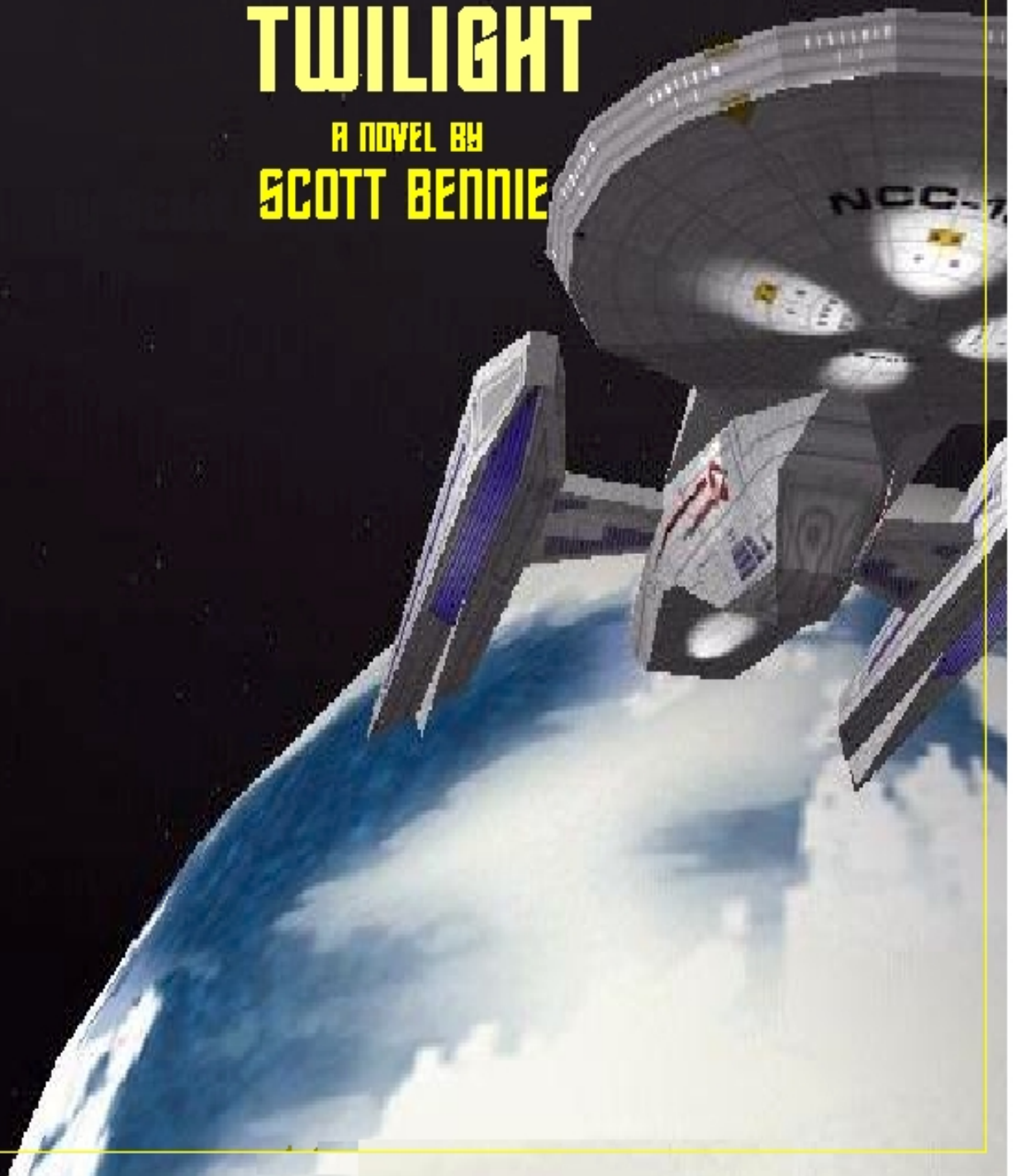


*STARFLEET COMMAND*

# THE FINAL TWILIGHT

A NOVEL BY  
SCOTT BENNIE



## **Praise from readers for *The Final Twilight* saga...**

“I have the whole "deeply satisfied yet heartedly disappointed that it's over" feeling like you get at the end of a really damn good movie.”

“Masterful! I'm going to need to read the saga in its entirety at least twice more. Once just because, and once to see what I can learn as a writer...”

“I'd start praising but I think I'd run out of superlatives long before I was done.”

“...this is by far the best ST based story I have ever read - you put the novel authors to shame!”

“Totally enthralling.”

“One hell of a story!”

“Everyone should check these out. I have bought books that were not a third this good.”

“This is GLORIOUS! Utterly glorious!”

“This piece is easily as good as anything I've bought at a bookstore, and better than most.”

“...some of the best stuff I've ever read.”

## Death of a Starship

"Relays are down on Deck 8." I tell Whittaker.

"I know, I can see it from here," he shouts back. "God, there's a lot of smoke."

That's the flashing yellow on the panel. At least we're still getting readings.

"Do you want to send in a request for damage control?" I ask.

"Plasma fire in main shuttlebay. Damage control team to main shuttlebay." The computer barks.

"They're needed over there!" Whittaker shouts. "And stop jinxing us, Said. We're in enough trouble!"

It's meant as a joke, but I don't take the remark well. Unfortunately, I don't have time to really dwell on it. The shaking's getting worse.

"Hull breach on Deck 2... Hull breach on Deck 4... Hull breach on Deck 5."

By now, the ship is shaking in what feels like a continuous resonance wave from the pounding. Just how many ships are attacking us? Whittaker slides down the shaft with a zigzag step and closes the lift door behind him. I flick a switch and quickly step back. With a whirl and a dazzling Christmas-like display of lights, the system comes on-line again. "Good work," I tell Whittaker.

"Warning, turbolift will not function above Deck 3 due to hull breach," yet another warning says.

"The bridge is cut off!" Vance barks at us.

"No connections are registering," Gottlieb says, looking at me for some reason.

"The bridge is *dead*?" Whittaker asks in an unbeliever's voice.

"No connections are registering!" Gottlieb repeats.

I reroute emergency life support to some of the more obscure bridge evacuation routes – there's an emergency escape pod located under the main sensor dish. Then there's another hit, and I can tell the sensor array's been hit. *Oh no.*

"Get a force field bracket ready." Whittaker suggests. "We can bridge the gap between decks and pry them out if needed."

"I'll get it," I say, confirming the order, ignoring the unpleasant taste that's welling in my throat as I open up the emergency stores. The power glitches as I open the cabinet, but fortunately there's a manual release. I slide it open, grab a large metallic bracket that stretches into a ring – once in place it'll generate a force field and expand it into a tube.

"I'll take it," Gottlieb says. I toss it at her, and she doesn't fumble.

"Do it now," Vance says, peering with Whittaker up the turbolift shaft. The air here's is starting to get hazy from the leakage – and a quick inspection of the systems panel shows the filters are already working overtime to keep the atmosphere breathable.

"This is *very* bad," Gottlieb says. You can always trust her to state the obvious at the worst possible moment.

"They'll make it." Vance says, though the look on his face isn't fooling anyone, even himself.

As if to reinforce Gottlieb's observation, the ship shakes again, and this time we feel the gravity hiccup. "Warp core breach in three minutes." Oh no... Worse still, it's an automated voice. Perhaps the bridge is dead... you'd expect the Captain or the First to be giving that announcement. "All hands, abandon ship."

*Starfleet Command*  
**THE FINAL TWILIGHT**  
A Novel  
by Scott Bennie

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Act I:  
POETRY IN QUANTUM LINES

## I: Ark Royal

*Sixty stars over a dark eye.  
Sixty hot wombs of planet-birth  
Conjoined by the knife, by the fire...*

I wince at the sound of my own voice, realizing just how badly my muse has betrayed me. It's a realization that leads me to repeat, for the twelfth time today: "Computer, that damn stanza."

"Stanza erased," the computer answers. *Again.* I throw down the record pad, wince out the viewport, and struggle with an opponent deadlier than the Klingons or ISC - the human tongue, trying to capture in words a vista that's so beautiful it borders on the obscene.

Clusterrise over the dark matter moon of Sumas II, a stellar corona rising above the occulting surface, jewels sparkling in obsidian. It's a sight so beautiful that it's hard to breathe, and I'm not even looking at it on the ship's main viewscreen, where it would be magnified to smite the senses. There are sixty stars in the cluster, most of them Hs and Ks, hot oranges and reds, all connected by a three parsec long arc of charged luminous gas that astronomers have named the *Bat'leth*, after the Klingon weapon.

*Sixty royal stars striking a cosmic lyre.  
Their Song too grand for human ears,  
So we stare at it like beasts, dumbfounded...*

I'm not sure what *Ark Royal* is supposed to be doing here. We arrived in-system yesterday, under a wartime cloak of secrecy. Our Captain, Greg Jensen, hasn't us given any mission briefings yet, and the senior staff aren't just staying silent – they look absolutely grim. Emotions are running high after the battle at Runner's Station: the word is out that the ISC is extremely eager to avenge that defeat (despite the official ISC claim that they withdrew in the hopes that

we'd "come to our senses".) and three weeks ago, Starfleet intelligence reported that a large ISC fleet was gathering in the Neutral Zone, a mere eighteen parsecs from the nebula.

The *Bat'leth*, more beautiful than poetry, may well be held to our own throats.

I move away from the engineering viewscreen, officially log the end of my break on a wall panel console, and return to inspecting the Jeffries' Tubes on the engineering sub-level. It's a pre-battle inspection, although no one's officially telling us that - the grapevine from the lower decks is the only source for information right now, and what a heady vintage it's become. Which provides a contrast with my work detail, which is dull, oppressive, and more repetitive than a Klingon boasting contest. I spend most of my time crawling through claustrophobic tunnels and pushing buttons while contorted in uncomfortable angles, unsteady light from flickering blue and red force fields reflects off the walls and provides me with the only illumination. Sometimes the light's so harshly dim that I think I'm going blind. I wonder how many psychiatrists they'd throw at me if I mentioned that little theory out loud?

While I work, I contemplate new ways to describe the ion flow around the matter/anti-matter core.

*The ion cascade - the bright gate between day and night  
forever denying the meeting place  
A wall set around the apocalypse fountain*

Damn, that's crap too. I've composed at least fifty poems about the ion flow. Two of them were actually published in *Space Messages*, Starfleet's official literary digest. The other forty-eight poems were deservedly erased and removed from the universe. Everyone has some compulsion that turns into a personal running joke, and poetry is mine. And that's fine. Even though my winning percentage of poems is smaller than the clearance in a Jeffries' Tube, I enjoy writing and performing them far too much for me to stop now.

"Report, Mr. Said." a voice behind me says. It's our chief engineer, Rand-Alph Teller, a small, wiry human who wears an artificial third eye in the center of his forehead (he comes from Matsqui colony, where they do that sort of thing, I think it's a religious practice).

"Local systems are all in the upper five-to-ten percent range." I report, looking down on the Commander. He's looking back at me with almost android intensity on his face, or as we call it below decks, *his Phaser-II stare*. "No trace of that subspace interference field."

"We haven't seen it three days," Teller says. "I told the Captain it wasn't the engines."

"No sir. In fact, I haven't encountered any problems whatsoever." I declare. "I'm confident this heavy cruiser will be ready to fight whenever we're given the word. I'm surprised we haven't gotten it yet."

"Stop trolling for information, Ensign." the commander snaps. I blush and shrug. "The Captain will let use know when we're heading into combat again."

"Aye sir."

"Though the Captain hasn't been saying much to anyone lately. Have you noticed that, Mr. Said?" Teller asks. The remark catches me off cold, and I have to confess Teller looks a little surprised that he asked the question.

"I suppose waging a war will do that, Commander." I reply, more coldly than I intended. Teller doesn't hide his disapproval of my tone, but rather than get into an argument, he changes the subject. We share a short, uninteresting conversation about Teller's oldest son, Rocket, who's

practically being forced at phaser point to follow his dad into the Academy. I don't offer my opinions about what's he doing to his son – given the casualty figures we've seen in the last year, it's insane for anyone to want their kid to become a 'Fleeter.

"You should be glad you don't have children, Mr. Said." Teller tells me bitterly. "Trying to raise a family during the middle of a war, seven sectors away..."

"War makes everything difficult sir," I say, a truth whose profundity reaches the level of a village idiot.

Teller does a quick half-turn away from me, a signal he's ready to extract himself from the conversation. I nod and give him tacit permission. He gets ready to slap me on the back, but I hold up my hand and remind him that I'm not yet medically cleared to make physical contact with people. He shouldn't need to be told - but Teller likes to test people, regardless of the risk. He'd get a Klingon drunk to see if he could hold his temper in check. But testing me (and touching me) is *far* more dangerous.

A year ago, on a routine survey mission to Monoceros IV, a higher being fell in love with me and kidnapped me. Captain Jensen rescued me, but I'm still experiencing the aftereffects of sharing a deep telepathic lock for two weeks with an alien psionic field that's about as strong as the entire Vulcan race combined.

"Still experiencing". Could I have come up with a more pathetic understatement? After nearly a year of therapy, I can finally focus past the Crysian's emotions - they wouldn't have let me back on duty if there was even the slightest doubt that I could - but anyone who makes physical contact with me isn't so fortunate. Some people might find a sadistic pleasure in watching anyone who makes physical contact with them experience twelve different intense emotional states in thirty seconds, but I don't. Most of my friends don't come within three meters of me anymore. Teller, who's a meter and a half from me, is one of the brave ones.

"Damn inconvenient, these *higher beings*." Teller snorts.

"Damn inconvenient." I mimic. "Almost as bad as the ISC." Teller frowns and I sigh. "Are we ever going to get a briefing, commander?"

"We'll be lucky if we get debriefed when this is over." Teller responds. "But I think you can cancel your poetry reading tonight. It'll give you a few more days to work on *Ode to An Engine*."

"Ode to An Engine was six poems ago." I report. "Tonight's poem is *Voyage of A Dilithium Crystal*, starting with its regurgitation by a Horta, then describing its placement in a Troyilian necklace, to its purchase by Starfleet engineers..."

"You *are* joking, aren't you?"

"*Mottled skin silicon mother within the crèche crying...*" I start to recite.

"Good-bye, Mr. Said." Teller declares loudly. He turns with an unexpectedly fast torque and nearly bolts as he walks to the turbo-lift. The great red doors seem to accommodate his desire, opening and closing with unusual speed, a quick whoosh and a rapid hum.

Even the ship's a critic.

After my shift, I avoid the crowd of engineers who are heading down to the rec deck (it's a mutual shunning), walk back to my quarters and try get as much shuteye as I can. I keep very austere quarters - one wrong decoration, one hint of gaudiness, and everyone from the Captain to the ship's chaplain will be trying to psychoanalyze me. It's better to bury myself, and let my poetry be my only ostentation - at least it's fun when people try to unravel what you write. That's what you're supposed to do with poems, isn't it, play with them like balls of yarn?



At 0200, I awaken when the ship's goes to yellow alert. Yellow alerts don't usually last very long - either they go green after a few minutes, or everything goes to Hell. In this case, we stand down from yellow alert at 0212, and the ship breathes a sigh of relief.

**"They're talking about you, my love."** The voice tells me as I begin to fall sleep again.

I lean back on my bunk and moan fiercely. The feeling hits me like an orgasm, sharp and wonderful. She's back. She's been visiting me sporadically for two weeks, the muse, the voice in my head, and I've fought like a devil to keep people from finding out. I've even kept parts of myself in the dark, those parts ruled by duty. Let them live their lives of orders, monitor duty, sterile corridors and Jeffries' Tubes. I want to be happy.

"They always talk about me." I say. "They're afraid of us." I laugh for a second. "They don't know how to accept a simple reality."

**"I think the Captain knows. His mind is very keen. And cunning. He may try to set a trap."**

"No traps." I promise the Crysian. "I'd know if they were planning one. I can always tell by the way they look at me."

**"I don't want to leave you,"** the Crysian says in a frightened tremolo. Such a simple thought for such a glorious, sophisticated intelligence, isn't it?

"I'll protect you. I'd freeze a star to save your life." I declare with a large smile.

It's an idle boast, but when you're on the edge of sleep, all boasts are real. "Sweet boy..." the Crysian tells me, and I finally surrender to sleep. I feel her stroking me with telepathic fingers, stroking and rocking me.

All consciousness is battle, and all sleep is surrender, but when I'm walking the thin edge between consciousness and sleep, the only time when my love can touch my mind, it doesn't feel so bad. Tonight will be a good night's rest.

I awaken at 0930 to discover we're on yellow alert again. It's cancelled at 0952 -a long one - and I head to the messhall, where breakfast is some sort of Andorian omelet served with spicy Tellarite sausage, tasty but full of gristle. I sit down at a long table with a gaggle of engineers and listen quietly to the latest news. Five yellow alerts have been called in the twenty-four hours, and the captain's sequestered in his ready room.

"He's on the edge, I tell you." Lieutenant Harris, a sensor ops technician who's as unpleasant as he is capable (and whose brashness has given him an undeserved popularity that's a complete mystery to me), snorts his opinion. "Even if we win the next few battles, I don't see him remaining in the Captain's chair much longer. He's falling apart."

"That doesn't sound like the Greg Jensen I know." I say, referring to the Captain. But the duty shift is talking over my sentences and paying no attention to me, so I fall silent, as usual. I'm pretty good at one-on-one conversations but not quite so good with groups, though the Captain has told me I'd be an exceptional leader if I learned to assert myself more. Jensen's an extraordinary individual, probably the best in the fleet, but he has a much higher opinion of my abilities than I deserve.

Although my defense is ignored, a few of the other Lieutenants, the ones who served with Greg back in the days of the General War, spring to his defense, and a lively debate follows. After breakfast, I return to my post, deep in the bowels of engineering, an hour early for my shift. I guess I'm not in the mood to relax; every time I pass an alert panel, I expect it to erupt in some bright shade of yellow or red. A casual observation of other people's body language indicates I'm not the only one who's jumpy. But the morning doesn't quite go as I expected.

Main engineering during war patrol on *Ark Royal* in the *Bat'leth Nebula* - between the system diagnostics, we run battle drills. They're the worst part of the day. Not only do they throw my diagnostics schedule out an airlock, they force me to endure the overwrought antics of Ensign Gotlieb, who always plays the burn victim that we have to pull out of main engineering before we asphyxiate. She acts like she's the queen of the universe, the magic princess who gets to be rescued by a dozen Prince Charmings in funny red suits. I hate that. Or maybe it's because I have to sit back and watch the drill, avoiding any physical contact. I can't even touch someone to save their lives, so I get to be bored instead.

Teller walks up to me again and asks about the faulty sensor readings again. I tell him they're probably a glitch caused by sloppy patching - our sensors were overhauled four weeks ago at Starbase 41. Teller asks me to show him a shred of evidence to back my theory.

"I don't have any sir. It's just engineer's intuition." I say, blushing.

"Well, since your intuition is so finely honed, I'm sure it will lead you to discover something I can show the captain." Teller closes the semantic trap on me. I nod.

"Aye, sir." I say, sighing.

I should have known that neither Captain Jensen nor Commander Teller would be prepared to let us get away with that excuse. Unfortunately, the speed with which Starbases have been cranking out repairs makes all of their work a little suspect. I'm not trying to disparage them, it's just that the war has gotten so hectic that it makes me wonder if starbase engineers are getting *any* sleep these days. I suppose there are some tours of duty that are even worse than a starship in wartime.

I look over at Teller, who's chewing out another engineer who's probably giving him the same excuse. *Ark Royal* is running well, but that's not good enough for the command staff. It's always the little things that get under someone's skin and do the most damage, isn't it?

Between breaks, my face is glued to the sight of the *Bat'leth* at the nearest observation station. Because I like to view the nebula as naturally as possible (and the portal apparatus is complex), I have to crane my neck to get the best view. It's worth the effort. The nebula's strands of charged gasses seem to spin and hiss as we dart beside it. Judging from the Doppler trail of the gas filaments, I'd guess we're about a tenth of a parsec from the Nebula, moving at a cruising speed of just under warp three. It's a privilege to see one of these marvels up close, a *real* nebula, a *gaseous* nebula, not one of those glorified dust clouds like the Coalsack which you can spend days navigating without observing a single interesting vista. The cosmos is a feast to be savored, and this particular banquet is one of the most magnificent I've ever enjoyed.

If only I didn't keep hearing the crew whisper about ISC fleet movements, or the rumor that the Klingons have sold out the Quadrant to become the Concordium's enforcers, it'd be just about perfect.

"Do you have a poem for the occasion, Mr. Said?" A man's baritone voice asks. I turn around to face the warm wide face of Dr. James Latham, a true Renaissance man: chief surgeon, psychologist, chaplain, and hologram sculptor. Since I've had my fill of doctors in the last year, the latter is his most attractive quality. I've seen his art, and his ion fountains are absolutely mesmerizing, as good as anything I've seen that wasn't built by a Tholian master. There's a rumor that one of his fountains was so highly regarded that one ostentatious Orion Cartel chief dispatched an "acquisitions team" to steal it from the Planetary gallery on Trill to add to his personal collection. There's no higher compliment than outright theft; even imitation pales beside it.

I nod – the best acknowledgement I can think of, and begin to rattle off a verse.

*"Strings of an ion harp  
Plucked with angelic fervor, the divine song  
narrates poetry in Quantum lines..."*

"Quantum lines?" Latham's crinkled nose is visible in the reflection of the glass. He has a round Caucasian face without wrinkles or edges that makes it look younger than its actual years, framed by thinning black-brown hair and the thickest beard growth that's allowed by current Starfleet regulations. "That's not scientifically accurate. 'Quantum' isn't a linear state..."

"I'm afraid you're starting to sound like a Vulcan, Doctor." I reply, teasing him. "I'm a Romantic, not a Classicist. I'm giving a poem, not a physics lecture. I don't want to see science in my art. I get enough of that in engineering."

Latham laughs. "I have too many prejudices, I suppose. I must have my Bach, and my Pachelbel..." I worry that he's about to give me a laundry list of his musical tastes, but we're interrupted when the alert light starts blinking and the ship goes to yellow alert again. Latham winces. "Oh Lord, I wonder if it's the real thing this time. I wish the Captain wouldn't call so many yellow alerts."

"Ever since the Finney Incident, Captains need to mind their Ps and Qs about alert status." I opine. "And you know how careful the Captain gets when it comes to procedure."

"Well, you would know, wouldn't you Kenneth?" Latham retorts. *You know him better than anyone on this ship, don't you?* He doesn't say it, but I know that's what he means. During the mission when the Captain and his alpha team rescued me from the Crysian, the creature blended our consciousness together for over an hour. For one hour of our lives, Jensen, Pratt, Gable, Nagura and I became a single entity.

I can't begin to describe the intimacy of the experience. We instantly knew each other's histories, felt each other's passions and... well, I don't like to describe the deeper levels. And it changed us. I never cared about poetry before the Crysian - Pratt was the poet - but since Monoceros I've written three volumes of verses. Nagura was a security officer - but after the incident, she transferred to engineering and demonstrated a better grasp of ships' systems than most twenty-year vets I've worked with.

Unfortunately, we were all very messed up by the experience. Pratt went through therapy, acted fine for two months, then one day he transported himself into deep space without a suit. Gable left Starfleet and now lives on a commune on Vespera III, where he meditates naked over a narcotic fire, sustaining himself by inhaling organic smoke. Nagura had a nervous breakdown three months ago and was dragged kicking and screaming to the Federation psychiatric facility on Elba II. Me... well, I've had my problems too - It's a miracle that I managed to get back on the duty roster. The only one who came out of it unscathed is the Captain. I guess that's why they call it "Captain's luck".

But yes, James is right. I do know Captain Gregory Livermore Jensen better than anyone alive. After the Crysian incident we became very close (I suppose we should be grateful we didn't absorb Gable's sexual tastes), but lately he's been ignoring me. These days our conversations consist of quick eye contact and an acknowledging nod, like telepathy without the voice. But we can't completely ignore each other: when we're close, I feel him and he feels me. It's a weird experience, and although I suppose it should reopen old wounds every time we're in

the same room, I find that it's very comforting. I perceive Greg's passion as a quiet, comforting resolve, and basking in it is a zen experience, a pure joy of being. There are times when I realize that didn't hate that link with the Crysian as much as I thought I did.

"Afraid not." I say, finally answering Latham's question. "But if the ship's doctor doesn't know what's going on..."

"I never know what's going on." Latham sulks. "Patch 'em or pray for 'em when they're about to be spaced, that's all I seem to be good for around here. That, and crew evaluation." He sighs, and I have a horrible feeling about what he's about to tell me. He holds up his hands to steady me, and emphasizes his words by pointing each hand at me and gesturing. "No, I'm *not* removing you from duty, Mr. Said. But your performance rating has sunk like a stone over the last two weeks."

He pauses for me to offer one of the standard excuses. I don't give him any.

"And with your history, I'm very concerned."

"Okay." I acknowledge. "I've found it really hard to focus lately. I'm not sure why."

"You haven't been sleeping well?"

"No worse than usual," I shrug.

"I'd like to schedule a physical, Ensign." Latham says. "It'll probably be interrupted by yet another yellow alert – or a red – but it's worth the effort. I know you've been lost in your poetry lately..."

"Not in poetry," I admit. "More like in the universe."

I suppose I was trying to be profound, but... this is another of those moments when my muse betrays me. I can see concern mix with amusement and slight embarrassment on Latham's face – and I suspect the expression is echoed on mine. Whatever critique he'd offer toward my earnest yet pretentious description is interrupted by the sound of the Captain's voice over the intercom. When the announcement begins, I detect the slightest crack in his voice, but maybe that's because I was listening for it.

"Attention all hands, this is the Captain. This is a ship-wide tactical alert."

"Damn. Here we go." Latham whispers. *This time it's serious.*

"We have made sensor contact with an echelon of at least six ISC heavy cruisers on the far side of the *Bat'leth* Nebula. We're not planning to engage them - yet - and we'll try to keep the nebula between us until reinforcements arrive. Unfortunately the Concordium knows we're here. We should know within the next half-hour if they're planning to take a crack at us. If our fleet doesn't arrive soon, we'll pull away from the nebula and hit warp 8. However the ISC might decide to send a single ship to test the waters, and if they do that there'll be some fencing. on't stray too far from battlestations. Red alert could be sounded at any moment. Jensen out."

"Well," Latham says. "I'm afraid your physical is going to be postponed. Do you have a poem for this occasion?"

"War poems aren't my strong suit, but let's see." I say. "Six ISC heavy Cruisers against a single Constitution class refit? I think the only poem I feel like composing right now would consist of repeating the word for 'excrement' in as many languages as possible."

"That sounds more like performance art than poetry." Latham observes.

"The line sometimes blurs." I answer.

"I wonder how far away the fleet is?" Latham muses, referring to the Feds.

"He couldn't tell us over an open channel." I reply. "Maybe he's worried about ISC telepaths out there. Haven't you heard the reports about telepathic eavesdropping?"

"Don't confuse rumor with report, Mr. Said. The only people I know who've ever tried that trick are the Romulans." Latham says. He's about to head back to Sickbay and make preparations, but we're interrupted - Captain Jensen steps out of the turbolift, looking a little winded. He does a half-run toward us.

"Captain?" Latham asks as he enters conversation range.

"I need to talk with Ensign Said." The Captain wipes a bead of sweat off his brow. "Alone."

## II: A Kiss in the Void

It's more than a little odd for a Captain to ask to meet with a junior officer before a battle. A suspicious mind might even call it "ominous". But it's understandable once you know our history (not to mention that it's one of the perks of wearing four pips on your collar – no one can walk away from a conversation without your permission) – the truth is that this talk's been overdue for several weeks.

"Aye sir." Latham says to Jensen as he turns away, looking back at us (once) with a trace of suspicion, almost as though we were partners in a conspiracy. The Captain and I do trade a look, each worried that the other looks a little ragged (though neither of us says it aloud, it isn't necessary).

To be honest, it's a little ridiculous for me to be worried about *his* looks. Starship Captains all look like gods and goddesses - some paternal/maternal, some fraternal/sisterly. Greg Jensen's one of the fraternal ones, everyman's big brother. Life made him tall and broad-shouldered and promoted him several ranks above handsome, he's a walking Greek statue from the top of his brown, slightly curled hair, to the thick ankles and steady feet. Jensen comes from Gwai colony, where everyone's a paragon or a corpse - people on that planet contract a strange form of influenza when they're an infant, and the few who survive it grow up to be physical champions. It's a great place to breed athletes, Captains (and savages) although the death rate makes every Federation doctor gnash their teeth in despair. Nobody's answered the planet's viral riddle, and they've been working with samples for eighty years. It's almost a natural eugenics lab, and you know how worked up people get about *that* subject...

"Captain?" I ask.

"Kenneth, let's go to Astrometrics," he interrupts me.

I'm tempted to crack a joke – the stellar dome in Astrometrics has been used more than once for crewpersons looking for a spectacular place to stage a sexual encounter – but I can see that

Jensen's being as serious as a Vulcan. "You must have just come from the bridge." I say as we hit the turbolift.

"Yes." Jensen affirms, trying to catch his breath, not quite successfully. "Deck 4, Astrometrics." he says, holding the turbolift lever. We rise with a graceful whir and the lift makes its way through the ship's labyrinthine corridors. Jensen recovers his breath along the way.

"Couldn't this wait until after the crisis is over?" I ask. But I know the answer even as I'm speaking him the question. He knows that too, that's why he doesn't answer me, not even with a head shake.

The turbolift opens near Astrometrics; two doors down, and we walk into the room that's (with the exception of the warp core and the shuttlebay) the biggest open space on *Ark Royal*. The room's actually smaller than it looks - it's hard to get a sense of perspective when you're standing in the middle of this great stellar dome. The computers have been lowered into the floor, and so it's just the two of us here: us and the images of gas, dust, and stars surrounding us on all sides. We walk the nebula, each object appropriately labeled. The closest objects vanish almost as soon as they appear, and the cosmic dust bouncing off the deflection grid is visible as a spectroscopic haze, making pretty "roy g. biv" trails as they pass. That tells me we're moving at low warp, maybe 1.5 (the deflection haze is less apparent at higher warp speeds).

"Computer, display the enemy." Jensen says. The entire room spins, shifts, and comes to magnify eight (not six) ISC ships, which are flying in formation on the far side of the nebula. *Eight*.

"They're still a ways away." I observe. "They probably won't try to warp across."

"Thank goodness the ISC don't use cloaking devices," the Captain responds.

"Not with *that* power consumption curve," I state with a big smile that some people have called 'irritating'. ISC ships are powerhogs, their biggest weakness in my book. "I always thought it was an ugly design. They call themselves peacemakers, but they fly these... vengeful bat-ships. It sure doesn't reinforce the pacifist image, does it?"

"I think it captures ISC hypocrisy perfectly," Jensen is almost smirking himself. "Although they'd be hard pressed to look better than *Ark Royal*. Constitution-classes are genuine beauties."

"From every angle." I say. "Even better than Excelsiors."

"Well between you, me, and the nebula, I wish I was flying in an Excelsior right now. Or something even bigger," the Captain admits, and then he winces hard. "Computer, display the location of the Crysian."

My jaw drops. The Captain gives me a good hard look. "Unable to comply," the computer says. "The Crysian is not within sensor range."

"That's what I thought it would say." The Captain moans. "Computer, display the Monoceros system." The room automatically adjusts to display that star system we know so well, focusing on one very small, very familiar blue and white planetoid in particular. The sight of it is almost a rebuke.

"Captain... Greg..." I stammer. I'm expecting compassion on his face, but it's hard. Not compassion, not anger, just a trace of... either numbness or fear. I'm not accustomed to seeing either emotion there.

"I need to speak to her, before it's too late." Jensen declares.

I wonder for a second how he intends to communicate with her, then the answer to the question occurs to me. "I haven't spoken with her since the link was broken!" I protest. I have no idea why I'm raising my voice.

"I spoke to her, Kenneth," the captain tightly grabs the front of my shirt. Anyone else on this ship would go into spasms when he touched me, but the telepathic bond we share gives him some sort of immunity. Now, for the first time, I'm regretting it.

"Greg! Stop that!" I protest. He's hurting me, and with his physical strength, he could do a lot worse. Gwaiians have been known to snap – their biological imperatives can spur them into fits of violence so sudden and brutal that he could tear me and this room apart in seconds – and although Jensen's self-discipline is as magnificent as his other physical attributes, it seemed to be crumbling before my very eyes.

"I was taking a nap in the ready room before my shift, and she spoke to me. She told me she was sorry for what she had done to us, and wouldn't do it again."

"That's great," I say. Jensen's fingers are digging into my chest, painfully, and there's a look on his face that I've never seen before, a wildness that doesn't look like it even remotely belongs on those usually serene features. "But no, I haven't seen her. I haven't heard her... or the voice..."

"Kenneth, I know when you're throwing up barriers. Please, let's not pretend, not now." He pleads. Some people might crave the sense of euphoria you got from speaking with the Crysian, but it wasn't in this man's nature. Why was he so desperate?

"Greg, I don't remember a thing. Nothing," I say, consciously convinced it's the truth, and wondering almost sub-consciously if it was a lie at the same time.

"You're special to her. She wouldn't just ignore you!" Now Jensen begins to raise his voice. "You know that, Kenneth!"

"I - I honestly don't remember," I stammer. "But you'd hoped we'd never have to deal with her again. If she's not going to bother us again, shouldn't you be happy?"

The Captain's face steels itself. "It said good-bye to me for a reason, Kenneth. It said good-bye because we're all about to die..."

The statement hits like a photon spread against tenuously reinforced shields. His face is frozen in my head – no, everything's still, even the astrometrics display seems to freeze for a moment, turning the universe into a brief snapshot of stars, prisms, and wisping trails of hot nebula gasses.

"We're going to what?!" I stammer.

But Greg says nothing. He sighs, relaxes, and lets go of my shirt. Ever the neat freak, he even straightens out the wrinkle.

In the long silence that follows the revelation, our eyes focus on the planet beneath our feet, the one that changed our lives. Astronomers call it Monoceros IV, but we called it the Wash. It isn't a planet in any conventional sense: it's more like a teardrop in space, a big dirty ocean about six hundred kilometers in diameter with a small core of ice, formed when comets collided after the Monoceron sun entered its expansion cycle about 163,000 years ago. It's a phase all stars enter; once Mono Prime was just your classic G2 star, much like Earth's sun. But when stars age, the supply of primeval hydrogen fuses into helium, then into heavier elements, and when it reaches a critical mass, it expands – a lot. Monoceros Prime is now about five billion kilometers in diameter, about the distance between our sun and Pluto, a swollen ball of helium plasma that's going to contract at some time in the near future and become a much denser, smaller ball of heavy elements. That's how stars work.



When Monoceros Prime expanded, small fleets of comets in its Oort cloud collided, melted, and coalesced into watery worlds in space, forming a new solar system. That's not an uncommon occurrence within dense comet clouds during a red giant's expansion cycle. What is uncommon is for life to develop on them. Perhaps some old Monoceron race, staring its doom in the face (or whatever form its body took), planted the seeds of life on the surface of a comet. Perhaps it was just an accident. But somehow, in those scant 163,000 years, life not only took bloom on the Wash, it bloomed in unexpected ways.

The only way I can describe what happened on Monoceros is by comparing it to Earth's Pre-Cambrian period, during which primitive life evolved into extraordinarily complex forms in a mere ten million years. But this particular miracle took place in only one-seventieth of that time frame, and evolved a creature whose cognitive abilities are surpassed by only a handful of lifeforms in the known universe.

I call the Crysian a female, because that's what she feels like – or felt like – in my head. In reality, she's a colony creature, a school of luminous flame-red rays, each thinner than your pinky finger, but hundreds of meters long. Watching her, or them, or it (I always mess up my pronouns when I think about her physical form) swimming in that ocean is an awesome sight. In the depths of the Wash, where the sea pressure turns the water into something that might as well be called a solid, the rays condense into something that's almost a single being, a wavy cylinder. But when she rises to within three miles of the surface, the rays separate, and become distinguishable, so the Crysian appears to become an abstract maze of shifting lines, a swimming labyrinth.

She's a telepath of course, but to call the Crysian a mere telepath is like a primitive man calling warp engines "fast" - the description is an injustice on a cosmic scale. Her telepathic ability defies measurement or description – or resistance, for that matter.

When Greg's around, the memories are clearer. I was assigned to routine engineering detail on Monoceros Wash – to help set up a small unmanned outpost on the surface, designed to gather data on Monoceros Prime. The Federation has never tracked the start of a stellar contraction (at least not with modern instruments) and Starfleet wanted to put something in place in case the sun began to collapse during our lifetime. (Stellar cycles are a devil to predict, and I'm glad they are. Humanity can be such a race of arrogant bastards that it's good when something in the universe puts us in our place.)

I didn't know anything was wrong until the second evening after the mission. That's when, with *Ark Royal* already a quarter parsec from Monoceros, I casually walked down to Auxiliary Control and reprogrammed the ship's navigation system so we would head back to the planet. Then I watched a security team break into AuxCon, and smiled at them as their phaser fire bounced harmlessly off my body. Then I tore apart the security team in a vicious hand-to-hand fight. The security chief thought he was particularly tough - I hear he was in a coma for three days. That's when the Captain charged in and tried to tackle me from behind and drug me - and I threw around a man who's gone hand-to-claw against a Mirak like a sparring dummy.

We can laugh about it now.

Under my control, *Ark Royal* returned to Monoceros. It seemed like the entire crew had a crack at taking me down, but I ignored them and transported down to the planet's surface. I wasn't even remotely in control of my body. (And thank Allah that I managed to convince the tribunal of that fact, otherwise the court martial would have been even uglier than it was).

I have no idea why, given the Crysian's telepathic abilities, she wanted me to remain so close to her. I lived with her in a small pocket of air, trapped in a bubble twenty kilometers below the planet's surface. Our senses mingled, hooked into the star's gravitational field, and we learned how to use the sun as a subspace lens for her telepathy. We projected ourselves around the universe, even into other times. We grew together, felt a bliss that can only be experienced when a curious, wonderstruck mind constantly exceeds its expectations. And I made her a goddess - she was raw telepathic clay that I molded with my imperfect fingers.

And the Crysian became aware of the concept of mortality, a curious sensation for someone whose life feeds on a form of photosynthesis and had never met a predator - the prospect of death doesn't occur to you when you aren't in direct contact with it. The Crysian took a casual view of death, almost a philosophical detachment. Her only passion was me. And I'll admit my feelings for the Crysian were strong, and not just because of the telepathy. She has a childish sweetness to her (and a child's willful stubbornness) and although I've never been a man given to forging emotional bonds, she got to me.

Of course, she also drove me insane. How could I have *not* gone mad? When she was in my mind, I was incapable of relaxing, and she didn't understand my need for comfort. Can you imagine going two weeks without sleeping? Now imagine two weeks of extreme focus and concentration, without any break, any moment of sitting back and escaping the thing that's in front of you, even for an instant. Two weeks. Can you imagine that?

Two weeks later, when any other Captain would have warped away to Starbase and filed a "missing in action" report, Captain Jensen finally figured a way around her telepathic shield, and beamed a rescue team down into the bubble. I'll confess that I did my part to get her to lower her defenses. She captured the landing party like they were puppets with tangled strings, and she decided to hook us together, to see what would happen.

It magnified her power immensely, to share five life experiences instead of one. But as our consciousnesses dissolved into an inescapable sludge of shared memory and thought, she had an epiphany. She finally understood how her power was hurting me. And it mattered to her.

And the instant she understood, we found ourselves back on *Ark Royal*. The cord was snapped, and I was breathing on my own again. We were all free. Although we had no idea of the price we'd end up paying.

"I'm surprised you can stand to look at it," I remark, rubbing the planet with my foot.

"Honestly? I find it almost impossible to look away," Greg admits. "It has a graveyard fascination."

"How long has it been?" I wonder. I'd spent a lot of time in the hospital after the incident, it's been easier to track of it than I ever thought it could be.

Time's a relatively unimportant consideration when you're fighting for your sanity.

"It's been about a year," Greg said.

A year after Monoceros, the same Captain who had been a fortress during our captivity looked like a shattered wreck of a man. People think it's the wars; we'd been involved in the General War against the Klingons, Romulans, and Lyrans for close to a decade. After millions of deaths on all sides of that conflict, the Klingons finally agreed to an armistice. *Ark Royal*, which had been involved in some of the bloodiest fighting in the War, was reassigned to more peaceful duties (which included, unfortunately, Monoceros.)

"We went through our own little hell, and then, one month later, the ISC decided to share their own special version of hell with us." Greg added.

About a month after the Monoceros Incident, less than a year after the armistice of the General War had been signed, the Organians returned. These were the nigh-omnipotent beings who had helped negotiate the first peace treaty between the Federation and the Klingons way back in 2267. Unfortunately, ten years ago the Organians mysteriously vanished from their homeworld, and their departure was the catalyst for the General War – without our cosmic daddy watching us, the Klingons wanted to play. When they finally returned, the Organians were very unamused by anyone’s behavior. They were also not alone: they brought the ISC – the Interstellar Concordium, a vast empire situated beyond Gorn and Romulan space – to this quadrant to police our Neutral Zones and prevent further conflict. But the ISC had more intrusive methods of peacekeeping in mind. The Concordium proclaimed that every empire and confederation in the quadrant were savages, and that justified imposing a very brutal brand of peace on us.

“I’m glad I missed the start of that mess.” I said. “It must have been something to watch that particular juggernaut gather steam...”

Greg nodded. “I don’t know which emotion was stronger: anger or helplessness.”

“Most people with whom I’ve spoken say they felt – tired.” I say.

“That too.”

The ISC’s Pacification Campaign began with the forced evacuation of all colonies in *any* disputed area – any colonist who resisted their forced relocation was imprisoned. We were outraged – everyone was outraged – but too war-weary to fight back. Then we began hearing complaints from traders who trafficked across the Romulan Neutral Zone (an illegal but widely tolerated practise, even during the General War) that their ships were being unfairly searched and seized. Some people said that they were scum and deserved what they got. The people who served in space knew better.

“They were people who wouldn’t go within a hundred parsecs of the Core,” I say. “I guess it made it rather easy for the people on the ‘big worlds’ to ignore their problems.”

“That’s usually something most people don’t have any problems doing .”

Then the situation really began to deteriorate. Nine months ago, an ISC fleet crossed into Federation space and destroyed the listening post at Barravel Core. Starfleet was caught completely off-guard by the attack, but that was only the start of an ISC offensive. Within six days, twenty Federation listening posts and sensor arrays had been obliterated. The ISC claimed that by destroying these installations, they were preventing empires from spying on each other, a practise that only led to warmongering and the raising of tensions. Of course, destroying these sensor posts also conveniently concealed the movements of ISC fleets from these self-same “untrustworthy” empires. The Klingons immediately declared war. The Federation was both embarrassed and angered by the assault; we began to reorganize our fleets and assign starships to task forces, but we still hoped that we could establish some sort of peaceful dialogue with this unexpected enemy.

“It was amazing just how quickly the situation got out of hand,” Greg muses.

“Has the ISC ever spoken to us, Greg? Once?”

“Individual Captains have,” Greg answers. “But not as a people. At least not at any level which the Federation has chosen to share with its Captains,”

*Greg knows the intricacies of politics only too well.*

Two weeks after the destruction of Barravel Core, the ISC attacked and destroyed JML Station, an armed Federation base and shipyard that’s located eight parsecs from the Klingon Neutral Zone. As it turned out, that wasn’t the only target of their offensive – in fact, most of the

other galactic empires were hit a lot harder. The Lyrans, Tholians (the only empire to successfully repel their attack) and Mirak immediately declared war on the ISC, and the Klingons actually petitioned us to join the fracas.

Being a more peaceful race than Klingons, we made one last ditch effort for peace. The Federation sent a team of our best ambassadors into ISC space, led by Ambassador Fox, a diplomatic legend. But we never heard from them again. The ISC was not interested in conversation.

Then eight months ago, we discovered that the ISC had telepathically brainwashed many of those “rebellious” Neutral Zone colonists they’d captured during their initial “pacification” of disputed worlds and were sending them back into the Federation as spies. That was the last straw. How could any self-respecting people tolerate *that*? The Federation council issued a formal demand, requesting that the ISC immediately vacate all Neutral Zones adjacent to the Federation border; I believe the final sentence on the communiqué was “And stay the hell away from our space!” The Concordium responded by telling us that “the ISC does not negotiate with inferior life forms”.

Forty-eight hours later, the Federation was officially at war with the Interstellar Concordium. Once the Federation joined the fray, everyone else leapt in: Romulans, Gorn, Hydrans, you name it, they’re now fighting the ISC.

“And it’s still not enough,” Greg said, guessing at my thoughts with uncanny accuracy. The longer we stay together in the same place, the more attuned we become to each other.

He’s right. This so-called “War of Pacification” has been a real bloodbath. The General War consisted of wave after wave of attack, but at least there was a respite between each offensive, sometimes lasting for blessed months at a time. By contrast, the War of Pacification has seen almost continuous fleet action – no one’s giving an inch or a quarter or a parsec or whatever yardstick of grim determination you care to employ. Unfortunately the resumption of hostilities right after the General War (just when it looked like we were *finally* getting back to normal) broke the spirit of more than a few ‘Fleeters. By one estimate, about one in ten crew members on *Ark Royal* has either transferred out of the fleet or is receiving intensive psychiatric counseling.

Yes I know that’s a lot of exposition, but you need to know it. And you need to know that war *never* discouraged Greg Jensen, if he wasn’t born for it, he was bred for it by the sort of life that only a Klingon or an author of pulp adventure stories would envy. No, it wasn’t the war that’s eaten away at him: it’s the *power*. The same power that’s broken everyone else who’s experienced the telepathic union has finally gotten to him too. I can see it in his eyes - the defeat, the despair, and even a trace of longing.

"Sir," I ask uncomfortably. Surprised by my formality, Greg snaps to attention. "Greg. Did she say how *Ark Royal* was going to be destroyed?"

Greg shakes his head, bows it slightly and digs his fingers into my shoulders, as if experiencing the residue of the Crysian's power might help him understand.

"If we're going to die." The Captain says, a little haltingly. "She'll come to you. You know that, don't you?"

I nod. "Seems logical."

"If she does... when she does, I want you to give her a message," Jensen says, struggling through wild eyes. "She took a lot from us last year, and we *gave* her a lot. It's time for her to repay the debt."

"Repay? How? You want her to save us?" I ask. I could hear his answer before he said it.

"Yes, that's it exactly. Save us." Jensen says. "If the Crysian is the creature of compassion that you've always thought her to be, she'll listen to you, and reward you. There are four hundred lives on this ship to beg for, Kenneth. I want you to think of each and every one of them the next time you talk with her."

"I certainly will, Captain." I promise.

"You know what she's capable of doing to you." Jensen adds. "I want you to swear on it. You may only have a split-second before she takes control of your mind. You need to concentrate on that above all else."

"I will." I promise again.

The Captain shakes his head and winces hard, forcing himself to concentrate, "I think..."

"The post-telepathic trauma is getting to you too?" I finish the sentence for him. He nods. "I'm sorry." I have to add. I feel culpable for the agony of this Promethean man. But Jensen won't acknowledge the wrong, let alone the apology. He has what I called in one poem a "soul of water", one that's not easily caught, even by himself.

"I was hoping that enough time had passed..." He doesn't finish the rest of it. "But I've got one last fight left in me. Same as the ship."

"You'll get a chance to heal." I try to be encouraging. "It's a promise."

The Captain just laughs. "Never trust a promise that's given three times. You'd be amazed how many cultures share that taboo... it's not just Peter and Christ..."

"I can say it a fourth time if you want." I smile broadly, another obnoxious, self-satisfied smile. But I realize that it's Pratt's smile, not mine. No one came back from the Monoceros Wash even remotely the same as when they set foot on it, not even the Captain. And worst of all, I can't help but wonder whether I was the piece of the gestalt that soured the others: the reason everyone else went wrong.

"No." Greg Jensen says, sensing my discomfort. "You're better than the rest of us put together, my friend." He smiles slightly. "So stop being an idiot."

Greg didn't mention why he's been avoiding me for the last few weeks, and I never asked him, but I think I finally know why. The bond's between us is even stronger than I remembered, both the Crysian-imposed empathic bond and our natural emotional bond – they're strong enough to drown in. When times get as rough as they are right now, friendship can turn into an dependence, even an addiction. Neither Greg nor I can stand addiction: I don't like them because of my family background (I was raised with a lot of old Islamist taboos) and as for Greg... well, a starship Captain can't afford the distraction. Not in wartime.

We'll have to discuss this further, provided we can pull off another miracle and keep *Ark Royal* from being destroyed in the coming battle.

After forty minutes running in a circle with a nebula interposed between us and the ISC fleet, we're called to battlestations. I crawl into a heavy engineering suit, and move to my assigned position at the Deck 11 engineering station, along with Lieutenant Vance, a strapping red-headed man who's assigned to be our security escort, along with Ensign Joyei, an Andorian woman who's our medical detail. Gotlieb and Whittaker, a pair of engineers, join us a few minutes later - Gotlieb's a short, slightly overweight woman who can outtalk a drunken Ferengi; Whittaker is tall, thin, and wiry, which reflects some past experience in security. He nods at me. We often work together. Somehow, that gives us the safe illusion of knowing each other.

"It sounds serious this time," Whittaker takes comfort in stating the obvious.

"Real serious," I reply, doing the same.

"Very serious." I almost laugh at the stupidity of the conversation. At least he hasn't asked me to recite a poem.

Our job is to keep the turbolifts working in an emergency. We're in one of the safer areas of the ship, not too far from Sickbay (some even call this the "luck detail"). But without us, damage control parties would have a devil of a time getting from one place to another, and nobody could get to Sickbay unless they wanted to risk site-to-site transport, and no one in their right mind's going to do *that* when the ship's shaking apart. Whittaker pushes a button and the engineering station pop out of the wall panel and pushes into the corridor. It's a large computer system that monitors every local system, but I patch into it and configure it so the turbolift control is the most prominent system on the display. It's easier that way.

"What do you think we're up against?" Whittaker asks me while I complete the job.

"Certain death." I reply, trying to make the remark sound like a joke. When did I start getting so ironic?

"Attention all hands, this is the Captain." The instant the announcement we've been dreading blares over the ship's speakers, we snap to attention. "An ISC Marine squad has attacked the Federation colony on Pholos II. Their target was the head of Starfleet's weapons research division, who was guest-lecturing at the planetary science institute; the ISC is accusing him of war crimes."

"Is there anyone they haven't accused of war crimes?" Vance snorts.

"An echelon of eight ISC ships is moving toward Pholos to retrieve the hostages and deliver them to ISC-controlled space. We can't allow that to happen. We've joined up with a fleet of five Federation heavy cruisers to stop them. We're outnumbered eight to six, but if we inflict enough damage, we'll probably drive them away from Pholos and give local authorities enough time to deal with the crisis. Thousands of lives are at stake. I know I can count on each of you to do your best, and we'll do the same on the bridge. Jensen out."

Gotlieb and Whittaker have a brief conversation about the comparative firepower of ISC and Federation cruisers, until Vance tells them to shut up (in Gotlieb's case that's very much like asking a black hole to stop sucking). Vance finally manages to enforce his edict, but he can't silence the machine – the computer pulse sounds vaguely like a heart pounding dimly in your eardrums, faint but impossible not to notice. I think we all feel it. Five minutes later, I can feel the ship shake, as our inertial dampers buckle.

"Once more into the breach..." Whittaker says. I hate it when poetry becomes cliché. Vance looks a little constipated.

We count the seconds between shakes like kids in a storm counting the seconds between lightning and thunder. Ark Royal shakes six more times in the next two minutes.

"Six..." Vance breaks his silence on the sixth hit. "That's not good. I'll bet we're being attacked by at least two ships."

The comment doesn't do much for our morale - and then we hear "Hull breach on Deck 6" blare over the main speakers, echoing as it's repeated over every speaker on the deck. This is followed by a tart communication from Doc Latham to Joyei to get down to Deck 7 as quickly as possible - Allah, that must have been a deep hit!

"Maybe they just clipped us on the forward hull." Gotlieb remarks, walking over to the display panel to contact main engineering.

That proves to be a mistake. Five seconds later, the turbolift display panel ionizes (as do most of the electronics aboard ship). Unfortunately, Gottlieb's standing too close to the console. The electrical jolt has enough kinetic force to knock her backwards two meters, leaving the front of her suit blackened and smoking.

"Damn!" Vance says, rushing to her side while drawing a medkit from his belt.

"I'm all right," Gottlieb declares, muttering a profanity about the ISC. Vance begins waving a medical tricorder over the talkative engineer like a wizard shaking a wand and shakes his head. I check the lift, and discover it's not operating.

"What a surprise," I say aloud, with rare sarcasm.

"I'd better take the shaft." Whittaker tells me with a grunt, as he motions Vance over and prys open the turbolift doors. The standard "this door isn't supposed to be open" warning plays, but we ignore it and silence it like an animal getting its throat slit. I nod at Whittaker and guardedly check the turbolift status panel. We're getting some readings, but not from all decks.

"Relays are down on Deck 8." I tell Whittaker.

"I know, I can see it from here," he shouts back. "God, there's a lot of smoke."

That's the flashing yellow on the panel. At least we're still getting readings.

"Do you want to send in a request for damage control?" I ask.

"Plasma fire in main shuttlebay. Damage control team to main shuttlebay." The computer barks.

"They're needed over there!" Whittaker shouts. "And stop jinxing us, Said. We're in enough trouble!"

It's meant as a joke, but I don't take the remark well. Unfortunately, I don't have time to really dwell on it. The shaking's getting worse.

"Hull breach on Deck 2... Hull breach on Deck 4... Hull breach on Deck 5."

By now, the ship is shaking in what feels like a continuous resonance wave from the pounding. Just how many ships are attacking us? Whittaker slides down the shaft with a zigzag step and closes the lift door behind him. I flick a switch and quickly step back. With a whir and a dazzling Christmas-like display of lights, the system comes on-line again. "Good work," I tell Whittaker.

"Warning, turbolift will not function above Deck 3 due to hull breach," yet another warning says.

"The bridge is cut off!" Vance barks at us.

"No connections are registering," Gottlieb says, looking at me for some reason.

"The bridge is *dead*?" Whittaker asks in an unbeliever's voice.

"No connections are registering!" Gottlieb repeats.

I reroute emergency life support to some of the more obscure bridge evacuation routes – there's an emergency escape pod located under the main sensor dish. Then there's another hit, and I can tell the sensor array's been hit. *Oh no.*

"Get a force field bracket ready." Whittaker suggests. "We can bridge the gap between decks and pry them out if needed."

"I'll get it," I say, confirming the order, ignoring the unpleasant taste that's welling in my throat as I open up the emergency stores. The power glitches as I open the cabinet, but fortunately there's a manual release. I slide it open, grab a large metallic bracket that stretches into a ring – once in place it'll generate a force field and expand it into a tube.

"I'll take it," Gottlieb says. I toss it at her, and she doesn't fumble.

“Do it now,” Vance says, peering with Whittaker up the turbolift shaft. The air here’s is starting to get hazy from the leakage – and a quick inspection of the systems panel shows the filters are already working overtime to keep the atmosphere breathable.

“This is *very* bad,” Gottlieb says. You can always trust her to state the obvious at the worst possible moment.

“They’ll make it.” Vance says, though the look on his face isn’t fooling anyone, even himself.

As if to reinforce Gottlieb’s observation, the ship shakes again, and this time we feel the gravity hiccup. "Warp core breach in three minutes." Oh no... Worse still, it's an automated voice. Perhaps the bridge is dead... you'd expect the Captain or the First to be giving that announcement. "All hands, abandon ship."

Beg for us, he asked. She owed us, he said, and he was right on both counts. But now there was a good chance he was dead.

Where's a Crysian when you need one?

"Okay people!" If Vance didn't sound like a military grunt before, he did now. "We're going to proceed in an orderly manner to the nearest escape pod."

"We can't just abandon the bridge!" Whittaker insists.

"Three minutes means 'any second now', people!" Vance shouts - and he's absolutely right. "The bridge has its own escape pods, so let's move!"

“But Mr, Vance?”

“Move, you piece of bipedal cattle! Now!”

It’s odd how much the “testosterone wrestling” match between the officers interests me; when the emotions around me get superheated, I often find myself detaching myself from the event and viewing it from a distance, treating psychology like a person’s starship system. It's strange how docile the human animal can become during a crisis. Docile, but not numb; the others still remember to give me a wide berth. Whittaker, knowing my odd friendship with the Captain, looks at me for support, but I shake my head in response. There's no rebellion in my soul. The heroic ideal of dying for a just cause has always appealed to me - as it does to most people who join Starfleet - but it doesn't today. You see, I believe what the captain told me about the Crysian's message and that changed our mission from victory to survival. Why else would she tell him?

We're halfway to the escape pod when the ship rocks again - very, very hard - and the artificial gravity does what can best be described as a gulp, rocking from zero-g to five-gs to one-g in a half-second. I take a hard swallow to keep from vomiting, and I'm not the only one. Whittaker looks hard at Vance, begging him to stay behind and make a run at the bridge. "Every second we can be away from the ship when the warp core goes..." Vance begins to say. Then there's a sudden shake, and most of us are taken off our feet. I hit the ground on my belly, hard enough to crack my suit’s faceplate.

Vance curses, the curse turns into a punctured scream, then all sound stops.

And that's when the world bleeds white.

I'm sliding. I'm not sure why. Maybe there's a hull breach - yes, that's it, a big one, and something harder than physics has grabbed my entire body and is pulling me... somewhere. The pain cannot be described. In a fragment of consciousness, I get one final glance of a starship interior: blue/white walls, black scorching. The universe has suddenly lost all sound, and then I'm afloat in space, alone with the nebula.



I should be dead, but I'm not, and I'm not sure why. *Ark Royal* disappears the millisecond I'm out the breach - a trick of relative velocities, which at full impulse would move it about a meter every three nanoseconds - and I'm suddenly alone in space, at the edge of the *Bat'leth* nebula, trapped in an acrobatic tumble, a three quarter diagonal motion that's spraining my muscles and probably slowly tearing my body apart. Even my zero-G training isn't helping me, I must have come out of the chute too fast. At odd points during the roll, I witness massive discharges of energy - phasers, fusion beams, and PPDs being thrown between ships - but the actual vessels are too far away to spot with my naked eye. It looks like a distant thunderstorm, without the sound of thunder, or any sound for that matter.

You never realize just how frightening silence can be until you hear *real* silence.

And alone, incapable of even stopping my tumble, I don't really care about the outcome of the battle. My skin feels incredibly dry, and my chest tightens from panic - it's hard to breathe, but I'm not dying. At this moment, it's far from a mercy, as I experience new definitions of the word 'vertigo' every second. But when I get to the verge of passing out, I can feel another presence in my mind.

"Is it you?" I say. Without breath, it's just an empty physical motion.

"**Yes...**" The Crysian tells me.

She's ecstasy in my mind, but I can't surrender to the joy, not yet. I grab onto the discomfort and employ it as a crutch. "Save them..." I plead. "Save me."

"***Oh my love, you are so far away...***" The Crysian tells me. "***And death is still so strange to me. To cease being...***"

"Death is all around us." I tell the Crysian. "Can't you sense it? See it, feel it? Thousands of lives: people who don't want to die, dying. People who aren't killers at their core, killing."

"***Then this is their choice, and you mustn't worry about it.***" The Crysian says. "***Didn't you often speak to me of the importance of freedom? Is staying alive more important than being free?***"

"They're my friends. I love them..."

"***As much as you love me?***" The Crysian sounds a little peeved.

I don't have the strength or the focus to deal with her jealousy. "Love is not confined to a single person, just as beauty is not confined to a single object." I argue, hoping I can make her understand. I don't sense that she understands. "Save them." I finally beg, hoping that urgency would communicate a need that's clearly alien to her world. "Save them..."

The Crysian does not respond, though I feel her. She must be nurturing me, keeping me alive, although I'm beginning to think it's a losing battle, given the pain I'm experiencing.

### III: Verses

"*Ivwaterpk ffulyiia.*" The first thing I hear is the voice, sharp and keening. and what would normally be an annoying squeak feels like the most wonderful sensation in the universe. Sound, glorious sound, followed by the short cold stab of air in my lungs.

My eyes open to a pale blue light, like night on a world where two bright moons are nearly full. I'm alone in a dimly lit cell, about three meters by three meters wide, and less than two meters tall, low enough to risk bumping my head on the ceiling if I were to stand. Where there should be a door or a force field, there's a sheet of transparent aluminum. Beyond the "glass", the universe is a blur; I'm staring into water, and any shape quickly becomes a murky shadow. It's like looking into a large tank at an aquarium, except I'm the one in the cage.

"<Gender marker> <exist-verb> <rouse-verb... awakening>." A voice says, a universal translator slowly coming alive.

"What's happening..." I say, and I try to stagger to my feet. I can't. The uncontrolled space roll definitely pulled a lot of my muscles. I can barely cock my head.

"Identify self, please." The voice has a decidedly duck-like quality, even though the computer is doing its best to humanize it.

"You're the ISC, aren't you?" I say. I could almost slap myself for stating my theory out loud.

"Rovillian." The voice identifies itself, and I see a figure swim to the edge of the glass and peer at me. The Rovillians are an ISC member species of some prominence; their reputation pegs them as excellent pilots, biologists, and (like most ISC members) telepaths. Its body is porpoise-like, except for a heavy plate on its back like a tortoise, and its head also suggests something that's part-turtle and part-dolphin. Although terramorphing an alien species is racism of the worst variety, sometimes even the best of us can't resist one's worst, instinctual impulses. "I am Dr. Luiif." He pronounces his name with an odd squeak in the middle of the diphthong. "And your name is?"

"I'm Ensign Kenneth Said, *USS Ark Royal*." I state. "You can find my Starfleet ID encoded in my hair follicles." That's a ritual alteration performed at the Academy upon graduation, a harmless viral insertion that helps identify and verify officers (at least in those species with body hair or feathers). "Standard procedure is to inform Starfleet of my capture upon verification."

"That may take some time." Luiif answers, his eyes widening. Perhaps that means he knows he's lying. The ISC's never formally traded prisoner information except at exchanges – and they only exchange prisoners to insert spies.

Are you here to brainwash me?"

"I am a healer." Luiif says. His (or her, or its – I haven't really been briefed on Rovillian physiology) form hovers around the tank like a ghost, coming into sharp focus when it gets close to the glass, blurring as soon as it moves away. "I heal body, mind, and philosophy."

"I see." I scowl. "You *are* here to brainwash me."

"No, no, no!" Luiif insists in a chatter that almost sounds panicked. "No, I am a *healer*. You are suspicious, for understandable reasons. None of them matter. All physicians must struggle with patients who do not wish to be healed. I consider myself an expert in such treatments." I guess the translator's working well now. "No harm shall come to you in my care."

"Sure." I say. *Just as long as losing your free will isn't considered harmful. The ISC has problems understanding that.*

"How did you come to be alive?" Luiif asks, obviously not inquiring about my birth. "The decompression should have killed you within ten seconds."

"I will not willingly answer your questions, doctor." I insist. "I am Kenneth Said, Ensign, *USS Ark Royal*. If I am a prisoner of war..."

Luiif turns aside and has a brief conversation with another Rovillian. The translator immediately cuts out, and I find myself listening to squeaking dolphin-duck speak (sorry, but it's as natural to think of the Rovillians as dolphins as it is to think of Lyrans as feline). After twenty seconds of clicking chatter, Luiif turns back to me with a deft swimming motion. "You were from *Ark Royal*? I regret to inform you that your ship was destroyed."

"I know. Did it die well?" I ask.

"Of course not. It died badly." Luiif says. "It died on a fool's errand, opposing justice. How could it have possibly died well?"

"Did anyone else survive?"

"Perhaps. I do not know. We have retrieved other escape vehicles from your fleet, but it's more important to heal the wounded than it is to catalog their vessels of origin." Luiif replies. "And you are not a prisoner of war. The only species that's conducting a war is yours..."

"Really?" I ask. I'm not normally this sarcastic, but it's not often that I come face-to-face with such a load of pure hypocrisy. Perhaps the sarcasm originates in my telepathic contact with the Captain: Greg Jensen had a gift for it, a dark wit. He's probably dead now, and while I doubt he'd find it comforting that a piece of him is surviving in me, I think it's appropriate that he's confronting the hypocrisy of his enemy, even if it's only by proxy. He was a man of galactic strengths.

"We shall determine whether you have committed war crimes." Luiif informs me. "If you are exonerated, you shall be returned to your people, unharmed."

"You have a very broad definition of 'war crime'. Isn't Starfleet service a war crime?" I ask.

For some reason, Luiif's taken aback by the question. He quickly confers with another Rovillian. "I am not a lawyer." Luiif tells me. "It would be unwise for me to try to counsel you."

Unlike most of your quadrant, we are neither cruel nor unjust, even if these times do not allow us to always put on our best face. I will not do anything to jeopardize you in the future." He promises, lifting his head and clicking slightly. I think it's meant to be a gesture of sincerity.

"Really?" I respond, just as sarcastically as before.

"If the misdeeds of others have led us to treat you unkindly, I apologize. I would rather be your friend than your enemy."

Luiif's semi-believable apologies almost transcend the situation. He reminds me of a Japanese officer who was my first year roommate at the Academy... the man apologized for *everything*.

"Your friend? Impossible." I scoff. Luiif jumps - I can't really gauge the reaction on his face, but the body motion indicates he's surprised.

"When we recovered your body, we discovered that you had survived naked in space for nearly five hours." Luiif tells me. "And now you dare to tell me that something is impossible? You make me doubt my senses, Kenneth Said."

I don't have anything to say to him - in fact, it hurts to talk. Luiif waits for another twenty seconds, hovering near the tank with an agape mouth and anxious eyes. I shake my head, and I'd have turned aside if my body was capable of that motion. Sensing the argument's over, the quasi-Cetacean swims away, leaving me feeling profoundly uncomfortable.

I'm not just an ordinary prisoner now - I'm a riddle. And when someone becomes *this* big of a riddle to an alien species, it's usually a matter of time before they're strapped to a dissection table.

*"Three walls and a door of glass-iron.  
Is it a prison, or a flaw in a gem aquatine?  
And if a flaw, is it a star or a crack?"*

*"I am watched by whale-eyes  
Leviathan faces feigning pity  
Without understanding.*

*"It's always the sea, always the sea that chokes me.  
Dark walrus shapes waddle in blue shadows,  
inviting sunlight shafts and white bubble fountains  
And entice me to throw myself into coral knives.  
It's always the sea, always the sea that chokes me..."*

"If you wish to be understood, perhaps you should not choose such an *interesting* form of presentation." Dr. Luiif replies. It's virtually impossible for a dolphin face to scowl, but the stocky Rovillian is giving it his best effort.

They haven't removed me from my cell for interrogation. I don't know if they've physically handled me yet (and discovered the empathy field that still envelops me, a legacy of my link with the Crysian), or whether they've telepathically interrogated me (which is also nearly impossible, unless I actively fight against my own psionic defenses - another gift from the Crysian). But Luiif has decided to try another tactic. Not physical torture (which, for all their self-proclaimed pacifism, the ISC has been known to employ); they've chosen to flood my cell with some kind of "truth gas" drug. The gas sticks in my throat with an alkaline taste that'd be hard to ignore if they

weren't distracting me by bombarding me with questions. I'm answering them honestly because I have no other choice.

However there are no truths as flexible as free verse. I'm answering the Rovillians with poetry, hoping they'll have trouble interpreting them. It's working better than I hoped; poetry appears to be a difficult concept for even the ISC's best universal translators. The Rovillians are a mildly telepathic race, but because the Crysian's empathic field serves as a barrier against telepathic intrusion, they can't get at me that way. That's why they're using drugs, but their minds are so used to using direct mental contact to clarify conversations with aliens that deciphering metaphors is a major challenge.

*“Nine months ago  
The Peacekeepers came to the embattled galaxy;  
Proclaiming judgment without crimes.  
Declaring peace above truth  
The noble lions roar, ignoring their own  
Bloody carrion nature.”*

"Please focus your mind, Ensign Said. Seek a song of understanding." He's trying to be commanding, but he can't mask his irritation. I've noticed the Rovillians like to use the song metaphor – if they ever disavowed ISC bullying, it might be an interesting culture to explore – but I don't have the luxury of thinking kind thoughts about my enemy. "Now Ensign, why does your culture enjoy violence so much?" Luiif asks, turning his head suddenly for emphasis. "Why do you choose to fight our advances rather than embrace a peaceful point of view?"

*“Our unbroken will  
Exacts its command over vast planetscapes.  
Taming when it is challenged, no matter how hard we bleed  
Upon barren soil.  
We bare the breasts of our children to the universe  
And dare it to strike and test their lives.”*

"Hmmm... again you deflect the question." Luiif isn't even a good critic. "Are you incapable of confronting the violence of your species directly?" Luiif is both goading and condescending at the same time. "Your culture must bear some very deep scars. When *did* you learn all the ideals of your Starfleet were a lie?" I begin to object. "Why does honest communication frighten you? We'll never be able to break down the barriers between our species without an open dialogue. It's the first step on the path to the peace you say you cherish."

I laugh, consider my answer, and retort with another verse.

*“Peace and Freedom share an embrace  
On their knees, before a sacrificial altar.  
A void-black blade gently scratches against their throats.  
In their ears, a crone-voice whispers:  
“Which of you shall make the sacrifice?”*

*"Each knows that without the other they are a sham  
But then Peace says: 'the nobler sacrifice is mine.  
For it is easier to end a war  
Than to break shackles.'  
And though Freedom sobs, Peace takes the blow.  
We watch the dagger fall with pride.  
Knowing that our sacrifice is right."*

"A very simplistic attitude," the Rovillian notes as it turns its head slightly, a simple gesture that looks painful for someone with such a thick neck. I can't see what he's looking at. "But then simplicity is always the best defense against the truth."

"It works for you," I spit, suppressing the urge to wax poetic. I'll let my muse rest until I get another question. Thanks to all those stimulants you've been pumping into my lungs, my mind is racing at close to warp velocity at the moment.

"You would be surprised." Luiif tells me. "Federation propaganda condenses my Concordium into a few easily digested pieces of hate: communiqués taken out of context, incidents exaggerated, blame falsely assigned. It makes it so much easier for you to... beat your chests and go to war."

"We're a very easy people to get along with," I answer. "We don't invade neutral zones, attack starbases, shipyards, annex 'aggressive' planets or perform any of the 'peacekeeping' you've done since the Organians introduced you to the galaxy nine months ago..."

"Are you certain you've been told the complete truth?" Luiif counters.

"When does one ever know the complete truth?" I ask. Luiif's expression changes, and I get the impression from the subtle change in his face that he thinks he may have made a breakthrough. "But I think I know enough..." I add, deflating the emotion. Luiif stares at me without moving, his face an eerie constant as the water shifts behind him. For a moment, the water seems more alive than him.

"May I ask you a challenging question?" he finally asks in a (probably unintended) child-like peep.

"You're the torturer." I shrug, trying to keep a professional distance. How odd... torturers usually like to depersonalize their victims, but this one's taking the opposite approach. It's the one great weakness of the self-righteous, I suppose – nothing makes them angrier than when the sanctimony is directed at them.

"How often in your history have you gone to war and discovered afterward that you'd been sold a lie?" The Rovillian seems energized by the political debate – which gives him the advantage, as politics depresses me. "How often will you allow your leaders to manipulate you for political gain? Your politicians have perfect fluency in the language of idealism. They speak it just well enough to stoke the fires of your pride, so you're certain you're fighting for a just cause. But whenever there is a conflict between the ideal and the real, how often do your leaders tell you that all the values you were told to cherish have simply become 'child's play'? And how easily do you embrace their newfound pragmatism?"

I don't answer him, and that's a good thing. It means that the effects of the 'truth gas' must finally be wearing off. I also feel less ill - aside from the taste in my mouth, the gas also made me sick to my stomach. "By the way, you'd better crawl to the left hand side of your cell." Luiif

states. "We're going to beam in another human to join you. Perhaps companionship will make you more amenable to conversation."

"You can't really believe that." I taunt back.

"You're pretending, Ensign Said." Luiif states in an analytical tone. "You pretend to be a hard man: a *korlivilar* or a marine or a Captain. But you're none of these things. Your nature is intellectual, not visceral. You dodge questions with wordplay, not bravado..."

"You haven't really given me the opportunity to express myself physically," I interrupt.

"Eventually your games will grow tiresome." Luiif doesn't acknowledge my remark. "And once you tire of them, we shall be able to speak openly and honestly together: men for whom secrets are a shared feast, and philosophy a sweet dessert."

"Oh! So you're a poet too." I say with a smirk. He doesn't react, but I'll bet he understands sarcasm.

"Perhaps I am. A poet who must be going now, for I do have other patients." Dr. Luiif abruptly turns aside. "But you're far too interesting to abandon, Ensign Said." he observes as he swims away. "Until later."

Good, I tell myself, untucking my uniform to wipe the sweat from my forehead. I've survived the first interrogation. But that's hardly a cause for celebration: this was only the warm-up, the test of my defenses. The real questioning is yet to come.

In the meantime I prepare myself for the arrival of my cellmate. I crawl over to one edge of the jail, and painfully prop myself against the wall. You'd think that if the Crysian could protect me from explosive decompression and exposure to space, she could have kept my muscles from tearing themselves apart while I was tumbling. But in its native environment, the Crysian is a colony gestalt of telepathic eel-like creatures that swim around in a water world and respond to changes in pressure by adjusting its density - I guess she forgot I couldn't cope in the same way.

Not even a goddess is perfect.

A few minutes later, the air on the other side of the cell begins to burn - ISC transporters are a little brighter than ours, and they make a deep noise like a rumbling engine with bellows - and suddenly Dr. Latham materializes beside me. He wobbles but manages to stay on his feet. He looks like he's three seconds away from emptying his stomach on the deck.

"Doc?" I can't mask my astonishment at seeing someone else from Ark Royal.

"Mr. Said." Latham says, shaking his head at me, blinking hard to keep from fainting.

"What'd they do to you?" I ask.

"They've mixed a tranquilizer into the transporter sequence. It's a way to keep prisoners docile when they're being moved."

"They do seem to enjoy their pharmaceuticals here." I inform him.

"Whatever it is, it doesn't agree with me. Definitely *not* approved by Starfleet Medical." Latham wobbles again, and I wish I was feeling well enough to steady him - this looks even more obnoxious than the effects of the 'truth gas'. "It is good to see more people from *Ark Royal* made it out alive!"

"How did you escape?" I ask.

"Through the sickbay escape pod, of course." Latham says. "Along with nine other crewmen, though we had to squeeze in tight. How many were in your pod?"

"There was just me," I say, not quite telling him the truth. His face sags a little. "But what about the bridge? Do we know what happened to the Captain?" I'm desperate to find out, and I'm sure it shows on my face. Latham shakes his head.

"It was sheer chaos in those last few minutes. I counted three pods leaving engineering when we launched, but nothing from the bridge. I have a bad feeling that no one else made it that far."

"There were a lot of ships." I observe.

"That's true. And the ISC remained in the vicinity for quite some time after the battle, so they may have captured more escape pods. At least I hope they did."

"Did you see *Ark Royal* when she was destroyed?" I ask. He nods.

"We were about eight thousand clicks out when she blew." Dr. Latham recounts, his voice catching in his throat, his head slightly bowed. "It looked like she was being attacked by four heavy cruisers. They surrounded her, hammered her, and finally she couldn't take it anymore." Latham's explanation makes the old ship sound like a battered child. "First there was a huge explosive ring when the warp core detonated, it must have spread itself out about a thousand clicks in less than half a second. That set off a much smaller and brighter explosion, a big sphere, and then she was gone. The bombardment suddenly stopped, and I got the impression that they were watching her too. We kept watching as it dissipated, I think it took seconds..."

"Einstein seconds." I say. Relativity and the difference between real time and psychological time – some moments stretch themselves like moving at full impulse. I picked up my share of physics lingo at the Academy. Or maybe it was Gable? When Francis wasn't chasing men or women he had a first rate mind.

"...and it was so silent. None of us could draw a breath."

"As silent as space." I say, bitterly. "I've known too much silence these days."

"I guess you have enough narrative now to write a poem." Latham tells me. "*The Death of Ark Royal*. Or something more dramatic."

"My muse is demanding shore leave." I reply, half-joking. "I was using poetry as a defense mechanism against the ISC's 'truth gas', composing all my answers in free verse."

"What were you trying to accomplish?"

"I hoped to confuse the translator," I replied. "It worked, but – with the Prophet be my witness – it was a bear to keep it going. Not to mention that most of the poems I came up with were absolute rubbish."

"You say that about all your poetry, Ensign." Latham says. "Just as long as you don't start babbling about 'quantum lines' again..."

"You're not going to let that go, are you?" I retort, but with a smile. "Here we are prisoners aboard an alien starship, tortured and brainwashed, and in the middle of all this you *still* have time to criticize my poetry?"

"Well, I suppose I'd rather be tortured by the ISC rather than an earnest but embarrassing mutilation of my language. At least they're *intentionally* hurting my senses."

"You're really tempting me to call you a snob, Doctor," I remark.

"Now *that* is a badge I wear with considerable pride." Latham says. "As for you, you have been treated to one of the most unique experiences in the cosmos. I would hope that your ability to express it in words – and to tap into the richness of your bond – would transcend the limitations of your engineering mind and share that profundity with the universe." He shakes his head. "Art is, like starships, a vessel of exploration. You're like a man who's been shown how to fly at Warp 10 who goes back to building sub-light shuttles. You can do better."

"I'll be satisfied with getting out of here intact." I shrug, examining the glass. "The cell walls..."

"Transparent aluminum. Or heavier."



"The only way of getting in or out is by transporter."

"Over which we have no control," Latham notes.

"Outside, it's all water..."

"Probably littered with air pockets. Rovillians are very similar to Terran cetaceans in that regard. They also prefer fresh water, if I recall."

"Air pockets. That's useful." I say, continuing through the wall of the tank. "I have to get out there and swim with the fishes."

"That's a very tall order," Latham observes - an obvious point if I've ever heard one.

"I know." I say, not avoiding the obvious reply.

"You'd probably be better off staying in your cell." Latham tells me. "The ISC cruisers were badly damaged in the battle. They had to wait for hours before leaving the *Bat'leth* Nebula. I'll wager there's a Federation fleet traveling at high warp right now that's going to intercept us at a moment's notice. I think we should wait and give them a chance to rescue us."

"More than likely, we'll just get blown up again." I reply. "This isn't a friendly environment for prime teams - have you ever known a space marine who enjoyed playing in the water? And it's our *duty* to escape."

"True enough." Latham tells me. "But is that you, or is it the Captain speaking?"

Damn. Latham knows me to the proverbial 'T'. It's never been in my nature to respond aggressively in a crisis. On the other hand, it was practically Greg Jensen's lifestyle to seek out new crises and new levels of aggression, and to boldly go into hot spots where even Klingons hadn't gone before. "It's duty." I say - as pure a lie as any I've ever told. "Somehow, I need to get the Rovillians to transport me into their environment. If we... or I... can get control of this ship, we can disrupt the echelon and delay them until the Federation fleet arrives."

"Assuming I'm right. I'm an optimist you know." Latham says and he asks me with a sigh: "Are you sure this isn't suicide?"

Involuntarily, I cackle, and it's a sound that even I find unnerving.

"Suicide? Of course this is suicide." I say. "This is war."

"Then prepare yourself," Latham says. "Because you're not going to like what comes next."

The mess hall was decorated with ribbons, banners, and wall-to-wall smiles. Thirty crewmen, mostly from engineering and security, had gathered to greet me. I've never received this much applause in my life - even at my Academy graduation, all I received was polite "we don't know who he is, but we'd better applaud anyways" clapping - so my crewmates' enthusiasm is unexpected and slightly embarrassing.

"Welcome back to the Royal," chief engineer Teller says, a little less gruffly than usual. He keeps his distance, as per the Doctors' instruction, but the warmth in his voice sounds genuine. "I'll bet your surprised to see the ol' gal's still in one piece without you." he teases.

"**What happened to you?**" another voice whispers. I turn around, and I don't see anyone speaking to me. Very strange.

"Are you okay, Ensign?" Teller asks.

"I'm not sure, sir." I say, forgetting about the whispering voice. I'm not sure how to react: to Teller, or to anyone else in this room. The past eight months have seen a parade of people walk up to me and prod my soul: some with gentle fingers and words, others with the telepathic equivalent of cattle prods. I met one psychiatrist after another, none of who were able to understand my simple need to get out of their damn hospital and live a normal life again. I

witnessed five different Vulcan telepaths get green nosebleeds when they tried to reach into my mind. Almost daily, I answered questions from Lieutenant Commanders with everchanging faces, Starfleet Intelligence's finest. More people asked me the question "how are you feeling Kenneth?" in one day than they'd done in my entire life prior to Monoceros.

But now I'm back on Ark Royal, among people who appreciate my quiet manner. Lieutenant Gleason loudly wonders how I could possibly stay alive without spending at least three hours each day in a Jeffries' Tube. It's both strange and good to hear laughter again. My colleagues are surprised to hear me joke and say that I found the claustrophobic confines of Starfleet Medical were just as "welcoming". Commander Hansen tells me that all the women onboard ship had been counting the days until my return. I laugh, and I laugh again, and I tell the entire room that everyone knows that every woman on this ship are all pining over the Captain. As a statement of the obvious, it ranks up there with "anti-matter and matter need to be evenly mixed". Although fortunately for my romantic hopes, Greg has to remain celibate (for physiological reasons), making him a safely unobtainable object of desire.

That's when the ship's jazz quartet enters, sets up on the bandstand, and plays. The party moves into full swing. It's not about me anymore, and that makes me happy - I spend most of my time backed into a corner, listening to the music and holding occasional conversations snippets between sets.

It's beginning to look like it'll be an uneventful party when suddenly Francis Gable, one of the two people remaining onboard *Ark Royal* who had shared my ordeal on Monoceros, comes half-sprinting/half-leaping through the door. He's naked except for a loincloth (Francis is a nudist, although he usually confines the practise to his quarters and a few private parties) and the words "Welcome Home Kenneth!" painted in bright orange on his chest. The music abruptly stops.

"Francis?" I wonder.

He says nothing; he grabs me in a passionate embrace and kisses me square on the lips. I'm too shocked to even describe the sensation - although there's a little part of me that's longed so badly for physical contact with another human being that I almost welcome it. Like the Captain, Gable can safely touch me.

"I love you, my brother," Gable says breathily, releasing the grip. A pair of burly security boys immediately grab the Science Second and drag him out of the mess hall. "Welcome back, Kenneth!" he shouts as the doors close behind them.

Well. Everyone's staring at me. It feels like my face, which is usually Semitic-dark, is suddenly burning beet-red. "Well, that was interesting." I finally say, breaking the silence.

"You don't know the half of it, Ensign."

I could feel the Captain's presence even before he entered the room; it's an odd welcome feeling, like déjà vu, but without the oblivious frustration. "Mr. Gable and I rarely agree on anything, but we do today. Welcome home, Kenneth," Greg Jensen tells me warmly.

"So are you going to kiss him too, Greg?" Hansen asks with a laugh. The captain just smiles, turning back to me when the laughter stops.

I know what he's about to say before he says it. *Captain*. I smile, but I don't say it. He acknowledges the unspoken word with a nod, and puts his hands on my shoulders, a firm welcome grip. Like Gable, Jensen linked with me down on Monoceros, and thus he's immune to the empathic turmoil that overwhelms anyone who makes physical contact with me.

"**But why?**" a voice whispers again. But I'm so deeply involved in my empathic conversation with the Captain that I'm not paying attention. I glance back at the doors through which two redshirts had just dragged Francis Gable. The Captain sighs.

"You're not the only one who's had trouble coping," There's some unusual hesitation in his voice. "Mr. Gable has not been himself lately."

I shake my head. "He's been *too much* of himself lately." I counter, and I can see from the look in Jensen's eyes that I've hit the nail on the proverbial head. Francis Gable's unbridled sensuality rivals a Deltan in heat. Partially it's because Gable comes from Vespera III, which has an animistic, sexual religion, but the big Science Officer's massive ego and vanity also acerbates his sex drive. When we were on the Wash and all the barriers between our minds dropped, Gable was the one who enjoyed it the most. The bond felt like sex to him.

"That's probably true." Jensen replies, and he holds up his hand to make an announcement. Within three seconds, the room's silent. "I know it's unfair to drag a man away from his own party - especially the way Constantina is looking at him..." (Technician Constantina blushes slightly; I have a crush on her, and he knows it). "But I need to discuss several things with him..."

"He hasn't been back an hour and he's already in trouble." Teller laughs. I've always been an easy target for ribbing: before Monoceros, I'd never been in trouble in my entire life.

"I won't take away the man of the hour for long, I promise!" He makes the announcement with a much broader and more familial voice than I've ever heard from Greg Jensen.

The Captain and I take a long walk down to the engine room. There's something about the gentle hum and throb of the warp engines that's comforting, especially to an engineer. , I've missed the sound so badly. Jensen knows it too, that's why he's brought me here. I'm standing next to a matter/anti-matter furnace that's powerful enough to annihilate everything in a five thousand kilometer radius if a force field so much as hiccupped. And yet, standing alone in this great chamber, the heart of our species' wizardry, my first thought is of the engines' purring noise, and not their terrible power.

"I've heard you've started writing poetry," Jensen notes. "Just like Pratt."

I lean against the dilithium chamber and stand as still as one of the crystals. Jensen paces the room, more restless than I remember, glancing periodically at me and at the bathing red light of Ark Royal's warp drive.

"**What happened on Monoceros?**" I can hear a voice whispering to me within the engine purr. It startles me, and I turn to the captain for support.

"You wanted to talk?" I ask. He nods.

"Have I ever told you the Paragi-Andor story of the creation of the universe?" Jensen asks.

"No sir." The question surprises me.

"There's no *sir* here, Kenneth. It's just the two of us."

"Just you and the guy who rattled around in your skull." I'm still trying to keep my distance, but it's hard. *I liked having you in there*. He doesn't say it, but we both know it. "Sorry," I say, surrendering my separation. "Your story?"

"The Paragi nomads of Andor are mystics; some of the most spiritual people in the galaxy. It must be the antennae." I smile, even though the joke's not appropriate. "They tell the tale of the first Speaker – who may as well be God – who has two hands: a good hand, and an evil hand. One day, for reasons that no one knows, God got an itch in one of his hands, and so he brought his hands together to scratch. But good and evil were never meant to come into direct contact

with each other, and when they touched, they went to war. It was an apocalyptic battle – Heavens were created and destroyed, Hells were dug in the foundation of the universe and unearthed...”

“Sounds like some ancient Middle eastern myths to me.” I say.

“Perhaps. The battle lasted only for a fraction of a second, but it’s destined to reverberate, like a bell, until time’s last moment. At the end of the battle, the winner created the universe.”

“So good triumphed and made the universe? How comforting.” I declare a little snidely. Jensen laughs and pats me on the back.

“The legend doesn’t name the victor.” The Captain informs me with a smile. “It’s a mystery that Andorian theologians have contemplated and debated for millennia. That’s probably why it’s my favorite creation myth in the entire universe.”

“Mine is the one about the giant turtle which carries the world on its shell.” I reply. “When I was a kid, my parents gave me this big picture book for Founder’s Day, *Mythology of the Universe*.”

“I remember.” Jensen says. And he does, because of the Wash.

“I love big paper books, the feel of them...”

“So do I. Even the paper cuts.” Jensen smiles.

“There was this comical looking turtle buckling under the weight of the world,” I remember. “It was like Atlas in a turtle shell, and its legs were all bent like rubber. I loved that drawing. I think all...”

“...creation stories should appeal to children.” Jensen finishes my sentence for me. He walks over to the grate, as close as you can possibly get to the warp engines. “Good and evil. You know, if you substituted ‘matter’ and ‘anti-matter’ for ‘good’ and ‘evil’, cosmologists might even agree with the Andorians.”

“It makes you think.”

“I was in a circle of Andorian storytellers last month when I was introduced to the story. For some reason, it made me think of you.” Jensen tells me. I chuckle.

“Am I supposed to be the good hand, or the evil hand?” I ask.

“Neither. I don’t know why I thought of you. I just did.” Jensen explains.

We stop talking for a few minutes, and just stare at the engines; like God, we watch as good and evil touch each other, go to war, and produce enough power to move a small planet.

“Pratt’s dead.” Jensen says.

“I heard.” I say. “Some sort of transporter mishap?”

“It was suicide.” Jensen doesn’t spare me the truth. “Shortly afterward, Nagura started seeing invisible Andromedans crawling all over the ship, and had to be dragged away to Elba II. The crew is now calling Francis ‘Gable the Unstable’.

“Childish, but apt,” I say. “Poor Francis.”

“He’ll be gone soon too.”

“Is there any way to stop it?” I ask. Francis Gable is equal parts strange, annoying, and unsettling, but I like him a lot. Greg shook his head.

“And it took more arm-twisting than I ever imagined to persuade Starfleet Medical to put you back on the duty roster. They don’t think you’ll last a month.”

“They’re wrong.” I say.

“I know they are.” Jensen says. “I’d bet my career on it.”

There's another long pause, a pause when I feel like hot breath is heating the nape of my neck. Only Greg's presence keeps me from turning around. "I guess that's the second time you've rescued me, sir," I remark.

"Hardly. I brought you back where you belonged, that's all." The Captain answers, and he stiffens, like the old Greg Jensen, the one I barely knew before Monoceros. "I run a tight ship Mr. Said, and there are certain... components... that are hard to replace."

"Well, I'm honored to be such a critical component." I say, half-mocking. "And if you ever need rescuing, I'll move heaven and earth to save you..."

In the tradition of the Arabic people, it's inadvisable to swear oaths. I don't care.

"Is that a promise?" Jensen looks a little amused.

"With both hands." I say.

**"But what happened on the Monoceros Wash?"** Luiif asks. I recognize the voice behind the whisper, and it brings me out of the session. The Rovillian's irritated; he rears his head slightly back into his neck, his shell, body language I've not observed until now. "You telepathically joined with the others. The Captain rescued you. The others fell apart, but after a long rehabilitation, you got well again. But you still haven't told me what caused your psionic nightmare in the first place!"

We're now into the third hour of my latest interrogation, and it's going badly - the drugs are a lot stronger this time, the poetry's stopped flowing, and they're using some sort of artificial mental probe that - while not able to get me to tell the truth - is still very good at unlocking old memories. And here I thought Romulan interrogations were efficient. The Rovillians have transported me into a small plastic chamber in the center of the ship's sickbay. Thin plastic walls are all that are shielding me from the Rovillian's preferred aquatic environment, and there are a lot of security guards, wearing what appear to be phaser gloves. I've heard about these weapons - they only have a stun setting, but they hit you about twice as hard as a phaser II, so if you're unfortunate enough to get hit by too many of them at once, you probably won't wake up with too many brain cells left intact.

"I'm tired. You've keep flooding my cell with a stimulant to keep me awake." It's been at least two days, and I haven't been able to get to sleep. It's a discomfort that I'm all too familiar with. "Our bodies don't react well to it."

"I apologize." Luiif again laments my discomfort. "You were badly injured. The drug is the best way to regenerate your damaged muscle tissue."

I *have* felt my pulled muscles rapidly knit themselves back together, but I don't want to admit there's any possibility he's telling the truth. "How convenient." I snap, lacing him with sarcasm. "Your 'compassionate' drug just happens to cause sleep deprivation, which just happens to be standard operating procedure for... torturers?"

Luiif recoils at the accusation. "I am a physician!" he insists with a low growl I've never heard from him before; his stance practically screams offense. "A healer! I do not break bodies, I mend souls! Do not compare me to the barbarians of your quadrant!"

"You've drugged me, hit me with mental probes, confined me to a tiny living space..."

"Space is at a premium on a starship." Luiif protests, albeit feebly. "As for the drugs..."

"I'm surprised you haven't raped me." I spit. Luiif is so aghast, he can't even answer. "But in a way you've already done that. You've gone to so much effort to get inside my head - and for what? For what? Engine schematics? Your agents have already taken those. To learn what

happened on the Wash? You've seen how hard my mind's working to avoid thinking about it. It's not a secret, it's trauma!"

"It may well be." Luiif states.

"It's as uncomfortable as it is private. Whatever I learned from my link with the Captain a year ago has no tactical value – we hadn't even engaged the ISC at the time. There's nothing of value to you..."

At that moment, the ship seems to shudder, the universal translator clicks out, and the security guards and Luiif have a brief conversation. I suspect we've arrived at Pholos, the ISC's target, and if that's the case, it's the best thing that's happened to me since I escaped from *Ark Royal*. The Rovillians probably won't risk a site-to-site transport of prisoners during the middle of an operation, and if so, they'll leave me in this interrogation chamber. These thin plastic walls present me with a lot better opportunity for escape than the transparent aluminum door of my cell.

"You'll have your wish." Luiif says, adjusting a control. "We need to put you to sleep while we conduct other business."

"The raid on Pholos?"

"The ISC does not raid." Luiif insists. "But yes, we've arrived at Pholos, to take custody of an accused war criminal."

"And take him to Meska, and put him on trial?" I spit.

"Trials – in your confusing sense – are only for those who can't be examined telepathically." Luiif informs me. "And such a trial would have to be held on the ISC parliamentary world of *Deskkiye*, not on the Meskeen homeworld."

"You're such a lovely democracy, aren't you?" I never thought I could put so much sarcasm into a such a short sentence. But even the sting of the conversation doesn't hide the fact that I'm already beginning to feel tired. So much for my escape plan. Unless I plan to sleepwalk my way off the ship.

"Ensign, I know you've experienced enormous pain." Luiif says. "Eight months in an institution, forced separation from your friends, your ship, and everything that gave your life stability and purpose. Isn't isolation the surest form of hell in the universe?"

I shake my head. "Ah, the sympathy speech. This is the third time I've heard you give it, always at the end of the session." I laugh. "Does it make you feel better?" I mock, fighting a wave of fatigue with raw contempt and nerves. "Does it let you put back on that careful ISC veneer of civility, wash away the grunge of barbarism? Are these words soap for the Rovillian soul?" I start to laugh.

"Look into my eyes, Kenneth Said. Do you think they're devoid of sympathy?" Luiif presses close to the wall of the cell. "I am many things, but not an actor."

"I do not believe you." I state. To acknowledge any truth to what he's saying would give him power. Let the dolphin-head carve me up first.

"I hate all of this." Luiif says. "The suffering, and especially how it's forced us to harden ourselves. Do you know why the Concordium takes such a hard line about the righteousness of our cause?" I don't even bother to answer - I know wasted rhetoric when I hear it. "To keep us from losing ourselves in the mad necessity! If I help you, a worthy, tormented soul, I may yet save myself. Most of your quadrant doesn't elicit pity, but you do..."

"No one asked you for your pity or for your interference!" I finally snap, and it's been a long time since I so clearly felt the Captain in my throat. "Pity hasn't kept you from your 'mad necessity': drugging me, torturing me..."

"Yes! But *only* to achieve a greater good," Luiif works harder than ever at taking a sympathetic tone. "The Federation has been unable to heal you, not completely, and you know it. But I'm certain once I understand you, *I* can help you. And I won't do it to turn you into a parrot for the ISC, or a spy, or any of the things that you fear, but to be yourself again. That will be my gift, but first the walls must come down!"

I slump to the floor, in a seated position. "If the Captain were here..." It's more babble than threat.

"I don't know where your Captain is, Kenneth Said." Luiif says, and his voice is so convincing that I don't hesitate to believe him. I told him about my bond with the Captain. Francis Gable had called me his brother - it was the last word he spoke to me before he left Starfleet. That's also the way I feel about the Captain.

But that's not enough to keep me going. The fatigue is overwhelming and all I want to do is rest my eyes. All I want...

"**Beloved.**" In my last conscious moment, I hear a faint female voice in my head, growing and taking shape. "**Beloved!**" the Crysian says, sensing the seriousness of my situation.

"Help me..." I mutter.

"***I cannot succor you for very long. You are so far away, and... I...***" For the first time, I sense the Crysian hesitate, almost as though she's keeping something from me. "***Perhaps you should wait until I am stronger.***"

"No. I'm tired of waiting." I declare, focusing on her, and her power, and the bond of our love. She understands my wish perfectly. Suddenly my body jerks like a puppet and I rise to my feet in a split second. The guards are alerted to the sudden, unexpected motion of my body, but they don't fire on me yet. That's a mistake. I remove my ship's badge from my shirt and use one of its sharp corners as a knife, running it along the enclosure's plastic seal. It's far stronger and thicker than it looks, but with the Crysian's power flaring within me, it's easy to tear through the walls. Water begins pouring into the breach, but I ignore the pressure wave. Because I can, at least for now.

"I'm going to borrow your ship." I tell the guards, looking down at my hands. "Please..." I add, with a sick smile.

The one question that people always ask me when they think they're having a private chat with me is "*what does it feel like to be a god?*" I curl my lip and stare thoughtfully ahead, and they expect me to reply with something profound (or at the very least a cliché like: "absolute power corrupts absolutely") and when I tell them the truth, it confuses the hell out of them.

I tell them that it feels like love, because nothing else in the universe feels this good, this puissant, or this simple. Love and godhood.

The pressure of the water pressure that's shooting through the severed seal should be crushing me, but I am a god now, so the water is as trivial as dust motes in my path. Five Rovillian guards shout and scream improvised battlecries and dot my body with blue-white phaser circles. Phaserlight in the water is an oddly beautiful sight when you don't have to worry about the consequences. Taking deliberate steps, I advance on the Rovillians smelling the fear in the water. It's warranted; when I reach fighting distance, it only takes me a few seconds to club their

thick armored frame into unconsciousness. And when I touch them, I can sense their minds panic, losing all emotional control. Unconsciousness is a mercy.

Finally I reach a computer console and open myself to the language of the ISC computers. The interface is surprisingly simple: like the Federation, ISC technology has to be easily accessible to a wide variety of cultures. Many ISC cultures are telepathic, and when I touch the console I feel a helpful telepathic presence direct my mind. A telepath in your skull is a very creepy sensation, like watching a spider crawl over your skin, but you *can* get used to it; I twist the telepathic guide to my will and override the controls of the ship's site-to-site transporters, picking up its security codes while I'm doing this. Five seconds later, I'm on the bridge. Fifteen seconds later, everyone on the bridge is unconscious except me.

I take a moment to observe my surroundings. The ISC bridge is a compact, nearly spherical multi-level affair that vaguely resembles a wasp's nest. On some of the upper stations, crew are positioned at odd angles, some even hanging from (or supported on) thick metallic rungs. This place must be quite the sight when it's fully staffed.

My first task is to check the prison log and locate Captain Jensen. I'm not expecting to find him, but it's still disappointing: all prisoners have been identified, and neither he nor any other member of *Ark Royal's* bridge crew is on the list. I request the prison roster from the other ISC ships - a risky but very necessary move. Unfortunately that search turns out to be fruitless too - no one has him. If the captain's still alive, he's not in ISC hands.

The Crysian said I didn't have much time, and she was right - the power's already starting to wane. The cruiser, *The Lasting Peace* is designed to operate in both aquatic and dry environments, so I quickly force the ship to empty out enough of its water compartments and give air-breathers free access between the brig and the bridge. Unfortunately, drying out the ship will kill any Rovillian who's unfortunate enough not to be able to get to a wetsuit, but this is war.

War. Hundreds of people who have been deluded into becoming my enemy, dying a slow and painful death just because someone they don't know - me - wants to show off his cleverness. Yeah, that's war in a nutshell.

I can't do it. I *won't* do it. "Computer." I say with the last of my Crysian empowered authority. "Can we do a site-to-site transport on all Rovillians in the dry zones to get them into water?"

"Yes." The computer answers.

Another thought occurs to me. If I can transport that many people at once... "Computer, can we do a continuous cycle of site-to-site transport on all Rovillians? Keep them in a continuous state of transport so they'll be unable to do anything?"

I suppose storing the Rovillians in the transporter's memory buffer would be just as easy, but after a few hours of storage there's a decent chance their patterns might degrade, and that'd be an even more painful death than asphyxiation. Continuous transport keeps the Rovillians out of my way with as little potential loss of life as possible. The ISC calls us barbarians in the languages of a hundred worlds. Proving them wrong on that score would be the most satisfying vengeance I've had in this war.

"No. Computer memory is insufficient to hold all patterns in the buffer simultaneously," the computer replies.

Yeah, it is a lot of memory - there's no way I'd be able to consider trying this on a Federation ship, even if our transporter technology were perfected. "Computer, can we dump enough non-essential data out of your system to be able to hold the patterns?"

"Yes."



I quickly review what the computer considers non-essential, and I'm relieved that it's mostly a cultural and historical database, not ship's control systems. So I decide to burn the equivalent of the Great Library of Alexandria or Memory Alpha and clear enough space in the ship's main computer to ensure that we've got enough memory to hold the Rovillians in a continuous transporter loop, at least until I find a place to secure them safely. Once that's accomplished, I trigger the transporter sequence and watch the monitors as every member of the crew finds themselves sent on a little trip.

I'd never have guessed that Rovillian faces could be so expressive, though part of me feels sorry for them. This can't be pleasant.

"This is Ensign Kenneth Said of *USS Ark Royal*." I declare, sending a message to all decks. "The ISC-CA *Lasting Peace* is now firmly under the control of the United Federation of Planets. Prisoners, stand-by for transport, because we're going to need you."

I'm not really thinking ahead. I need to know who's here, how many Federation prisoners are onboard. I check the prisoner database, only to discover that it got erased in the memory purge. So I use ship's sensors to examine the ship's cell blocks and discover a grand total of forty-three Federation prisoners huddled together in various cells. I was only sure about Latham. I transport each member of a known Federation race to the bridge one at a time, starting with Doc Latham. Within minutes, the bridge is a cocktail party of officers from three shattered Federation heavy cruisers: *Rutherford*, *Ark Royal*, and *Nebraska*.

"Uh... folks..." I say, noting that eight different conversations have broken out, and some of the prisoners are examining consoles in ways that are making me nervous. "People!"

The bridge goes silent. A tall, slim red-headed human male with three pips on his collar steps forward, glowers at me with Ireland-green eyes, and commands me in a deep bass: "Stand down, Ensign. You've done great work, but now it's time to defer to a more experienced officer." He sits down in what he thinks is the commander's chair, but which is actually a navigation console. I don't have the heart to correct him – yet.

"Commander..." Latham says to this man who, like half of Starfleet, is mostly composed of priggish dignity. "You aren't familiar with this ship's systems. Ensign Said is. I strongly recommend that we defer to him, at least for now."

*And he has the power of a god...* But Latham only says it with a glance.

"We can't do anything without alerting the other ships in the ISC echelon," the commander continues, ignoring Latham's advice. For a second, Latham's face expression I've never seen on it before – authoritarian without even a trace of jocularly – but the moment passes quickly. Latham defers to the Commander as he continues to talk, a rapid stream of patter.

"We're going to have to make it look like we're as ISC as a talking frog, and wait it out until the fleet arrives." *Talking frog*. The Captain's race of the ISC are the Meskeen, creatures that resembled nothing so much as a man-sized bullfrog. "What's our position?"

"We're in orbit over Pholos, sir." A woman with long auburn hair and lieutenant's piping on her uniform sits down at the helm. I've translated the display controls into English, the technical language that most 'Fleeters understand, but the Lieutenant doesn't look like she even needed the help. She's so much at home with the systems that it resembles a natural confluence.

Were I a Starflint – Starfleet Intelligence – spook, I might be suspicious. But the universe is full of natural prodigies.

"We have a clear route between major ships systems." another lieutenant says, as people quickly arrange themselves into appropriate roles. "I recommend getting a skeleton crew down to engineering immediately."

"Mr. Bridges, Main Engineering is yours. Mr. Said will remain here and coordinate with you." The nameless Commander glances briefly at me. I nod. Lieutenant Bridges gives the regulation *ayesir* and quickly rounds up several technicians.

"The science station is noting some major data loss, and transporters are going crazy." a (literally) hawk-nosed Skorr reports, prodding the science station with half-fingers, half-talons.

"That's deliberate." I interject, turning to the commander. "The crew's being bounced between transports. I didn't know where to put them, and locking them in transport seemed like the best solution..."

"Curruthers, take a security team and scout the cargo bays," the commander barks. "Let's see if we can find a secure place to hold our hosts that won't require 80% of the ship's power reserves to maintain."

"Aye sir." A woman repeats. It's like an echo.

"Commander, the configuration of these weapons systems defies logic..." Another Lieutenant, a pretty young Vulcan woman, is dangling from the weapons control console in a monkey-like pose that's about as un-Vulcan as it gets. I could almost laugh. "Given that we are dealing with an advanced culture, I am.... disappointed."

"What do you know about the ship's offensive systems, Mr. Said?" The commander breaks my concentration with something that would be a good question if it weren't barked at about twenty more decibels than it needed.

"Only what I've been told in Starfleet briefings, Commander." I offer a half-hearted, wincing reply.

"Jahal, we'll need weapons at a moment's notice." The Commander barks again, this time at the weapons officer. I haven't encountered this level of authoritarian overdose since the Academy.

"My highest priority was securing the ship and freeing Federation prisoners." I add. "The weapons systems were a much lower priority..." But the Commander ignores me; he's already walking over to Communications and is working with two Lieutenants in deciphering ISC communications codes. He glances at me, and I take a deep breath and take a long look at the situation.

I don't belong on the bridge of a starship. I really don't, no matter what Jensen said about my 'hidden talents'. Bridges always intimidated the hell out of me, they're too close to the nerve center of the ship, where the crisis hits first and hardest. All sounds made on the bridge register as white noise – anytime I try to figure out what's being said up there, my ears hurt.

"Commander," the Skorr reports. "Eight Federation cruisers have just warped into the system."

"The ISC command ship is sending deployment orders, Commander," a lieutenant commander from the communications team reports. "The echelon will assume a wedge formation – we're supposed to be the third starship from the left."

A more jocular commanding officer would have turned it into a Peter Pan reference, but this man either lacked good verbal timing or was close to culturally illiterate. Not that he lacked distraction. The Commander sprints back to his (not-quite-the-captain's) chair and responding to the report by glassily staring into space. The other ISC ships are already breaking orbit and

moving into their appointed roles in the formation. For a second, the mask drops from the Commander's face, and I see him for what he clearly is - a ship's second officer, way out of his depth on an alien ship with an unfamiliar crew. He closes his eyes to give a silent prayer, and then leans forward on a large seat that was built for a creature very different from a human. "Good," he says. "The toads destroyed *Rutherford*. It's time to even the score."

## IV: No Lasting Peace

The helmsman, without orders, begins to move the ship into its place in the echelon. The Commander doesn't even blink - either he approves of the act, or he has absolute faith in his helmsman. There *is* something about her that's a little too perfect for my liking, but for now I'll take "perfect" over "getting caught".

"We'll intercept the Federation fleet in thirty-six minutes." The Skorr science officer reports, jostling its wings and shifting its head. I can't get a read on the lieutenant at all - the Skorr's hawk-like face makes it one of the most emotionally impenetrable species in the Federation.

"Okay people! Listen up!" The Commander rises from the chair and barks like a Rigillian guard dog. "Communications, I don't have to tell you that the less contact we make with the ISC, the less likely it's going to be that we'll be discovered. Jahal, I need you to get down to plasma control and check on the torpedo situation..." Plasma torpedoes are the ship's heaviest weapons system. " - and while you're down there, look for a nice, big comfy cargo bay that we can dump the Rovillians into."

"Aye sir."

"I'm going to Sickbay to see what I can do," Latham says, leaving the bridge without consent.

"T'Doroth?" The Commander turns and fixes a commanding gaze at the Vulcan weapons officer who's still dangling from a ladder on one of the upper levels of the bridge. "Work with Mr. Said and see if you can make sense of the weapon controls."

"Sir?" T'Doroth says, looking at me.

"Yes Lieutenant?"

"I do not believe that such a collaboration would be productive." The Vulcan declares, looking at me. Like most of her species, she can sense the Crysian's empathic field.

"Why the hell not?" The commander is tensing his body as though someone were about to hit him.

"He is *kyaniarie*, the emotion storm." T'Doroth replies. "Working with him is likely to be... counterproductive."

"Oh, consider it a logic challenge." The Commander snaps in an irritated tone. I think she's offended; T'Doroth nods, but she doesn't say the requisite *ayesir*.

T'Doroth's post is located on an elevated area eight feet above the floor. I scamper up a metal ladder, ignoring the creaking sounds it makes, and join the Lieutenant at her side. She bristles, flicks a switch, and suddenly a localized anti-gravity field wraps itself around me. "This will allow you to maintain your balance," she tells me.

"The ISC has some interesting toys." I say. "Let me take a look." I bend over and look at the row of blinking lights and manipulate a read-out. "Hmmm, I can't locate the controls. The weapons systems are clearly displayed, but it's like the control systems don't exist."

"I have seen no evidence of automation."

"I didn't detect any when I was scanning the system either."

"Nor have I found any alert status triggers, a sequence that automatically brings the weapon controls online."

She's both nervous and frustrated, not a pretty combination, especially in a Vulcan. "Okay." I say, taking a deep breath. "You may be approaching this a little too logically."

"Oh?"

"The ISC hates war and violence..."

"As do we." T'Doroth says.

"You do indeed." I nod. Vulcans are as well known for their pacifism as Klingons are for bloodthirst; the pursuit of peace is so entrenched in Vulcan culture that working in Starfleet is a stigma to some of them even in peacetime. "You'd probably make very good ISC members." I joke.

"That is highly unlikely, given our one irreconcilable philosophical disagreement." T'Doroth explains. "History teaches that violence cannot impose a lasting peace. Only through moral example and sacrifice can you persuade a species to abandon a violent heritage."

"Unfortunately, the ISC clearly doesn't see it that way."

"Indeed. Their lack of logic is *troubling*." T'Doroth says.

She enunciates the last word to make it sound especially significant, and I have to stop myself from guessing at her motives. When you work long enough with Vulcans, you start to see emotions where none are intended, or you exaggerate the emotions they do display. Clearly she's given the issue a lot of thought, and she's not the only one. It's been reported that ISC morality has been loudly debated in the universities and temples of Vulcan, and ISC diplomats have privately approached the Vulcans and attempted to shake their loyalty to the Federation. I wonder how this is impacting the Vulcans in Starfleet?

"Okay." I say, snapping my attention back to the problem at hand. "But what if it's not lack of logic, but *twisted* logic? Something that only makes sense to the ISC mindset?"

"I do not understand your line of reasoning." T'Doroth declares, still pondering the question. "If they are pacifists - flagrant pacifists - who need weapons but wish to disavow their use... Perhaps they might link them to a low priority subsystem?"

"Perhaps -"

But before I can finish my sentence, she's already found the answer, a eureka moment that's only expressed by the frenzied fingering on the control panel. "Weapons control is nested in the

communications subsystems." She pivots and looks down at the command console.

"Commander, I now have access to the ship's weapons controls."

"Good!" The Commander's smile is genuine.

"Commander," a communications officer also pivots down to face the commander, and if the display of teeth is any indication, he's got good news to share. "Lieutenant Nesron has discovered several cargo bays where we can safely dump the Rovillians. He's arranging for cargo to be moved into quarters and is cutting off local access to control panels prior to flooding."

"Well done." The commander snaps. "All those damn transporters are draining so much energy we can't arm our weapons systems. If the ISC sees that we can't arm ourselves, there'll be hell to pay."

The repudiation of my tactic hits me like a punch in the face - I almost check my nose to make sure it isn't broken. The Skorr lieutenant bows his head and reprograms the ship's transporters without blinking. "It will take approximately fifteen minutes to deposit the ISC crew in the cargo bay."

"Well, let's hope they don't suffer from too much transporter sickness." The commander grins. Bouncing around for an hour in a transporter beam isn't particularly easy on the stomach. "Baker, find us some sidearms: let's not be unarmed in case they find a way to escape. T'Doroth, what's our weapons status?"

"All weapons systems are functional. I am charging them as power becomes available."

"Good!" The commander smiles. "I'm in a fighting mood today."

"Not in *too* much of one, I hope." I mutter out loud. I know I'm making a mistake the moment I say it, but it isn't until I see the look of disgust on the commander's face that I realize how big a mistake I just made.

"The ISC expects us to hold our position in the echelon. Any movement out of formation and we'll expose ourselves, and they *will* come after us before the Federation is in a position to help us. I don't *like* seven to one odds, Ensign."

"I don't dispute that, sir." I reply, trying to dig my way out of the asteroid-sized hole I'd just dug for myself. "But I have to point out that we have only a handful of personnel to dedicate to damage control, and they don't know the ship's systems. When the shields go down, they are going to stay down. We are not battle ready."

"I concur with Ensign Said," the helmsman interrupts the conversation to support my point. I have the feeling she's been mulling over battle tactics from the moment we took control of the ship. "I recommend that we hold fire until we can perform an alpha strike on an ISC's exposed starboard shield, then run."

"Dammit people!" The commander growls, glowering specifically at me. "Tell it to someone who *didn't* finish in the top five percentile at the Academy..."

"Commander," T'Doroth states. "We are unfamiliar with each other's capabilities, trapped on an alien ship. It is more logical to offer advice than to hold back. Communication..."

"Thank-you, T'Doroth, but time is a luxury." The Commander again rudely dismisses her. People only use that tone with Vulcans when they think they won't fight back. Coward. "I'd love to chat with each and every one of you and win your confidence, but by that time we'd probably be blown to kingdom come, and losing two ships in one week would really irk me. Lieutenant Kollos's attack plan is sound." He takes a deep breath while acknowledging the pretty helmsman. "And Ensign Said's cautionary note is... not without merit. However, Starfleet may have its hands full today, so I won't promise a safe retreat."

Nobody says anything except the standard *ayesirs*. He sits down again and struggles with the quasi-captain's chair, an oyster shaped platform that's obviously meant for a Rovillian; he wastes any opportunity to relax by inspecting the con until his face becomes a mask of frustration.

"Bloody hell! Does anybody know how to issue an alert on this damn ship?"

I think the question's rhetorical, so I turn again to T'Doroth, who's been unconsciously nudging away from me. "Thanks. I'm glad you supported me." I tell her with a smile that seems to irritate her.

"Appreciation is unnecessary," T'Doroth replies. "I simply attempted to facilitate more efficient communications between members of the crew."

"Well... sure." It's really hard to argue with a Vulcan. I turn back to my controls, and check the ship's autorepair system with a few quick keystrokes - ISC ships aren't as heavily manned as a Fed vessel of comparable size, but they compensate for the smaller crew complement with increased levels of automation. That should work in our favor in the coming battle. "Kollos is an odd name for a human. It sounds Klingon to me."

"The name is Medusan." T'Doroth explains. "I served with Kollos aboard *Rutherford*. Her mother is a human telepath who mind melded with the Medusan ambassador. What she didn't realize at the time is that telepathic contact is part of the Medusan mating ritual."

"But Medusans are an energy based species." I wonder aloud. *Who are the best navigators in the galaxy, and supposed to be so horrific that the mere sight of them drives humanoid lifeforms insane. But that's beside the point.* "How did he manage to match chromosomes with a human?"

"I do not know." T'Doroth replies. "Energy to matter is a trivial transformation for some species, even unique matter like genetic material. And I have observed, as you humans say: *'that love will find a way'*."

I laugh. The part of me that still holds a piece of Francis Gable laughs harder than the others.

"You act as though you have considerable battle experience." T'Doroth notes quietly, a little taken aback by my expression of emotion. "I believe that irritates the Commander."

"I've never been on the bridge during a real fight in my entire life." I admit, and then I realize that I've just told a lie. Prior to our link, Captain Jensen had fought in twenty-eight separate engagements – not including ground assaults and bar fights - and I remember all of them vividly. A hundred shudders and inertial glitches, the smell of ozone issuing from burnt circuitry, keeping your head clear while men die around you, it's painful to think about. Greg had taken four different starships into combat. I wonder what the final battle on *Ark Royal* felt like?

"Then logic suggests you treat him with greater deference." T'Doroth chides me.

"Fine. Greater deference it is..." I say. But I can tell she believes me as little as I believe myself.

Commander Beliveau (the half-Medusan finally mentions his name about fifteen minutes into the operation) is mostly concerned with communications - his specialty on *Rutherford* - and whether the ISC will uncover our ruse. But the ISC aren't checking us carefully. Starfleet intelligence has uncovered evidence of conflict between the Rovillians and the dominant Meskeen race, and it may be that as a 100% Rovillian ship, they'd prefer to keep *the Lasting Peace* as far from the command loop as possible. I have no idea whether the reports are true, but it would greatly amuse me if the racial prejudices of this so-called enlightened ISC come back to hit them in the face.

The thought makes me wonder what Dr. Luiif is doing at the moment. Given everything he did to me, I hope he's experiencing several minutes of hard vomiting in a brackish, water-filled, cargo bay.

I'm handed a Rovillian "pacifier", one of their phaser gloves, a big clam shell device that fits us as clumsily as an adult glove on a child's fingers. It's more likely that I'd drop it in a firefight than get off an accurate shot. A couple of officers, Beliveau in particular, breathe a big sigh of relief as soon as they're holding them.

"Transport complete." The Skorr reports after about fifteen minutes. "The Rovillians are secure in their new home."

"A pity we didn't have enough cells in the brig," the commander notes.

"Weapons and shields are fully charged." T'Doroth adds. "We are ready."

"We'll be in attack range in six minutes." Kollos adds.

"I am confirming eleven ships in the Federation fleet." The Skorr Lieutenant scrutinizes sensors with an expression of such intensity that it looks like he wants to shoot his eyes through the panel. "The task force is led by USS Wellington and is comprised of four Excelsior class vessels, four Constitution class vessels, and three Mirandas." The last three are trivial. The Lieutenant pauses and looks like he's waiting for the Commander to remove his hand from his chin and stop brooding. "Better odds than the *Bat'leth*," he adds, trying to be encouraging.

"I don't know." The commander is thinking out loud. Very sloppy. The other bridge officers trade telling glances, and most of us realize just how poor a fit Beliveau is for the big chair for the first time.

The Skorr, acting without orders, displays the Federation fleet's approach on the main viewscreen, a hologram that engulfs most of the central section of the bridge-dome. Kollos takes control of the hologram and overlays a juryrigged tactical display. "It's an excellent approach vector," she says. "Minimal exposure to their arc of fire on the first pass..."

"We're receiving an order to prepare for an emergency turn," the communication specialist informs us. "When we reach seven thousand kilometers, we're to perform a high energy turn so we're directly facing the Federation fleet. Then we're supposed to launch an alpha strike on their front shields, and hit them again with rear photons after we overrun them."

"Standard ISC tactic." Beliveau says, and he's right. "It's all going to come down to a matter of timing. Will Starfleet anticipate the maneuver and perform their high energy turn to compensate?"

"A better question would be if knowing the ISC turn beforehand will give us a better chance to launch an alpha strike against *them*," I ponder. I don't mean to challenge the commander, I have no idea why I'm challenging him, given that I've never done it before - it just happens. But having gone this far, I plot the two fleets' movements on the main viewscreen, which draws a series of repeating dashes and dots at my command. I slide the ships on a computer simulation and draw careful attention to shield facings. "This ship, *The Old Grey Man*, is the most vulnerable, especially at this part of the turn..."

The commander has a very hard look on his face, but he's not stopping me either.

"If we perform our alpha strike here, and *USS Wellington* and *Haida* take advantage of it, we have a chance of taking one of them out on the first pass."

"Hmmm, and what's the response from the ISC going to be like?"

"Let's hope we catch them naked, sir." I reply, wearing a Francis Gable smirk on my face. It's frightening how appealing it can be to get inside Francis's skin and wear it for awhile.



"Thank you, Mr. Said, but I would rather not think about naked Rovillians," Beliveau retorts. "But you're probably right." He turns to the communications team. "What are the odds of being able to send a private subspace packet to *Wellington* without it being detected by the ISC?"

"Pretty high, sir." The lead communications says. "If we knew how to do it. ISC communications are very big on openness and everyone knowing what you're saying."

"Feh," the Commander responds. "If this were a Romulan ship, we'd probably have the exact opposite problem." I think that's the first joke I've heard him crack. He shakes his head slightly, as if rejecting an idea before he even says it. "Keep working on it, Lieutenant. I'd like a little privacy. But for now, I think we'll go for the tactical plan as it's been presented." He walks over to the helmsman. "Do you see any problems with it, Mr. Kollo?"

I know it's standard nomenclature, but even after four years in Starfleet, it still a little odd to hear a woman called "mister".

"No, sir." Kollo says. "In fact, if we perform a quick acceleration and drop - and we get lucky - we can probably overshoot them on the first pass and place our rear plasma torpedoes into the same shield."

"That'll make it easier for *Wellington*." The commander says, unconsciously brushing back a strand of red hair from his face.

"Three minutes to extreme weapons range, sir."

There's a collective swallow on the bridge. Kollo focuses the viewscreen on the echelon, giving us a rearview. We're in a tight formation, only five hundred kilometers separation between ships, just far enough that a photon detonation isn't going to damage multiple targets. We move in a sleek, uniform motion. Kollo's ability to anticipate enemy movements is almost frightening.

Soon we're in range. The Miranda diamond is the Federation's first attack wave; they're not powerful, but they're the most nimble. They move in to try to break us apart and draw fire; they skirt in to fifteen clicks, unload an alpha strike that does moderate damage to the ISC Medium Cruiser *Nova Hope*, then abruptly turns and veers away in a direction tangential to the rest of the fleet. One of the ISC cruisers fires a pair of forward phasers in response, but the distance is too great to do any serious damage.

"We're being told to ignore them and head straight for the Excelsiors." The communications officer informs us.

"Let's be a good boy and follow orders." Beliveau says gleefully, straightening himself.

The moment comes. At twelve clicks, the Federation wedge begins a high-energy turn in anticipation of our move. The other ISC ships begin their turn, adding additional vector to compensate for the Feds' movement. It's a game of chess played at warp speed, but one of the rooks is about to change sides. *The Lasting Peace* suddenly drops out of formation, fall back to three clicks and fires all of its forward weapons into the starboard shields of *the Old Grey Man*. The viewscreen flashes white - this crate has a *lot* of weapons. We watch with giddy anticipation as our target shudders like a living thing. The hull lances, sparking with gigawatts of electricity. When the phasers come out to play, there's always one heck of a thunderstorm in space.

"Starboard shields down. Moderate damage to decks 3 and 4."

"Send a message to *the Wellington*. Apprise Captain Stoddard of the situation." Beliveau's back into his barking dog mode.

*The Lasting Peace* jerks hard enough to challenge the inertial systems, and we drop. We can see *the Old Grey Man's* undercarriage as we overshoot her. I can only imagine what they're

thinking on that ship right now - especially the twelve survivors from *Ark Royal* who are stationed in that ship's brig.

"Aft plasmas, fire!" Beliveau shouts when we're two clicks away. Beliveau doesn't realize that we're too close to safely launch, and we're fortunate that our acceleration moves us to a safe distance when they impact against *the Old Grey Man's* unprotected hull. T'Doroth scrambles hurriedly to make sure the plasmas are being reloaded. Thank God for ISC automation systems. *Wellington* and *Haida* fire volleys of photon torpedoes that connect squarely into the enemy's side.

"Major damage to *the Old Grey Man*, decks 4 through 10." The Skorr says.

"Helm, take us hard to starboard, 122 mark 68. They're concentrating fire on *USS Victrix*. Let's see if we can break up the party."

"Aye sir." Kollos says. I have to bite my tongue - I'd told Beliveau that we should pull away at this point in the fight, but it's clear he had no intention of listening. Everyone wants to be a hero when it's their first time in the Captain's chair.

"Sir, the ISC command ship is demanding an explanation."

"Tell them we're defecting." For a moment, Beliveau's smug joy is almost infectious.

"Aye sir."

The echelon isn't sure what to do - it may take ten to twenty seconds to reprogram their targeting systems to lock onto us. We use that time wisely, strafing one ship with phasers, waiting for our PPDs to recharge.

We reach the front of the ISC echelon, where three ships are pounding on *the Victrix's* shields. "Close to five clicks of the command ship, then hit them with everything we've got," Beliveau instructs.

"Aye sir."

We continue on course. One of the ISC ships fires a rear plasma into our front shield. "Brace for impact!" Beliveau shouts, clutching the oyster-chair tightly. The impact rattles us. Our inertial dampers buckle, and only the gravitic clamp keeps me from plummeting to the deck.

"You okay?" I ask T'Doroth.

"Forward shields at 58%." T'Doroth ignores my inquiry.

"Fire!"

A three phasers and a PPD strike the rear shield of the ISC command ship, followed quickly by a plasma torpedo. The shield drops, though the results aren't as nearly spectacular as they were with *the Old Grey Man*.

"Command cruiser's aft shields are down. Hull breach on deck three. No system damage."

"The ISC cruisers are being ordered to destroy us. We're now their top priority."

"I think it's time to go, Captain." I suggest.

"The party's just getting started, Mr. Said," the commander smiles. *Idiot!* "Helm bring us around 249 mark 17. Let's give the command cruiser another gift..."

But at that moment gravity buckles, and then power is cut to the bridge. We're illuminated only by emergency lights. The localized gravity field cuts out, and only a quick grab on the edge of the console keeps me from toppling to the floor. T'Doroth isn't as lucky, but she manages to grab the ladder and break her fall.

"What the hell..." Beliveau gasps.

But it gets worse. Water begins to pump in through enormous floor pipes, and there are multiple transport signals around us, on all sides: a panorama of Rovillians. They've broken loose.

"Take cover!"

But there's no real cover when the enemy's everywhere. I pull myself back to the console and scramble to regain control of the bridge systems, while the others draw their phasers and prepare to fire the moment they materialize. A couple of our people, struggling with the clamshell hand phasers, fire prematurely. We drop five Rovillians in the first barrage, but we lose three of our own when they return fire. That's a rough guess - everything's happening *very* fast. More Rovillians transport onto the bridge and within seconds, we're outnumbered three to one. Sullenly, Beliveau throws down his phaser and gives the order to surrender, and the others comply. At least the firefight gave me time to reestablish main power and shut down the pumps so we don't drown - yet.

A tall Rovillian turns, scans the crew, and suddenly trains his weapon on me. "*Him.*" he snarls. "*He's* the one!"

The first shot won't kill me, but they've assembled enough firepower that it won't be a problem. I close my eyes and prepare myself for the inevitable.

But neither I – nor them – counted on Beliveau. The Commander's decided that if he can't play hero in the space battle, he's going to do it here. He's got that look: the posture of a panther, the eye of the tiger, just a trace of perspiration, all teeth and snarl. He jumps on one of the Rovillian security guards, and wrestles away his weapon. The commander shouts something incomprehensible and loud while he's doing this. The Rovillians are taken aback by the ferocity of his attack - I guess they're *not* the best security officers in the galaxy - and I use the interruption to access the ship's site-to-site transporter controls while nobody's watching me.

Beliveau manages to outwrestle the hapless Rovillian, Backing up to the edge of the bridge, he uses him as a shield. I guess the Commander's stronger than he looks - the hostage is rather stocky. The Rovillian is struck three times by "friendly" phaserfire, while Commander Beliveau shouts "Back off! Back off!" at the top of his lungs. It's almost a convincing performance. By this time, I've got the trace disabled, now to automatically set the coordinates...

Unfortunately that's when we take a hit on our rear shield from a plasma torpedo.

Both Rovillian and Fed perform a collective wobble, but the restored anti-gravity brace gives me and T'Doroth, who had climbed back to her post, additional stability. I frantically continue to set coordinates for the site-to-site transport, while most of the Rovillians (and the Commander) are knocked off their feet by another hit. It must have been a hard one: given their stocky build and low center of gravity, Rovillians shouldn't be toppling like drunken swaggerbeasts. The Commander pulls the unconscious Rovillian on top of him, snags his phaser glove, and fires away. It's a creative move, one that would be insane if it wasn't so effective. Beliveau's an excellent shot. He manages to stun four Rovillians before they finally bring him down, connecting with three phaser bursts almost simultaneously. Beliveau's hit so hard enough that he involuntarily throws his hostage away and tumbles wildly for five meters until he connects with a sickening head-thud with the bottom of the bridge viewscreen. Allah, I hope they haven't killed him. *Allah, keep him from death.* I have to actively dislodge the old childhood prayer chain out of my head, I've got other things to do.

I'm keeping half an eye on the firefight, but most of my attention is focused on the console and my desperate attempt to wring control of the transporters. I no longer have a direct link with

the ship's systems, but I still have something of a special insight - it's hard to explain - about the controls. Once I've found a patch of dry land for us to fall back to, I flick the switch to beams our bridge crew to safety and await the slightly disorienting effect of ISC transporters.

Unfortunately, nothing happens.

I suppress an urge to curse. My eyes immediately fix on a rapidly flashing amber light, and I get a telepathic message from the system guide about "lockdown procedures". I can only transport someone if they're in direct physical contact with the console.

The ship takes another hit and rocks slightly, jostling the Rovillians as they train their weapons on me. For once, I wish we'd been hit a little harder. I have only one chance, and I'm not going alone. I grab T'Doroth, and force her hand to the panel. Her eyes bulge as she experiences the Crysian-inspired emotional turmoil, and she gasps.

"Sorry..." I say. I can feel the rush of emotions infect her like a virus, a product of the Crysian's telepathic link. *I hate it when this happens.*

We materialize in a corridor near main engineering. T'Doroth starts screaming - it's the same high-pitched scream I've heard from every Vulcan who's made physical contact with me since Monoceros. God, I hate that sound. T'Doroth's eyes are a wild accusation and she squeals as though a phobia had suddenly been triggered.

"They're coming for you," she gasps.

Maybe my telepathic affliction's gotten weaker in the last month - Vulcans don't usually start to recover their faculties this quickly. But she's right. Under normal circumstances, the Rovillians would never use a site-to-site transport in the middle of a battle, but this situation isn't normal. I've already taken over the ship once. They can't afford to let me do it again. They've got to come after me with everything they've got.

Water begins flowing into the corridor. It hits me and T'Doroth hard enough to knock us off our feet, and we're swept down an impromptu flash flood. The water's meant to trap us, but it turns out to have the opposite effect: the deluge sweeps us down a side passage just as the ISC hit team is materializing, saving us. We're still in a vulnerable position, but somehow I fight the current, regain my footing, wade over to an engineering console, and seal the bulkhead. Once the flow's stopped, I try to get access to the transporter controls again.

I'm also soaked to the bone. God, do I hate the water. But I don't have time to worry about this right now.

"T'Doroth!" I shout. The Vulcan has also regained her footing, and is wading through knee-high water and daring to get close to me. That's in spite of her face, which is locked into a vacant expression, almost like she's in shock. "Touch the panel!"

She nods, not risking speech or any unwanted emotional expression. She places her hand on the panel even as another floodgate opens. A surge of water hurls itself at us like an onrushing plasma torpedo - but the transporter whisks us away before it reaches us.

We materialize in Sickbay, in a dully lit central area that's a man-and-a-half high semi-circular desk holding records and medical supplies, beyond which are eight large adjustable beds and an overhead cage (the frame for the interrogation chamber). T'Doroth immediately gets as far away from me as she can, and calls my attention to Dr. Latham and a pair of wounded officers from *Nebraska*. All three are lying face-first on the floor, unconscious.

"Your weapon..." T'Doroth says with a bit of a hiss. I nod and toss it to her. She catches it deftly with both hands and immediately dons it, half-phaser, half-medieval gauntlet. She's still

running high on emotions: for a moment, she looks like a panther too. It's an odd look for a Vulcan, and not unattractive.

"Be careful." I say. She cocks an eyebrow at me as if I've said something that's mortally offensive. I almost smile, but there's work to be done. I shuffle over to an access panel and play with it. I chose Sickbay because here I can erect a protective force field around here to keep the Rovillians from transporting in another wave of shock troops. That's my first priority. My second priority is to prevent them from flooding the place by sealing the bulkheads. I achieve both goals in seconds.

That's when I hear a phaser discharge, the thud of a falling body, and then a second phaser shot. I swing around in time to watch T'Doroth topple unconscious to the ground. Damn.

Dr. Luiif, recognizable even in a Rovillian pressure suit, walks around a corner with a phaser draped over his hand like a lobster claw. "Away from the panel, Mr. Said," he instructs.

I take a step back, and throw up my hands. The ship rocks again, but we both manage to keep our balance. Part of me wants to jump him and avenge the interrogations I endured. But only part of me, the part that wants to get hit by a phaser before I've taken my third step.

"We humans have an expression." I tell him, locking eye contact. "*Only a fool fights in a burning house.*"

"We Rovillians have an expression too." Luiif says. "*Only fools fight.*"

"If that's the case, why do you have a phaser in your hand?" I retort, waving an accusing finger at his weapon.

"Foolish times call for foolish measures," Luiif retorts, as casually as if he were discussing the weather. Then he laughs, a half-rasping/half-clicking sound which startles me. With a shudder he throws down his weapon.

"Is that supposed to impress me?" I ask.

"No." Luiif answers. "It was just that I was thinking, and... doesn't this entire conflict strike you as meaningless?" The ship rocks again as if to emphasize the point.

"The battle outside?" I ask.

"No. *This* battle." Luiif answers. It wasn't what I expected to hear at all. "It has an almost mathematical simplicity. If the ship is destroyed, nothing we do here will matter."

"True."

"If *we* win the battle..." He looks up as if to indicate the battle outside the ship. "...you will not escape, regardless of what *you* do here. And if your fleet wins, Federation stormtroopers will board this vessel and seize control, regardless of what *I* do. You've sealed off Sickbay so my fellow officers cannot interfere. So we are alone, and the next few minutes will decide our fate. Why should we spend it threatening each other?"

"I can agree to a truce." I declare. "I'm tired of fighting."

"So you trust me?" Luiif asks.

"Of course I don't." I smile.

Making a clicking sound that the universal translator tells me is a Rovillian chuckle, Luiif walks over to a food synthesizer, a small machine that looks like an old kitchen cupboard that's covered with buttons like a computer access panel. "Can I get you anything to drink?" he asks.

"Hmmm... I don't think so." I ponder. "By the way, just what do water-breathers use for recreational drinking?"

"Usually nothing." Luiif answers. "Except on holidays, when we release low grade toxins into our breathing supply and observe their effect on our bodies. Amateur debauchery, by human standards."

"Not mine, though I've seen my share." I tell him. "I would have thought you'd say that human debauchery consisted of getting drunk on fermented blood and eating our young." I reply. "Even Klingons don't usually go *that* far." I add with a smile.

"Hardly, Mr. Said. Despite what you may think, I have an *excellent* nose for propaganda." Luiif declares. The ship rocks again, hard to starboard at a sudden 30 degree angle, and we slide into a wall before the gravitic compensators kick in. I hit shoulder first, harder than I'd like, but I don't think anything's broken or dislocated.

"Plasma torpedo!" Luiif says. He tries to get to his feet, and then discovers (to his horror) that he can't. I'm not sure if it's a strain or a leg break, but he hit the wall hard enough that his leg will no longer support his weight. He moans, and I stare at him, wondering what this new development means for our conflict. "Get me my medikit. Please."

*To Hell with you.* That's my first impulse. Fighting the pain with subvocal squeals, the Rovillian's eyes are fixed on a small leather box that's sitting on the center of the counter. I walk over to it and grab it. "You tortured me." I said.

"Interrogations are, by nature, unpleasant." Luiif replies.

I'm looking for an admission that I know I'm not going to get, and so I relent. I've read accounts of some of the things that happen to Federation officers at ISC "reeducation" facilities; what Luiif put me through wasn't nearly as intense as the Grave of Thoughts or the other nightmare factories. Of course that's probably due to the lack of facilities; if he had access to a starbase full of mind toys, he'd probably be just as bad as the rest of them. Who knows how many Federation officers he could corrupt?

"Please," Luiif repeats. Something inside me softens, and the worst case scenarios vanish.

So I toss the bag at him - harder than I should, but at least he can help himself. "Don't say that a human has never done you any favors." I tell him.

"I will not forget." Luiif tells me.

"Not that it really matters," I mutter. "They're tearing us apart just like you did to *Ark Royal*." I ponder the situation for a few seconds, then walk over to the controls and check the ship's layout. The Rovillian places a pair of weird looking circles on his pressure suit. They dissolve with a hiss, and he straightens his leg, growling painfully as he sets it. I keep an eye on him while I access the ship's current records. The panel flashes, and I instinctively throw my hands back.

"What are you doing?" Luiif asks me.

"Keeping myself from being electrocuted."

"ISC control systems pose no such dangers - they're optical." Luiif explains. "An overload would merely shut down the system. Why do your people force you into space in such dangerous craft?"

"I've asked that question myself." I admit. Truth is, *every* engineer in Starfleet has asked *that* question at one time or another. "Well, I've got good news and bad news. The bad news, the ISC is refusing to listen to your Captain."

"My *Al'traes*," Luiif corrects.

"Sure. *Al'traes*. Your *big man*." I reply. "But he's not so big that he can persuade the Meskeen to order three ships to stop pounding us into pieces."

Luiif contemplates the situation for a few moments. "The Meskeen were always better at giving orders than listening."

"We've noticed." I reply.

"That means we'll probably be dead in ten minutes." he observes bitterly.

"My guess is five. But now, the good news. The Feds are winning the bigger battle, so your buddies might be forced to break off their attack. But we *do* have another option, one which will keep both of us safe regardless of the outcome." I don't even bother hiding my smirk - Pratt would be proud of me. "Do you feel like cooperating with a mere primitive, Doctor?"

Luiif nods. "I'm beginning to think you're something more, Mr. Said," he says. "Something so much more that it frightens me."

## V: Death or Glory

I find myself getting a little paranoid right now. I'm *expecting* to fail. I expect to miscalculate, for the ISC to break through the force field any second now, and to get shot to pieces. Oh, I know what people say, *if you expect to fail, you will*. That's just a cliché retold by idiots who need to delude themselves into success. The sensible person tries to anticipate all possibilities.

And will somebody stop all this damn shaking? It's so hard to concentrate.

"So this is how it ends..." Luiif tells me as he's injecting T'Doroth with a stimulant. "Unless you can get control of the shuttle bay."

"I'm working on it..." I mutter. "How are my crew?"

"I'm holding up my end of the bargain..." Luiif answers, then he suddenly finds himself staring into T'Doroth's not very friendly brown eyes as she awakens. She reaches out, grabs his neck, and... wouldn't you know it, the nerve pinch works on *them* too.

"What is the situation?" T'Doroth asks.

"I *was* working with Dr. Luiif to get control of the ship's shuttlebays." I say, looking at her sourly. "I figure we can site-to-site over there, launch, then..." The ship shakes again, hard, and I stop talking. There's no time for explanations, and we both know it. "Get the others ready for transport. Rovillians included."

I don't outrank T'Doroth, but she doesn't challenge me (even though she could, and probably should). We revive Luiif, and Luiif's assistant, and Latham, and the two officers from *Nebraska* who had been knocked unconscious during the proceedings, and I prepare to beam us over to the one place on the ship that's not built to operate in both water and dry environments.

The shuttlebay.

"Got it." I announce as I break their latest attempt to encrypt the transporter codes. Now we can get out of here. I turn on the medical bay viewscreen and link it to the ship's tactical display, awaiting the best opportunity for a safe site-to-site transport. "Hmm, not bad piloting." I say, looking at the display.



"Two of the ISC cruisers have broken off the attack. I estimate a complete Federation victory in approximately 8.3 minutes." T'Doroth states.

"I'm still not going to risk it. A lot can happen in eight minutes." I declare. She raises an eyebrow, but I get the impression from the rest of her body language that she agrees. I turn to Dr. Ruiif. "One thing puzzles me. Why don't the ISC build "wet" shuttlecraft so the Rovillians can be transported in an aquatic environment?"

"I think it has something to do with us not being *Meskeen*." Luiif replies acidly. "That would require every ship in the fleet to install special equipment to drain the shuttles when they land. The Rovillians are a young race by the Concordium's standards. We don't warrant 'special treatment'."

I shrug and gauge how long it will take for the next plasma torpedo to hit *the Lasting Peace's* weakened aft shield. "We've got at least a twenty second window." I say (aloud) to myself. "Energize."

We materialize in the shuttlebay. There are only two executive shuttles in drydock - the others must have been carting ISC "pacification" squads down to Pholos when the attack began.

"Thirty seconds." I say, and we race to the shuttle.

It takes me a little longer than I'd hoped to open the shuttle doors - I was so busy programming the automated sequence for the bay doors, that I'd overlooked this critical step. But Luiif provides the access codes. Luiif, myself, and T'Doroth commandeer one shuttlecraft. Dr. Latham and the others grab the second. "Best of luck, Doctor." I tell him. "Stay in one piece, okay?"

"I'll see you on a Federation ship." Latham answers as he boards. "Good luck."

The shuttle doors close, but there's an unforeseen complication. Three Rovillian security guards, having figured out where we'd moved, have transported themselves into the shuttlebay, phasers blazing the second they're solid. In their protective suits, they look like stunted wide-faced Klingons. Their phasers bounce off our doors as they close. They readjust their weapons, which look bigger and nastier than a standard ISC Pacifier, and fire again.

"Ten seconds to vacuum." T'Doroth reports.

"No!" I snarl. "The moment the bay doors open, they're dead..."

I know they're the enemy, but... T'Doroth agrees with me. She walks over to the transporter and works the controls to try to get a lock on them. But the shuttlebay doors open as programmed, on schedule. I can't bring myself to look at their expressions of horror as they're immediately sucked into space. T'Doroth says nothing, and dispassionately walks back to the control console. Luiif looks at her, but says nothing too.

"Sorry." I say. I just found the silence too heavy to bear. Luiif nods.

Latham's shuttle releases from its clamps, floats gently until it's a meter above the deck, and vanishes when its impulse engines kick in.

"Our turn." I state.

T'Doroth shoots me a puzzled look. "I was unaware anyone else had a turn," she says. Vulcans can be *so* clueless. It's a pity I'm not more of a joker, since they're the best straight men in the galaxy. "And are you cleared to pilot an ISC shuttle?"

"Is anyone in Starfleet?" I answer. I'm no pilot, but Starfleet training requires helm training for everyone, and I do carry the memories of both Pratt and Jensen, who were both exceptional helmsman (among their other talents). The Captain used to say the helm was the best place to be

stationed to truly get to know a ship. Mind you, this was the one argument he could never win with me (or Chief Engineer Teller, for that matter), but for the moment I can see his point.

So we head out into space. It's a smooth takeoff, except for the part where I bounce us twice off the deck.

"The ship shook." I say, grinning at an unimpressed T'Doroth and Luiif.

T'Doroth suppresses an urge to sigh and quietly takes over the controls from me. I step into the rear compartment and begin using the transporter scanner to look for Federation lifesigns still aboard *The Lasting Peace*. Luiif comes into the back with me, probably to look over my shoulder. I ignore him - until I feel something cold and dull pressed into my temple. It's a phaser.

"Quiet, Mr. Said." Luiif instructs. "This isn't a threat, it's merely diplomacy."

"Diplomacy?" I ask him, stone-faced. "We had a deal."

"I have one small alteration to request to our agreement." Luiif nods. "There's a Rovillian officer stationed on Deck 8, Section 33. I want her beamed over here. Look for a female with three life signs."

"Three?"

"She's eight months pregnant." Luiif explains.

I suppose she's having twins. "Your wife? Your lover?" I question.

"No." Luiif says. "She's simply a crew person. But I don't want to see children die before they're even born."

I nod. It's a legitimate perspective. I could argue the point, and flaunt my manly defiance at being forced to comply to a physical threat, but what a waste of time that would be. I suppose I'm too much of a pragmatist for my own good. Starfleet likes it when its officers have a bit of a macho streak, like Greg Jensen, but I'm more of a "flight" than a "fight" person. It only takes me three seconds to find the pregnant Rovillian and lock onto her signal. Luiif drops the weapon and helps her off the pad the moment she materializes. She's not in a suit, so Luiif rushes over to a supply closet and helps her don standard aquatic gear. She doesn't look pregnant (let alone eight months). I suppose Rovillians have a fairly long gestation period.

"I estimate *The Lasting Peace* will be destroyed in forty-five seconds." T'Doroth shouts.

"Go to warp at thirty-five," I instruct. Latham's transporters are grabbing the bulk of the 'Fleeters, the ones who were stationed in engineering (and the brig), so I concentrate on the bridge and the upper decks. T'Doroth relays her estimates to Latham. First I grab Koloss, then the unnamed Skorr, then finally Believeau. He's been hit hard, hard enough that he probably won't wake up until we get him to a real sickbay. I hope he's okay. He was loud and a complete doofus, but he was certainly brave enough to wear the uniform.

"Fifteen seconds."

According to the scanner, a major piece of fuselage has just broken off *The Lasting Peace*, part of the right warp nacelle. I lock onto another six 'Fleeter signals and transport them, then grab the final three. I think we've got them all. I think... I hope...

The shuttle lurches, and I look back to the viewscreen just in time to see the final destruction of *The Lasting Peace*. The magnified view washes the screen in green and black as the huge cruiser is struck dead center by a plasma torpedo that cuts through the entire ship. It punches through the superstructure like a wire mesh being hit with a shotgun blast. Part of the hull lifts as it's sheared, spraying debris like a geyser, then the left warp nacelle deforms, and finally it blows apart, becoming a ring of plasma, radiation, and debris that spreads along the cruiser's warp plane. Then it's gone. Just like *Ark Royal*. Ironically, it looks like I just lost my first command.

After ten silent seconds, I turn to the doctor: "I really, really hope your crew got to the life pods." The ISC inquisitor looks back at me with wide, sad eyes while he cradles his fellow Rovillian, but he says nothing. T'Doroth looks at me with as much empathy as I've ever seen on a Vulcan face. Latham's already sent a signal to the Feds, and fifteen minutes later we're being beamed aboard *USS S'harien*. Luiif is taken into custody along with the other Rovillians. They're calling me a hero; by Allah, they're doing everything to make me feel like I'm a hero except slapping me on the back and carrying me on their shoulders.

I could die from the embarrassment.

A week has passed since the battle of Pholos, a long week where (after the initial euphoria dies down) the only certainty has been debriefings and uncertainty. It's given me a lot of time to think, and even compose some poetry.

*'God's two hands grasp Death's  
Scepter and a plasma rain falls.  
Such a bright and terrible thunder  
Even a galaxy's eyes are awestruck.  
Witnesses raise their defiant fists  
And shout "It's better to control the ground  
Than to survive the tempest."  
The Lasting Peace greets the Cataclysm  
With a grin of fire.  
One mad smile, to draw one last mad breath...'*

"Lieutenant, you have a remarkable future in Engineering. Unfortunately, Engineering starships, not poetry." Dr. Latham critiques, entering my quarters. I frown.

"You hear anything about Luiif?"

"Every one captured from the ISC fleet – and there were many captives – are being interrogated. The ISC says our "mistreatment" of them is proof that we're nothing but savages."

"The word 'hypocrisy' comes to mind." I posit. Latham nods.

"More interestingly, someone in Starfleet seems to have pulled a string or two on the behalf of Luiif or one of the other doctors – all medical personnel are being released into ISC custody, no questions asked. There's not even a hint of a prisoner exchange."

"You sound suspicious," I note. "Neither of us are privy to the inner councils of Starflint. Maybe they're doing something right for a change. And about..."

"...no, I asked them. There's still no sign of the Captain." Latham scrutinizes my face, my response to the question I've asked repeatedly all week. "I know it's none of my business, but were you two..."

"Of course not. We were *friends*." I say, guessing that he's going to speculate on a sexual bond. I'm celibate by choice, Greg by necessity, and we're both heterosexual by nature. And yet, whenever we made empathic contact, the bond between us ran to some pretty deep levels... "He came back for me. He saved me. He's a fighter."

"Yes, he was." Latham says.

"Is." I correct his tense. "All his life, he has been a fighter. He's been one since birth. And not just because he was born on a colony with a natural eugenics system. When Greg was eight years old, someone sabotaged Gwai's energy supply."

"And Gwai colony was forced into the wilderness and descended into barbarism." Doc Latham says. "I've heard the stories, wild stories."

"You've heard *nothing*." I reply. "No one's ever told the full story. Greg became an adult very fast. He killed a man with his bare hands - a full-grown man - when he was only twelve, to save his tribe. As a teenager, he fought almost single-handedly to bring Gwai out of the *Lord of the Flies* territory and back to civilization. He never took a backward step, not when the lives of his people were at stake."

"So he fought to save you." Latham surmises.

"No!" I say. "He didn't. When we were in the link with the Crysian, when she smothered me with her love, it was the captain who got her to let down the barriers. Greg's every instinct was to fight. But when we confronted the Crysian, he knew that the only way to save me was to go against every instinct he possessed and surrender himself to the link. Do you know what it's like to go against your core beliefs for someone?"

"I can only imagine." Latham says. "But Greg was like that."

"How can I not owe him? In a way, he gave up his soul for me." I declare.

"Soul?" Latham mocks. "Oh Kenneth, stop being a such damn philosopher," he says, pulling a chair over and sitting down backwards in it.

"You're the last person I expect to tell me that." I retort. Xenophilosophy is one of Latham's strengths.

"I know you're a Romantic at heart, but this sentiment is positively... Gothic." Latham lectures me. "Face the facts, Mr. Said. There's no indication that anyone on the bridge made it to the escape pods. There was no trace of the bridge crew on any Class M world within range. He wasn't listed in the ISC prison records. When a warp drive explodes, everything in a one thousand-kilometer radius *vaporizes*. Greg Jensen may have been as close to a god as either of us will ever know - with one exception..."

"Oh please..." I sneer.

"...but even *he* wasn't invulnerable. His luck finally ran out. Accept it and move on with your life."

"He didn't abandon me." I state. "How can I give up on him?"

"So you're leaving Starfleet on some personal quest to look for someone whose atoms have probably been scattered across the universe?" Latham asks. It's meant to be a rhetorical question, but I nod anyway. "Well, Kenneth, you're an idiot."

"Aren't we all?" I say.

"When did you start getting so flippant?" Latham asks.

"It's amazing what a crisis will do to people." I reply.

Latham doesn't laugh, but rifles through my wardrobe, looking for a hook to change the subject. "Where's your dress uniform? They can't give you the Axanar Cross in this!"

"I was thinking of honoring Francis Gable and going to the ceremony naked." I reply, smirking.

"Another glib response." Latham notes. "Before you leave the service, I will definitely scheduling you for a psychiatric exam."

"Take a number, Doctor." I say. "I'm the most unlikely hero in the galaxy. Naturally Starfleet thinks I need my head examined."

"Hmm..." Latham says, trying to think of a way to change the subject again. "Are there any other signs of the Crysian?"

It's Latham's favorite deflection tactic, asking about her – probably because he knows it's so uncomfortable for me to talk about her. I think hard for a second, and if I felt smug before, it's gone now. "I've felt *something*, at night when I'm turning in, but nothing particularly strong. I think she needs to absorb more solar energy before she can restore the link." I pause and involuntarily sigh. Allah help me, I miss her. But I don't dare admit that.

"I'll find you a dress uniform." Latham promises, heading to the door. "You're not going naked." He smiles. "Francis Gable is the last person in the galaxy who should be a role model, and I don't want to have to treat a big gaping chest wound when they pin the medal on you."

"I figure we could do some body piercing on the chest to hold the medals." I grin. "And one above the collarbone for the rank insignia."

"I'm a doctor, not a body piercer." Latham's a free-thinker, but occasionally he does uphold some Starfleet traditions. "I'll find you a uniform - lieutenant..."

He smiles broadly, almost as wide as my mouth is gaping. *Lieutenant*. It's the first time anyone's used that rank in connection with my name. Did I just...

Latham confirms the suspicion. "Did you think you'd escape Starfleet without a promotion, Mr. Said?" And that's when the bastard walks away before I can give him my answer.

The door closes with the word "*Lieutenant*" still ringing in my ears. I was beginning to think I'd never get a promotion!

But all this is moot, not while the captain's whereabouts is an issue. I suppose the smart thing to do would be to ask for more medical leave and use that time to look for Greg. Don't give up your career, Kenneth, it could come in useful.

But I also wonder if the only way I'm going to find him is if I have the freedom of a civilian. Oh, cosmic gods, Great Bird of the Galaxy, give me wisdom as well as strength!

*A galaxy of crossroads, and I'm pixie-led.  
Down a thousand quantum paths  
Constantly dancing, an inhuman skein  
Whose lines I follow until the pattern blinds me  
Whose miles I follow until my feet fail me  
Hope's highway, the only road away  
from death.*

Act II:  
"...AND PARSECS TO GO BEFORE I SLEEP"

## I: Safe Passage

Agassiz had been turned into a fortress: even the streets on this scrapheap of a planet felt like walls. I can't tell you how much I hate that feeling. I suppose someone who travels the space lanes for a living should be used to feeling like a caged animal, but Roger Price – that's me, the tall blond guy, a human photon torpedo with muscles – was born with a bureaucracy-driven claustrophobia of galactic proportions, and I've never gotten used to being on worlds that are fenced in red tape, procedure and cowardice.

I've been waiting in this office for four hours, the Federation Trade Authority in the city of *Heron Port*. It's a big, crowded, sterile, overly air conditioned chamber, like a hospital emergency ward that's been blown up to the size of a cathedral. Every ten meters or so, four-directional triceivers (stuck to the top of steel poles like clocks) display a news report that repeats itself every fifteen minutes in a boring Andorian monotone. "Agassiz in Crisis" they say (over and over again), giving us repeated viewings of blurry long range sensor images of an ISC fleet that's hovering like a Regulan vulture on the edge of the system. There are five, ten, fifteen ships – no one knows for sure – and those of us (like me) who are willing to run the blockade are being held back by the not-so-almighty hand of Pappa Federation.

"Wait for the fleet to arrive," they keep telling us. "It'll be here any day now," they say. Feh. *Any day* is much too far away for my tastes. I've been told "Starfleet will save the day!" a dozen times now. Well, forgive me for doubting the competency of everyone's favorite band of long-john messiahs, but didn't the Neutral Zone used to be completely free and clear of the ISC?

Starfleet. A plague on them, oversexed pretty boys in uniforms so tight they cut off the circulation to their delicate Starfleet brains. Every time I've had dealings with them I've been left with the impression that the only things they teach at the Academy are smugness, arrogance, and how to keep your buttocks tight (the last one's a course for the women of Starfleet, probably taught by Vulcans). The men all look like they want to have sex with you, and the women all

look like they don't. Damn. The only thing that makes Starfleet look good by comparison are the ISC.

Okay, I have smuggled a bit of contraband in my time, so if Starfleet scans my ship a little more vigorously than they should, I can put up with it. Starfleet's like a low-grade ion storm - sure, it shakes you up a little, sure you whine about it, but at the end of the day, you're still in business unless you've done something incredibly stupid. Dealing with them is just one of the normal costs of doing business. The ISC, on the other hand, don't belong here.

I've been close to the Neutral Zone four times in the last six months, and each time I get within twenty parsecs of the border, I've been boarded by a team of alien jackboots. They have sensors - at least as good as ours - but a sensor sweep isn't good enough for the peaceloving folk of the Interstellar Concordium. No, they have to search every compartment on *Candlejack*, in their tireless quest to find evidence of "war crimes". If you're lucky, you can salvage 60% of your cargo when they're finished with you. Their boarding parties are always the same: a giant toad who croaks orders in a language I can't understand (they won't talk unless the universal translator's turned off), accompanied by six big kitty-cat stormtroopers with the rankest breath you've ever smelt. And they always get in your face and stare at you with big cat-eyes, like you're a mouse.

I've known more than one mouse who've been disemboweled by them.

Now they're here, eighty parsecs from the border. It's only a week before I'm supposed to meet my contact on Rakshasa Prime for the biggest sale of my career, and I find myself caught in two tractor beams pulling in opposite directions, neither of which is getting me any closer to my destination.

"Mr. Roger Price," a voice calls out over the loudspeaker. It's pleasant, so it has to be automated. "Undersecretary Nevsky will see you now."

I check the chronometer and marvel that I managed to wait for so long without killing a single bureaucrat, or watching one of the other people in line do the same. The Office administers the trading needs of the area's 30,000 colonists who (like me) are as frustrated as hell by the blockade and even more frustrated by Starfleet's lazy, arrogant attitude. At least half the colonists seem to be ahead of me in line. I've been sitting in a crowded waiting room whose chairs are so comfortable that it's hard to tolerate them after sitting for weeks on the hard cushioned seats aboard *Candlejack*. Sweet Vulcan harp music, played loud in the background so it can be heard over the chit-chat, only makes the experience more irritating. I extract myself from this cushion hell as quickly as possible, enter Nevsky's office with a brisk walk which might turn into a sprint at a moment's notice. I pointedly ignore the security guard, the Federation flag, and the latest Voice of the Federation Service Report that's mesmerizing everyone who's fixated on the tricorders. To Hell with all the jingoistic crap that's decorating this little outpost of the Great Galactic Utopia.

"You don't know how to accept 'no' for an answer, do you Roger?" Nevsky (formerly Sarandon) says as I enter. It's her way of greeting me. Alec is a short, severe, and breathtakingly beautiful woman in a red Federation uniform. Her beautiful blond hair, tied tightly into cornrows, dangles like long earrings around her shoulders, and she's smiling in spite of the very bad day's she's having. She also has a ring on her finger, and there's a picture of her and a piece of wide-faced, mountain-shouldered Starfleet meat sits on her desk - they're cuddling in a pose that's so nauseating that only a newlywed would be caught dead in it.



*Oh, Alec, how could you?* I moan inwardly. I knew she'd gotten married, but... Alec had been a merchant captain's daughter, she grew up on the spaceways, same as me. And now she's one of *them*. Dammit, sometimes the universe is just plain wrong.

"It's never been my style, Alec." I hide my disappointment with a smile and sit down. "*No* is a word used by those who accept a mediocre life."

"As opposed to yours?" Alec replies, digging in the knife. I should've known she wouldn't miss an opportunity. I don't know why, I wasn't the one who ended the relationship. It wasn't *that* big a deal that I'm married, is it?

"Well, if you think I'm such a waste of flesh, why don't you give me permission to go, and you won't need to put up with me for awhile?"

"Oh, don't play the martyr with me," Alec grinds the palms of her hands into the desk. "You don't wear it well."

"Well I was always better naked and you know it. In fact, you don't just know it, you want it..." I croon through an obnoxious smile. Her face suddenly twists, like a Klingon who's just been called a coward, and she opens her mouth to yell at me. "Oh, c'mon, Alec. Take a joke. Don't tell me the marriage to Captain Starfleet has already hit a few asteroids?"

"Your application to leave the system is denied." Alec growls through tightly grinding teeth. "Get out!"

"Huh?" The realization that I've played this all wrong suddenly hits me like a photon torpedo. I never guessed she held this big of a grudge.

"I don't have time for you, Roger!" Alec snarls. "The ISC is blockading my planet, everyone's worried that we won't be able to feed ourselves next winter, the miners are *this* close to going on strike, and the only place where we're getting relief from Starfleet is on a subspace propaganda channel!"

"But..."

"And I've got a vacation scheduled next week with my husband, except *I* can't leave the planet while it's under blockade, and even if I could, my husband's leave has been cancelled because of the war. And now you have the gall to come in here and force me to deal with your twisted little insults..."

"Wait a minute, Alec, you know I tend to shoot off my mouth and go a little over the top. You know me. Don't take it so serious."

I'm trying to hit that sympathetic octave, the rhythm of charm that can turn even the worst disaster in my favor. Everyone likes a penitent man. But Alec's face doesn't show even the slightest sign of a thaw.

"I'll take you anyway I damn well want." Alec snaps. "You swagger into *my* office, knowing that I'm married, and you try to..." Her voice trails off to match the clenching of her fists. "Your marriage vows may mean less to you than a peace treaty does to a Klingon, but I've got news for you, Roger: *mine do*. And even if they didn't, you're – not – even – remotely – worth my time..."

"Okay, we've traded insults and gotten it out of our system. Now let's talk about the permit." I say.

"If you had even a remotely legitimate excuse to leave..."

"Well, let's look at the reasons for the blockade," I argue. "The ISC has no quarrel with me. I wasn't one of those idiots who smuggled weapons to New Irania. I'm just concerned about my business. You've been there, you understand, I know you do."

"Politics is the worst enemy of business." Alec tells me coldly, keeping herself rigid as stone. "And I'm all politics now. Get out, Roger. Don't bother me again."

"Bureaucrats!" I declare loudly, displaying the open wound and leaving. If this building weren't so modern, I'd have slammed the door as hard as possible, just to see if I could shake some of the icicles loose.

I need to think of another way to go over the wall of this damn planet.

Simple plans are the best. Transport onto the ship, and take off. Simple. It's not as though they have a lot of security on Agassiz; the few people who haven't gone off to the war, who aren't still working in the fields, or scratching dilithium out of the mines. are a pack of fat, lazy, stunted halfwits who couldn't guard a toothpick if it was held in a tractor beam. This is going to be easy.

While I pack my belongings for the trip, I watch footage of a big battle between the Klingons and the ISC over K'reth station, near the Romulan-Klingon border, a pair of D7s getting blown to the Sto-Vo-Kor scrapyard by a barrage of ISC plasma torpedoes. The ISC provided the footage (another escalation of the propaganda war that's swept the galaxy of late), but it *is* a very spectacular explosion, and it has the virtue of not happening to anyone I might know. (Although given most of the people I do know, that's not much of a virtue.)

"...the Klingon Empire is officially denying that any action took place at K'reth, though they concede that a few 'minor skirmishes' may have taken place in the sector."

"Yeah, right." I smile. "And the Klingon Chancellor only had a cold before he croaked, and Starfleet isn't composed of a pack of complete buttheads..."

I try to think of what else I might need for the trip. Things are in short supply - Hell, even on Earth, with its endless supply of energy, the second major war in ten years is actually making a dent in people's 'land of milk and honey' attitude. It's about time. Major Federation worlds are hotbeds of affluence, decadence, arrogance, and dishonesty. They could stand a comeuppance or two (and Earth could stand at least twelve. Come to think of it, that's where they go to fill a lot of Starfleet uniforms, isn't it?)

I do a final check of my bag, head to the transporter, and get ready to return to my *Candlejack*. There are three transporter stations in Heron Yard, located in random areas of the city (most Federation outer colonies don't have much 'central planning', which is the way we like it), and twenty or so transit pads, small stations scattered among Heron Yard's key locales. The authorities say that if you attempt to transport to somewhere other than a transit pad, they're not responsible for any accidents. That's just a fabrication meant to keep people from transporting where they're not welcome. I *live* to ignore those sorts of rules.

The transporter station's close to empty. There's one operator and one guard on station. I strike up a friendly conversation with the operator and tell him that I'd like to input my own coordinates.

"That's not allowed, not until the blockade's over," the operator tells me. "You know how paranoid people are getting about saboteurs."

I nod, make him feel like he's doing his job well, then present my credentials (minus all those annoying criminal charges). He's not a hardcase, so there's hope. I invent one excuse after another: my cargo's volatile, I left critical security codes aboard ship, I need to go pick up a critical shipment for the Federation war effort; boy, do I ever pour it on. Finally, after the fourth time I worry about the health of my pet Marshound "Dido" (which *isn't* a lie, I did leave my dog

aboard ship before they warned us about the blockade), he relents and allows me to input my own coordinates.

"They probably won't let you access the location anyway," he shrugs.

Unfortunately, he's right. The transporter refuses to accept my signal - *unauthorized transport location, access denied until further notice*. Okay, they're being cute, but I was expecting that. Nobody's going to outsmart Roger Price. I've got a *huge* ace up my sleeve. I pull out my communicator. All I need to do is to make contact with...

...and that's when the transporter signal hits me. And it's not mine.

I'm slightly light-headed, and a transporter purr rings in my ears. Son of a bitch, how'd they catch on so quickly? The world ignores my curses and fades around me; there's a second of complete, terrifying darkness and then...

...I materialize again, inside a small holding cell in the city jail. The hum of its force field mocks me. *Roger Price, who did you think you were fooling?*

"Ah!" The sheriff is a small thin man, on the cusp of middle age, wearing the red and blue uniform of the Agassiz planetary militia. He scrutinizes me with a smile on his face. I don't recognize him, but unfortunately the reverse isn't true. "Mr. Price," he says in a clipped voice that betrays either an actor or a politician's pedigree. "I don't think I've ever seen you here when you're sober."

"The next person you transport here had better be a lawyer." I tell him. "This is outrageous."

"And so are those two outstanding warrants for brawling." The sheriff responds. "A pity you never answered them. Especially one of your victims ended up in hospital for two weeks."

"Tough." I sneer. Okay. So I'm a big man, 6'4" with a lot of muscle, and a mean streak when I've had a few drinks and someone's stupid enough to provoke me. "I can't help it if none of your local farm boys knows how to take a punch." I answer.

"Somehow, the judge didn't see it that way," the sheriff leans against the wall, smiling like he hasn't had this much fun in months. "He said you owe Agassiz Colony restitution. I believe the verdict was for... one thousand hours of community service."

My mouth opens wide. *One thousand? No way in bloody hell!*. How dare they railroad me? Colonies like this depend on people like me, on the hard-working freighter captain who keep them supplied when times are tough and their storehouses empty. Community service? My work *is* community service!

I'm about to tell off the sheriff just where he can stick his community service, when - and here I thought things couldn't get any worse - two people walk into the room. One is Undersecretary Nevsky, who looks quite pleased for a change. That's not a good omen. The second is an imperious looking young man, probably no older than 30, wearing a black and red Starfleet Lieutenant's uniform. I scowl at him. He doesn't look like one of the beefeaters as I've come to expect from Starfleet security, so I assume he's from Engineering (the only other department that employs that color scheme). The Lieutenant's a rangy six feet tall and a tad skinny. He's a human Caucasian, but most people would call him 'exotic looking'; his skin tone suggests that he's descended either from Middle Eastern, Portuguese, or Indian ethnic stock, as do his curly black hair and his long thin nose. His facial features are a tad homely: a misshapen mouth and slightly crooked teeth. He definitely looks less cookie-cutter than most of the Starfleet boys I've seen, though not less smug. I know he can't want anything good. But he's not saying anything for the moment.

"I've decided to grant you your wish, Mr. Price," Alec smiles. "I'll let you return to your ship and run the blockade. There's only one catch..."

"And what the hell is that?" I ask, keeping my gaze firmly fixed on the Lieutenant.

"I'm borrowing your ship, Mr. Price," the Lieutenant answers. "For the next thousand hours."

"This is Lieutenant Kenneth Said, formerly of *USS Ark Royal*," Alec says. "Because of his meritorious service in the Battle of Pholos, Starfleet has granted him leave to conduct a personal errand. He needs to leave the planet and is willing to run the blockade. But he needs a ship. You have a ship, and you're willing to run the blockade. The synchronicity could not be more perfect."

"No way in Hell!" I snap. "Do I look like a galactic chauffeur for wayward Starfleet officers?"

"No, you certainly don't," the sheriff answers. "There are many things written on your permanent criminal record, but 'chauffeur' isn't one of them."

"He'll improvise." Nevsky says, her smile widening.

The Starfleet Lieutenant stands there in a pose of quiet arrogance, returning my stare with casual assuredness. Damn! I don't understand why, but this skinny boy is actually a little intimidating. The only people who have ever looked at me that way turned out to be serious psychotics, or Romulans, or both.

"We could impound your ship for duration of the war, and have you locked away," Said tries to convince me. "You may not realize it, but we're doing you a favor."

"I need to get to Rakshasa Prime in five days." I say. "It's my neck on the line if I don't get there..."

"Then you can go to Rakshas. I don't want your neck." Mr. Said replies. "It's not that far off the path from Vespera III."

*Vespera III*? Why would anyone even remotely sane want to go to that commune from hell? Vespera III is populated by a pack of wasted idiots sitting naked in front of narcotic fires, killing brain cells while pretending to contemplate the universe. If they were any more flaky, they'd be crossing the Romulan Neutral Zone in search of the mythical planet Eden. "Fine," I mutter. "As long as I get to Rakshasa and you don't interfere in my business."

"It's a deal," the Lieutenant declares. "We'll start the clock on your service as soon as we leave orbit from Rakshasa,"

I scowl. Despite the Lieutenant's last condition - another twist of the knife - this is actually a good deal, given the situation. I still hate it, of course. Maybe I'll become the first person ever to mutiny aboard his own ship... Or maybe something *interesting* can happen to this skinny Starfleeter on the way to Vespera...

"Fine. I don't have much of a choice," I concede. "Just don't expect me to shake hands and kiss you, Lieutenant."

Said's face pops a real arrogant smile, and my loathing for the twerp instantly doubles. "I don't recommend it," he says, as though laughing at a private joke. "In fact, it would probably be the biggest mistake you ever made."

## II: Getting Acquainted

Sometimes, you gotta say goodbye to the places you love. I used to really like Agassiz. The people were friendly, the booze was damn fine, the sex was great, and most important of all, it was one of the last systems in the UFP which hadn't abolished the good ol' credit in favor of the "if you want it, we'll give it to you" utopianomics. When I was a kid, the universe was fun, completely wide open. We didn't have all these stupid wars going on: just a few Klingons, no Romulans, and (best of all) no ISC. There were only a dozen or so heavy cruisers in Starfleet in those days – it was *small* back then - and they were mostly off doing their own thing in unexplored sectors, not bothering anyone. We were free to be masters of the universe, and no one looked over our shoulders. Now that's the way to live.

Then that whole Rigil VII mess flared, and people began to complain that Starfleet needed to become more involved. Then the Klingons started acting up, and you know what happened there. Starfleet and the Federation bureaucracy began to grow, major worlds abolished the credit, and in a few years the Federation became a very different place. People look at the General War as the turning point, but that just sealed the deal. In fact, the General War actually opened up a few commercial opportunities; my double-great uncle, who was more active at 120 than most people are at 50, established his own freighter company during the War and got very rich. But that war was the last gasp of the Old Federation: the bureaucracy and the fleet grew faster than the opportunities and eventually strangled them. By the end of the War, Starfleet was transformed into the organization I've come to thoroughly loathe: a monster that's done more damage to my Federation than anything the Klingons ever did.

And, with those thoughts racing through my skull and a curse on my lips, a cold breeze drives the rain straight into my face, rousing me from my introspective stupor. It's not very hard to entertain such depressing thoughts on a cold, rainy evening in *Heron Port*, when the ground transports aren't running for God knows what reason, and the open sky is bursting. Agassiz's

surface is 88% water and it rains often and hard, just like it's doing tonight. And whenever I think it's going to stop, *boom!* here comes another cloudburst. You know, I respect any planet that refuses to use a global climate control system, but that respect gets thrown out an airlock when it's raining this damn hard, and I've left my waterguard-parka aboard ship.

I sprint the last fifty meters to the transporter station in a stupid attempt to outrun the deluge. The Lieutenant's waiting for me under a small lamp at the station, a small duffel bag draped over his shoulder.

"You're traveling light." I huff as I come to a stop, pointing at his bag. "How many changes of clothes you got?"

"Three." Said answers as curtly as possible as he heads into the station. It's late evening and the place is nearly deserted; there are only a couple of operators and a single security guard on duty. A kid, probably a fifteen-year-old farmboy from the outskirts, materializes on the cargo terminal and hands his manifest to the guard, who checks its veracity with a single bored tricorder sweep. The sound system is playing one channel of a Vitarin choral tune – needless to say, it's a complete mess. Doesn't anyone take pride in their work anymore?

"I don't want you stinking up the ship with your laundry." I sneer at the Lieutenant, pointing to the much larger rucksack that's mounted over my shoulder. "I always come prepared."

"Okay." Said isn't in a mood to contest the point. "Is there some problem with the laundry facilities aboard ship?"

"It's all a matter of water." I answer. "I need to skim gas giants to build up the water reserves, and I don't like breaking warp to do that more than twice a week..."

"I see." Said says with a nod and a momentary scratch on the back of his head, and we stop in front of the transporter booth, a big raised platform with eight man-sized pads and a bigger pad for cargo. We throw our bags down on the cargo pad, and I fumble through my pockets to find my coordinate card. It takes me fifteen frustrating seconds, and when I finally pull out the damn thing I discover that the Lieutenant's already handed his to the operator, a grey-haired man with a graveyard stare who practically has 'retired Starfleet' tattooed on his buttocks. "Of course, with a few minor modifications, I can use the sonic shower..."

"We're not traveling aboard an Excelsior luxury liner." I snort. "There are no sonic showers on *Candlejack*."

"Well, I could reconfigure the sterilization protocols on your ship's transporters..."

"You are not messing with the transporters on *my* ship!" I protest, turning on him. He takes a backward step and breathes hard. I'm expecting him to back down, but he doesn't. The transporter operator looks alarmed, but does nothing.

"I don't mess with ship's systems, Mr. Price, I make them better, that's my job." the Lieutenant replies, his coldness melting into anger. *Aw... did I mess up your precious Starfleet pride, kid? That's too damn bad.* "And until my thousand hours are up, it's not *your* ship. It's *our* ship."

That was worst thing he could have said to me. *Our ship! Our!* Blood flushes my pretty face, my fists and teeth clench, my entire body tenses, my eyes narrow. *Our!*

I know the only way I'm going to get respect from this piece of Starfleet trash is to beat him into a bloody pulp, so I lunge at him. But the Lieutenant's an agile little cuss; he takes another awkward step that's so quick that I'd swear he was a gymnast or a dancer.

"Never touch me!" the Lieutenant shouts with surprising force. Good, he's afraid. "If you *ever* make any physical contact with me..."

“You'll what?” I smile, glad to see I got under his skin.

“You'll *really* regret it.”

Fine. My heart's still beating hard, but I can wait. The transporter station's not empty (in fact, the lone security guard's already doing a fastwalk across the terminal toward us), but on the ship it's a private party. Said is trying to tell me something, but I ignore him.

“A thousand hours on the same ship, Lieutenant? I wonder what we'll do to pass the time?” I smile.

That shuts him up. I hope the threat's enough to get him to leave the platform and walk away (or at least to hesitate) but he doesn't. Instead, he quickly steps onto the adjacent pad. “Two to energize,” he spits, locking his eyes with mine. The world becomes a whine, a shimmering dissolve, then I experience that brief moment of complete blackness that always feels like death to me.

“Welcome to *Candlejack*.” I proclaim as we materialize, and I step off the pad. The Lieutenant's nostrils immediately flare.

“Did something die in here?” he asks.

I laugh. “Oh, that's just Dido.” I tell him.

“What's a Dido?” he asks.

I figure it's time for introductions. I stick two fingers in my mouth and whistle as loud as I can. “Hey Dido! C'm'ere, you stupid flea freighter!”

Dido enters, a little more cautious than her usual gait. Maybe she's mad at me for leaving her alone for two days. She'll forgive me – I'm about the only person in the universe she can stand. Dido is a Marshound, as far from a show dog as you can get, a genetically engineered breed of Irish Wolfhound with two extra organs. One of them, attached to her liver, discharges enzymes that help her flush radiation from her system. The second, a small sac attached to her lung, stores extra oxygen. She was the prize in a *Bondo* match I won several years ago, and although she's often the recipient of curses and obscenities, I'm awfully glad I won that fight.

“That's a Dido?” Lieutenant Said is still sniffing the air with his picky Starfleet nostrils.

“Don't insult my dog.” I warn.

“She's an interesting color,” he says. I guess he's not one of those starship farmboys I meet so often; he's obviously uneasy around animals.

Dido does have an ugly mottled mix of orange and brown fur, like Martian camouflage, which tapers to red around the head. Dido's not a social animal, in fact, she's as territorial as a dog can get, and I'm secretly hoping that she likes the taste of fresh Starfleet. But instead of approaching him with her usual barking and growling, the old girl takes one look at the Lieutenant, and then drops her tail between her legs. She walks toward me in a circle, whimpering softly, giving Mr. Starfleet a wide berth.

“Dido?” I wonder. “What's the matter, you stupid mongrel?”

I grab the dog with both hands, lift her up to waist height and display her to the lieutenant, who looks only slightly less comfortable than the animal. Dido struggles a bit, so I give her a quick shake, and she's still terrified. But this dog is *never* frightened! And what's the Lieutenant's problem?

“What do you think?” I ask the Lieutenant. “You still don't like the smell?”

“Not particularly,” the flustered officer says. He's trying hard not to look nervous, but I'll bet he's barely able to control his body functions.

“Smell her up close,” I smile, and I hurl the dog at the Lieutenant's chest.

This time, Said doesn't have time to take a step back. He's got the funniest look of horror on his face, though huge bugging eyes and a spastic mouth are a natural match for that crooked nose and teeth. The Lieutenant catches Dido with an involuntary spasm and I start to laugh – until Dido gives out the loudest squeal I've ever heard from an animal.

What the hell?

Frantically, the Lieutenant lays Dido down on the deck, bolts over to his duffel bag, and begins to rummage through it. Dido's lying on her side, yelping, shaking and making the most terrible noise I've heard since I trapped Tiburon rabbits when I was a kid. Dido's shaking resembles an epileptic seizure, and I'd swear that's blood trickling from her eyes and nostrils.

"What the..."

"Damn you, give me some room!" Lieutenant Said snarls. "She needs *entropophenamine*, now!"

"What the hell did you do to her?" I demand.

"I told you!" the Lieutenant snarls. "No physical contact!"

"What the hell did you do to my dog!?" I repeat, my voice two octaves higher than normal.

Said is too busy playing veterinarian to answer me. He pulls a hypo from his pack and injects Dido with a drug; her body relaxes almost as soon as I hear the hiss. Mine doesn't.

"I hope we got to her in time," Said says, Dido's head in his lap, as he gently strokes her head. Dido is still shaking and whimpering, mixing the whines with sporadic growls and an even an attempt at a howl. "C'mon girl, calm down, it'll be alright," he tells her. "*Red Martian pearl, a stench in the night...*"

"Get away from my dog!" The Lieutenant looks up at me, gently rests Dido's head on the floor, and gets to his feet with a sigh. He looks me square in the face, no hesitation in his voice as he unloads some unpleasant information.

"I'm surrounded by an intense psionic field," he explains. "It's a... sort of a cosmic accident."

"Cosmic accident?"

"I'm can't give you the details, it's not allowed." He shakes his head. "But what I can tell you is that anyone who touches me experiences serious telepathic trauma."

All I need to do is to look down at my dog to know that he isn't joking.

"Usually it begins with a moment of euphoria, then excruciating pain kicks in," Said explains, "That's followed by feelings of frustration and self-doubt, often at the level of a good nervous breakdown. In the end, every phobia the victim's got gets triggered, and they're like..." He looks down at Dido. "All within the space of a few seconds."

I don't say anything. I wonder if there's anything on the ship big and heavy enough to safely cave in the Lieutenant's skull with a single blow. *How the hell am I supposed to live in close quarters with this guy?* This ship's a tight fit for just one person. How can I spend a thousand hours with him avoiding body contact?

Whatever drug he gave Dido is obviously kicking in, she's barely shaking now, though she's breathing harder than a woman after a night of sex with me.

"You shouldn't have thrown her at me." The bastard doesn't even apologize. "Now you know." He pulls out a medical tricorder, runs it over her, then relays the data through a communicator to a veterinarian in *Heron Port*. "They think she'll be fine, but recommend that we beam her over and let them keep an eye on her," he tells me.

"There's no way I'm leaving her behind!" I insist. "She's my good luck charm."

"And what does it mean when a good luck charm *dies*?" Said asks, getting to his feet.



“That it’s time to buy a new good luck charm,” I answer. “So when did you plan to tell me this... psionic nightmare of yours?”

“I tried to tell you at the station, but then you started threatening me.” Said says. “After that, I figured you could find out the hard way.”

“You son of a bitch...” I snap, clenching my fists. “When we do make physical contact, I’m going to make sure you’re the one who gets the short end of the stick.”

“Fine.” The Lieutenant says in a dismissive tone, and he grabs his gear and slings it over his shoulder. “We don’t have time to do this dance, Mr. Price. Show me where I can stow my gear, and where I’ll be sleeping...”

“Try the airlock...” I say, coldly but with a smile.

He doesn’t physically react to the insult. “I’ll find the bridge. That’s where I’ll be.” Said tells me in a matter of fact tone, and he leaves me alone with my dog. I take one disgusted look at the whining, shivering little mongrel, and walk after the Lieutenant before he can do any more damage to my ship.

My *Candlejack* is pretty much all cargo holds, and there’s not much for the Lieutenant to look at. There’s a small engineering area (the transporters fit into one of the nooks), a tiny bathroom/shower area, the galley, my quarters, and the bridge. When I find him, he’s already on the bridge, firmly planted in the co-pilot’s chair (admittedly, there’s not much room to stand), and checking out the ship’s systems console.

“Don’t touch those.” I say.

The Lieutenant pulls his hands away from the controls. “It looks like a standard arrangement for a F-MMQ class merchant ship.” I blush and smile. “How old is it?”

“I’m not sure,” I admit. “I bought it about six years ago at a sale on New Andor. It was an independent registry ship, captured by the Klingons during the General War, then recaptured by the Feds. I guess the owners died.”

“I imagine it’s got a very bloody history,” Said remarks. “It’s very cramped. I wouldn’t want to go to close quarters against Klingons on this bridge.” He reaches up and bangs the ceiling with the palm of his hand. “There’s barely room to swing a *bat’leth*. They must have used daggers.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet the Klingons had a good time in here.” I reply. “Space is at a premium, as you can see, so I’d appreciate it if you weren’t a slob on this trip.”

“That’s not usually a problem with me.” The lieutenant says. “I travel light, and I try not to make more mess than my surroundings can comfortably regenerate.” He stops, and takes a look at the picture on my console. “Is this you when you were younger?”

“Nah, it’s my boy, Gordy.” I pick up the picture and get it to rotate and perform a few attack moves. Gordy’s wearing his school’s *bondo* uniform, looking sharp and mean in gold and black lycra tights, his barrel chest bared, a leather strap wrapped around his left wrist, positioned in a perfect combat crouch. “We call him ‘Grr’ for short. He’s living with his mother on Westminster.”

“That’s a long way from this sector.” Said states the obvious. “Is he sixteen? Seventeen?”

“Thirteen, when the recording was taken.” I answer with a smile. “My pride and joy.”

The lieutenant raises an eyebrow. “He’s big for thirteen. He’s going to grow up to be a monster,” he laughs.

“Just like his dad.” I smile. For the first time since I met Kenneth Said, I don’t want to hurt him.

“Not a bad looking kid,” the Lieutenant observes. “He’s definitely got your red hair, and your steely-black eyes. Thank God he doesn’t have your broken nose.”

“It’s a battle scar,” I laugh. “He’ll collect his own.”

“*Bondo’s* pretty rough for a kid that age.” Said remarks. “Or any age, for that matter.”

“I used to do it professionally,” I tell him, without an ounce of shame.

“I shouldn’t be surprised,” Said replies, not intending it as a compliment. “You got any other kids?” I nod.

“Well, Al’tricia turned eleven last month.”

“Where’s her picture?” Said asks.

“In storage. She’s more her mother’s daughter.”

Said hums in disapproval, then changes the subject. He turns to the computers. “Ah! You *do* have a few non-standard components in the console.”

He noticed them *that* fast? I try not to look alarmed. “That’s the wonderful thing about freighters. Customization.”

“Oh, I definitely agree,” Said says. “I need you to realize one thing, Mr. Price. I know you don’t like Starfleet, and you don’t trust it or me. But if you’re cutting a few corners, maybe breaking a few minor laws, no one’s going to hear about it from me. As long as I get my job done, what you do with your ship and the rest of your life is your own business. You have my word on it.”

I don’t believe a word of what he’s saying, of course, but it *is* nice to hear him actually make the effort to lull me into a feeling of complacency. “There’s one thing I am curious about, though...” he adds.

“Oh, what?”

“The telepathic presence in your computer system.” Said tells me.

The blood rushes from my face. God, I wasn’t expecting him to find *it*, at least not before we reached Rakshasa Prime.

I didn’t want to have to kill him this soon.

“No one’s been able to integrate ISC telepathic systems with Federation system before,” Said elaborates, and I breathe a sigh of relief – he came close to the mark, but he doesn’t quite *know* what he found, not yet. “Starfleet would be very interested in this technology.”

*That’s for damn sure*, my internal voice replies while I struggle to compose myself. “It’s something I can’t share.” I explain after a long pause, believing it’s better to be vague than to give an outright lie. “I gave my word.” Said nods, pretending to be understanding. “Believe me, Starfleet will be informed when the time’s right.”

“Okay. I’ll respect that.” Said tells me. “I’m not here to spy on you, Roger Price. You’re just the ferryman.”

“And you’re just cargo.” I reply.” *To be jettisoned when the time is right*, I add to myself.

“No, I’m your co-pilot.” Said contradicts me, taking a deep breath in reaction to my scowl. “And as your co-pilot, I think we should go through the checklist, make sure the ship’s ready, then head out. We’ve got a blockade to run.”

“Fine. No time like now,” I say, and I instruct the computer to begin its pre-flight diagnostic sequence. Regardless of what I was feeling toward Kenneth Said, this promised to be a very interesting trip...

### III: Deception

I've never seen the original ownership papers for *SS Candlejack*, registry FMMQ 359302, so I have no idea what skullduggery or bloodshed has been conducted on this vessel during its long history. I also have no idea where its name came from, nor have I heard any tales of its travels before the Klingon massacre that put it into my hands. The only indication of a colorful past is an inscription, carved in English into one of the shower walls: "*Light all the candles you want Jack, you still won't be able to see if you don't have any brains*". I'll be damned if I know to whom that's referring, but in my eyes, that's the ship's unofficial motto.

And right now, the best candidate for "Ship's Jack" is Lieutenant Kenneth Said, a quietly arrogant Starfleet engineer who's sitting two meters to my left in the co-pilot's seat. A few hours ago, this slim, tawny-skinned redshirt commandeered my ship for a secret mission. It really must be a secret, because aside from telling me that he wants me to take him to the galactic center of drug-addled decadence, Lieutenant Said hasn't even bothered to show me the basic courtesy of explaining why he wants to borrow my ship.

"You'd better buckle yourself in tight, Lieutenant," I give him my toothiest smile, burying my hostility in the moment. The pre-flight routine has checked out, and Port Control has given us a green light. "We aren't built for comfort. The inertial dampers aren't quite the same as on your typical starship..."

"I know. Specs rate them at about 30% efficiency," Said remains unflappable as he buckles in. "Although given that you're often transporting delicate cargo, I'll bet you've upgraded. The maximum dampening for an FMMQ-class would be around... maybe 55%?"

"Somewhere in that neighborhood," I casually admit, not willing to show that I'm actually impressed that he knew it. "But shouldn't it be, like, 57.83%?"

"I don't *Vulcan* my numbers Mr. Price," the Lieutenant replies, involuntarily raising his eyebrows. *I hate it when he calls me that, it's too formal and dismissive.* "...unless it's

absolutely necessary. I'm anal enough as it is." He checks out the console. I don't like the looks he's giving the computer system again. "How long do you think it will take for the blockade to intercept us?"

"Oh, a couple of hours." I quip. I don't even remotely know, but it sounds like a good estimate. It'll take us at least four hours at sub-light to reach a safe distance to hit warp, and I can't imagine the ISC getting too close to the planet – Agassiz has some pretty nasty weapon placements on those two big moons – so they'll want to intercept us somewhere in the middle.

"Well, we need to figure out a plan," Said says.

"Well I suggest..." and the terminal signal interrupts the conversation, ordering us take off *now*. "Lift-off in ten." I respond to both the tower and the lieutenant, interrupting the conversation.

"I'm ready." Said says. "But if the ISC finds me aboard this ship, we're both dead..." I give him an apprehensive look; either Said's got an even bigger ego than I suspected, or there's something going on here that I don't know about. But I don't get a chance to bring up the question. The ship lurches, and slowly begins to rise. There are two steel posts like cast-iron rigging on each side of the pilot and co-pilot's consoles – Said calmly grabs one with each hand to brace himself, and I do the same, being careful not to brush his fingers while we're both clutching the middle post. There's something comforting about the cold touch of steel during a lift-off.

The night view of *Heron Port* is briefly displayed on the ship's main viewscreen, then suddenly disappears as we pass through a layer of rain clouds. At least it's not a thunderstorm. The ship gently shakes as we pick up velocity. At ten kilometers, I pivot the ship, point its nose skyward, and we begin our ascent out of the atmosphere. The shaking intensifies until it resembles a small earthquake, and then there's a sudden, unnerving sense of calm when we leave the atmosphere and the artie-grav kicks in. We freighter captains call it "the gravity orgasm" (usually when we're drunk).

"Good-bye Agassiz," I say, setting our velocity to one-quarter impulse as we leave the planet's orbit. Two moons shoot past us in a ten-second span. "Blockade, here we come..."

"That wasn't so bad," the Lieutenant tells me. "Your inertial dampers are pretty good. Not at all like..." He pauses to ask a question. "You've never ridden one of the early rocket recreations, have you? The Apollos?"

"No?" I say. For a change, I'm actually interested in one of his casual conversations. "I know some of the inner colonies do reenactments of early space launches, but I've never head of anyone going *that* far back. Where do they do these?"

"The Thorvey Jet and Rocket Society hold weekly orbital launches every summer." Said tells me. "I... well, a friend of mine... rode in one of them seven years ago. It was like the universe grabbed her in a big fist, and kept shaking her until it was sure she wouldn't fall apart, then she got to spacewalk on an ancient tether *and* simulate the Gemini-8 tumble-malfunction while they were still in orbit. She vomited her guts out, but afterward she said she had the best time in her life."

"My boy would love it." I say. Knowing Grr, not only would he love it, he'd probably head-butt anyone who stood in his way until he made it to the front of the line. "I'm afraid I'm hitting that age where I'm beginning to wonder what I ever saw in adrenaline rushes."

"That's hard to believe," the Lieutenant counters. I scowl back at him. I shouldn't be surprised the Lieutenant thinks he knows me better than I know myself after only a few minutes.

It's a prime characteristic of the breed. My disapproval shuts him up, and a potentially friendly conversation is nipped in the bud.

Once we're safely up to ten lunar orbits (about five million kilometers) away from Agassiz, I kick the *Jack* up to three-quarters impulse. The ship accelerates smoothly, with only a rise in the engine hum indicating a change in speed. "So you were saying that the ISC would kill you if they got their hands on you." I turn back to Said, making it obvious that I don't believe him.

"No. I said they'd kill *both* of us," Lieutenant Said's voice is low-key, but I can see through what he's trying to say – he's deliberately trying to put pressure on me.

"Okay, Lieutenant, why does the ISC want you so badly?" I scoff.

Said pauses for a long time, long enough to suspect that either he'll shut up, or compose a lie. "Meritorious service at Pholos," he finally says. "A little *too* meritorious."

It wasn't the answer I was expecting - it even has the ring of truth, given everything the Undersecretary told me. As I've indicated before, I don't think much of these galactic pajama boys, but this one's starting to pique my interest. "Just what did you do?" I ask, staring him directly in the face.

A planet, a Jovian giant illuminated like a half-moon by the Agassiz sun, whips past us as we pass within two million kilometers. "Meritorious service," Said repeats. "Meritorious enough that the ISC has formally requested my deportation from the Federation for trial," he tells me, answering my question indirectly.

I'm getting a little tired by the Lieutenant's "I'm so coy" act, if only because he does it really damn well. Right now, I almost feel like obliging the ISC deportation order. "That would be a tragedy," I quip.

"Company is coming," Said informs me, not reacting to my insult. "An ISC Frigate, I-FF class. Registry I-FF ST220."

"Any names?"

"Nothing that's displayed on the hull or identified in the ship's autobeacon message." Said replies. "But ISC ship names are usually informal, coined by their original captains rather than the fleet. I've heard some real oddballs..."

"Yeah, who hasn't." I preempt him before he can give a typical Starfleet cultural dissertation. "How many are in the blockade?"

"There are three other ships in that attack group, twenty clicks of separation between them." Said says, carefully scrutinizing the computer display.

"They've spread a pretty wide net." I say. The Lieutenant nods.

"The frigate is the smallest. I also read two medium cruisers, an I-SM, and an I-CS..."

"A strike cruiser." I cough with a suppressed half-curse. "That's joyous news."

"There's worse. There's a heavy cruiser, I-CA 192." Said informs me. "Better known in Starfleet as the Plasma Ship from Hades or the Gravemaker, or the..."

"People in Starfleet don't know when to shut the hell up." I snap. "Now how are we going to hide you from their sensors?"

It's actually a rhetorical question, but to my surprise, the Lieutenant quickly offers a solution to the problem. "We can probably guess when the ISC will start to do their deep scan. I'd suggest storing me in the ship's transporter buffer a few minutes before we get into sensor range, let them do their scan, come to the conclusion there's only one life form aboard..." I begin to laugh and shake my head. "What?"

“That’s an old smuggler’s trick, and the ISC knows it.” I tell him. Said’s obviously not done a lot of police duty, or he’d have run into that trick himself at least a dozen times.

“It’s usually done with cargo, not people.” Said argues. “They’re expecting you to be smuggling contraband goods, not a Starfleet officer.”

“Trust me, they won’t play favorites just because I’m not using a cargo transporter.” I reply. “Of course, if you have more experience in smuggling than I do...”

I catch the sight of the Lieutenant grinding his teeth, and I can’t help but grin. Yes, I love it when my goading actually manages to penetrate the cool, righteous facade of these Starfleet boys. To be perfectly honest, the odds that the ISC will look for us to be hiding someone in transporter pattern storage during a deep scan are pretty close to nil. That’s the sort of thing they typically check in person, when their boarding parties are breathing down your neck. The odds are a lot higher that the cute little ISC I-FF will close on us and attempt to blow us to pieces before even sending us your standard *surrender or die* message. Said’s plan does have the virtue that I could arrange for a transporter “accident” to occur while he’s nice and cozy in his transporter trap, but I really can’t stomach acknowledging that the Lieutenant might actually have a better plan than I do. Call it a weakness.

To my surprise, Said doesn’t argue the point, though his slightly pursed lips and crossed arms tells me that he’s not buying what I’m saying. “Do you have an alternative, Mr. Price?”

I lean back in my chair and my smirk only gets bigger. “Well, there is something I can do. Hope you’re not claustrophobic,” I add, lying through my teeth and showing it with my smile.

“I’ve spent half my life in Jeffries’ Tubes.” The Lieutenant’s confession disappoints me.

“That explains a lot about you...” I quip, but before he can reply, we’re interrupted by a message, The ISC wants to have a little chat with us. “You’d better duck, lieutenant.” I tell Said.

The Starfleeter nods and crouches below the level of the console, listening intensely. I activate the screen and stare into the face of the enemy.

It’s another toad. God, am I ever getting sick of these fat-faced amphibians!

“Roger Price here,” I flash him my best fake smile. “What can I do for the ISC?”

“Rokoka, *al’traes of the Celestial Stormbreaker.*”

“Well that name’s real poetry, *Rokoka of the Celestial Stormbreaker.*” The toads do so enjoy flattery. “On behalf of the colonists of Agassiz, allow me to thank you for your intervention. Your brave actions clearly demonstrate what a low priority we are for the Federation. It is a revelation...”

“You approach us with sweet-juices on your lips, but still you violate our blockade.” Rokoka answers. I do my best to look mildly offended.

“Rokoka, you wish to stop freighters from supporting the Federation war effort. Given the ineptitude that Starfleet has shown during this conflict, I don’t understand why you’re even bothering.” (I’m certain that Lieutenant Said caught that remark, though I dare not look down while the ISC’s watching, just imagining the reaction on his dour face is enough to warm the cockles of my heart.) “My stores are empty. I am simply traveling to a neutral planet on an errand unrelated to the war. Allow me to leave safely, and I might even be in a position to do you a favor one of these days.”

“Stand down and prepare to be boarded,” Rokoka croaks back. The frog doesn’t waste words, does he?

“You’re certainly welcome to come aboard *al’traes*. Would you and your men care to dine during your visit? My galley is well supplied with meats that I’m sure the Korlivilar will find quite tasty.”

“Is that a bribe?”

I smile as brightly as a child, with just a hint of childish naughtiness. “Forgive me, *al’traes*. I’m used to dealing with the Federation. Negotiating with you can be... a difficult adjustment.”

“We shall see just what value your words have when we board you,” the Meskeen tells me, and the viewscreen goes black.

I was expecting at least one veiled threat, and that worries me. I wipe off a few forming sweat beads with the back of my hand. Said takes a frog-step backward from the console and gets to his feet, hands on his hips. “Well?” I ask.

“I could see the wheels moving, Mr. Price,” he says. “The question is what did you hope to accomplish?”

“They were bound to come.” I shrug. “I just...”

“...played to their expectations.” Said notes correctly. “I guess you did okay, given the circumstances. You smiled at them. When an enemy smiles at you, it’s time to get nervous. Nervous people can make mistakes.”

“True.” I nod. “I’ll bet you didn’t learn that in a Jeffries Tube.” But Said shakes his head.

“Don’t be overconfident. They’ve got at least six marines on a frigate. Assuming they send them all, we’ll be outnumbered six-to-two. When we compare our ship strengths, it’s an even bigger mismatch. And they *will* find me,” Said says. “I doubt your hiding place will stand up to a visual inspection.”

“That’s true,” I note. Both of my engineering access tubes are close enough to the plasma flow that they’ll shield him from a sensor sweep, but you can’t hide from someone who’s looking physically into the tube. “We could beam you into space...” I suggest, laughing. He doesn’t laugh, but gets lost in thought.

“They’d detect the transport signal, except when...” The Lieutenant struggles to complete his thought. “Suppose you beamed me away when their troops are transporting. They’d be a lot less likely to notice two synchronized transporter signals!”

“You’re asking me to pull off one helluva of a trick!” I say.

“I know I am.” The skinny Starfleeter nods. “But I’ll bet you’ve done worse.”

“You know they’ll be expecting me to dump cargo,” I note. “I’ll be under a constant low-level scan during the entire operation, and so will the surrounding area. If you suddenly materialize in the middle of space...”

“Then I’d better not show up in space,” Kenneth Said says, his face showing a sudden flash of inspiration. “But suppose you beamed me into the last place they’re expecting?”

“Where’s that?” I ask. “Up Dido’s butt?”

“As one of my Academy professors once said, ‘sarcasm’ is a chasm between reason and respect,” Said lectures me. My brow furrows. “Suppose you beamed me aboard *their* ship?”

“Huh?” My mouth gapes when I hear the Starfleeter’s plan. No wonder he hasn’t been assigned to a starship! He’s insane! “You can’t be...”

“I *am* very serious, Mr. Price.” The Lieutenant tells me, closing to an uncomfortable distance. “I know ISC ship layouts. I have first hand experience.” Once again, I get the impression that this Starfleeter is like an iceberg – there’s a lot hidden below the surface, and showing as little as possible is his life’s work. “Beam me into one of their holds, and I can hide there until you

persuade the boarding party to let you go, then you can beam me back the instant they leave. They won't be looking for it."

"This is crazy."

"You're probably right," the Lieutenant says. "But if I'm discovered, and the situation really starts to overload, you can disavow all knowledge of me, and I'll have a fighting chance if something happens to you. Now, if you'll excuse me, I believe you wanted me to hide in one of your access tubes before they get close enough to scan us."

"Good guess." I say.

Said turns and heads to engineering, sealing the door behind him. And here I had just the sweetest urge to nail him with something big and heavy in the back of his skull!

Today would only be a good day if I loved mysteries, and I *really* hate mysteries. It's time to solve one. I walk over to the computer terminal, and activate a very special circuit.

"Argos?" I ask out loud.

The ship's main viewscreen lights up as every computer on the ship momentarily glitches, The viewscreen display is a labyrinth of random colors and shapes formed from lines. Argos calls this the Gateway, the face of the machine, as all faces are gateways into one's personality. The Argos system comes to life as a throbbing in my head. I suppose you can say he's a computer that's literally a headache, but he's so much more than that. Computer. Entity. Telepath. Child. Spy.

I can tell from the size of my headache that he's stronger than he was the last time I let him out of the bottle - a lot stronger. Now how the hell did that happen?

"I've been listening, Roger," Argos says, not even waiting for me to ask the question. "I *can* probably transmit a telepathic message without being intercepted by the ISC. Unfortunately, there's a small chance we could be overheard if we're being telepathically monitored by the Veltressai..." (I acknowledge the comment; the Veltressai are the most powerful telepaths in the entire ISC), "...but that's not standard ISC procedure, not even in a situation like this one."

"I'll take the risk." I insist.

"You hate him." Argos notes. "Why?"

"He's Starfleet. And he hurt my dog. And between his mysterious telepathic trauma field and his interesting uses for transporters, he's really giving me the creeps. I want to talk to Tomarand."

"Uh, Roger," Argos tells me. "Have you ever heard the one about the cure being worse than the disease?"

"And neither the cure nor the disease is worse than my temper," I state. "I don't care what deal we have to strike with that pointy-eared devil. I want to know whatever the *Tal Shiar* knows about Lieutenant Kenneth Said..."



## IV: Who Needs Information?

It's him. I do my best to affect a humble pose - I know humility goes on a collision course with my nature, but attitude won't cut it with the *Tal Shiar*, especially with *khre-riov* Inluke Tomarand. Going from Said to the Meskeen to the so-called "garotte-general" is like taking a walk through a bonfire that leads down a path of red-hot coals into a burning building. But these are the risks of an uncertain universe. Said's only a Lieutenant, but he's got the arrogance, condescension, and coy wordplay of your typical starship Captain down cold. I'm not going to tolerate one more second of Mr. Kenneth Said without knowing who the bastard really is.

Tomarand accepts the telepathic link, as I suspected he would. Not that I'm his favorite person in the universe, but communication by Argos is definitely an attention-getter.

"Captain Price," I receive a mental image of Tomarand's office, focused on his sharp-angled Romulan face. His sloped forehead and pointed ears are framed by a head of pepper-grey hair, and his face reminds me of Dido's just before she bites someone. Like all Romulans, it looks like someone used a soup bowl to style his hair (although I shouldn't be thinking that - Argos is only transmitting images and surface thoughts, but he's not infallible, and it won't do to let certain thoughts loose. Needless to say, telepathic communication gives me the creeps).

The mental image clarifies in a few seconds, like a lens that quickly comes into focus. The *Tal Shiar* officer is seated at a plain metal desk: the room's sparse decorations are overshadowed by a ludicrously huge *Tal Shiar* emblem, a shield which is garishly spread-eagled on the wall behind him. Perhaps this is just Tomarand's alteration to the mental image - each side of the link has some control over the image the other sees, but it makes him look small.

"I hope this is not bad news," the Rihannsu's so-called 'garrote-general' says, hinting at his irritation.

"I honestly don't know, *khre-riov*," I answer. "I won't be able to deliver the Argos to you without running the ISC blockade of Agassiz."

"Then run it." Tomarand's facial expression goes from neutral to sour.

"I am. But in order to get permission to leave Agassiz, Starfleet ordered me to take on an irritating passenger, a Lieutenant Kenneth Said. I need to know about him..."

"For that you bother the *Tal Shiar*?" Tomarand says coldly. An officer hands him a data pad, he glances at it, and his eyebrow raises in a manner that's almost Vulcan. He spends several quiet minutes reading it before turning back to me. "My apologies, Mr. Price. Not only were you justified in contacting me, you were positively inspired. You have our thanks."

Okay, now I'm getting *really* nervous. I didn't think Inman Tomarand was the sort of man who would thank anyone under *any* circumstances, except to lull them into a sense of false security so he could more easily slit their throat.

"The *Tal Shiar* knows about this Lieutenant?"

"He falls within our sphere of interest," Tomarand tells me, holding up the data pad like an actor with a script. "Kenneth Ali Michael Ibn Said. Born on January 26, 2267 on his great-great grandfather's estate on the Arabian grasslands outside Riyadh, Earth. A direct descendent of a Terran Middle Eastern kingship."

"So the son of a bitch is *royalty*?"

"What passes for it in humans, I suppose. Mr. Said graduated with honors at the age of fifteen from his primary education facility in Riyadh..." It's almost comical, witnessing one of the most feared men in the galaxy reading the biography of a mere Starfleet Lieutenant. "Then he achieved a Bachelor's Degree in Engineering at the Alhambra Institute in 2284, then a Master's Degree at Cambridge in 2286, and was working on his doctoral thesis at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology when he abandoned his academic pursuits and signed up for Starfleet."

"Why'd he do that?"

"The *Tal Shiar* was not interested in the reason for his decision. I would assume that he was pressured by his family or his friends to fight in the General War," Tomarand surmises. "He graduated twenty-sixth in the accelerated Academy class of 2289, with nearly perfect marks in Engineering, but mediocre Command school grades. He then served aboard *USS Fox* between 2289 and 2291, *USS Phillipi* between 2291 and 2293, and finally transferred to *USS Ark Royal* in 2293 under the command of the late Captain Gregory Jensen, where he remained until *Ark Royal's* destruction last month."

"And what did he do at Pholos that was so special?"

Tomarand's expression changes subtly, but I can't quite interpret it. "A more interesting question would be to ask what happened to him on *Monoceros*."

"Monoceros? That backwater?" I snort. "Nothing out in that neighborhood but a few melted comets. I use it as a water resupply stop."

Tomarand shakes his head. When this man shakes his head, even *I've* got to rethink things.

"Over a year ago, Kenneth Said was one of several *Ark Royal* personnel sent to scout a small, dead water world in that system on a routine survey mission. Whatever happened on that mission is one of Starfleet's most carefully guarded secrets, locked in a classified document that's buried in a vault in the bowels of Starfleet Headquarters. Even *we* haven't been able to uncover them yet."

"Mr. Said is surrounded by some sort of protective psionic field. You touch him, you go insane. Never seen anything like it, and I've seen a *lot*," I tell the Romulan. "It's damn annoying."

"We are aware of Mr. Said's unusual protections." Tomarand states. "A by-product of the Monoceros incident, no doubt. Following the "interesting" mission, Kenneth Said's Starfleet career was finished. He was consigned as a patient in Starfleet Martian veteran's care facility for over eight months, damaged both mentally and physically."

"Are you sure about that?" I ask another question. "The Lieutenant's a strange one, but he's not too far from the Starfleet norm."

"Our data indicates Starfleet would have been content to keep him locked away there for the rest of his life. Only Captain Jensen's intervention saved him. Jensen tendered his resignation from Starfleet, and took it back only when Said was reassigned to active duty."

"Let me get this straight, A *Captain* gave up his career for a *Lieutenant*?" That makes no sense!

"No. For an *Ensign*." Tomarand lets the implications of the statement sink in for a few seconds. "Our intelligence speculates that an unusual bond, possibly telepathic, was forged between the members of the landing party on the Monoceros mission. Which includes the Captain. The *Tal Shiar* has had its eye on Greg Jensen for many years. Our operatives considered him one of the Federation's most effective and innovative military commanders. And (more importantly) our psychohistory department pegged him as an eventual UFP Presidential candidate after he left the military. He was destined for greatness."

"You're losing me here, *khre-riov*," I admit. "You're saying that Said and Jensen bonded in some way at Monoceros. What does that have to do with whatever Said did at Pholos?"

"Jensen went missing and is presumed dead when *the Ark Royal* was destroyed in the Battle of the *Bat'leth* Nebula. It was a great loss to the Federation. Ensign Said was captured in that same battle by the ISC-Rovillian heavy cruiser *Lasting Peace*."

I hum, and involuntarily lean backward in my chair. "That was a bad break. I don't envy him there, not one bit." I remark – no one should be captured by the ISC. Tomarand shakes his head sagely.

"As torturers, the ISC are quite overrated. They rely far too heavily on technology, not technique," the *Tal Shiar* chief states, and he ought to know. "Then, according to our sources, Ensign Said escaped from his cell, penetrated the Rovillian's aquatic environment and single-handedly captured the ISC cruiser."

My jaw drops.

"Wait a minute. He captured an ISC heavy cruiser by *himself*?"

"Yes," Tomarand says, matter of factly.

"By himself? You can't believe this, do you?" I question. "Starfleet has got to be playing a joke on your operatives!"

Tomarand brushes aside my opinion like a fly. "During the Battle of Pholos, Kenneth Said turned the captured cruiser against the ISC echelon, which tipped the battle in the Federation's favor. The ISC did manage to recapture *the Lasting Peace*, but far too late to affect the battle's outcome. Then Ensign Said and a Vulcan weapons officer captured a shuttlecraft and affected the retrieval of all captured Federation personnel before *the Lasting Peace* was destroyed," Tomarand states.

This is just too impossible to believe. What? That scrawny runt messed with the ISC in a way that only a handful of Captains have done? What? And here I was cursing him as just some another arrogant 'Fleeter - maybe even more full of himself than the usual member of his breed – but I guess I should have been thanking him for putting the fear of Man into the tadpoles. "So the

son of a bitch is an honest-to-god war hero?" I say, collapsing into the pilot's chair. "I never would have pegged it, never. Are you *really* sure about this?"

"The *Tal Shiar* is certain of nothing, but I find it unlikely that the Federation would embark on such an elaborate and *improbable* misinformation scheme," Tomarand says. "More importantly, the ISC believes it. His capture is one of their top priorities, as is acquiring any information on the Monoceros system."

I could almost laugh. "I really didn't expect to hear this. A war hero? A *hero*?"

"Roger Price," Tomarand says. "Your heart has gotten cold and cynical. Perhaps that is why we are so fond of you. But occasionally, heroism is more than just propaganda. Very rarely, some individuals do transcend the spirit of their species. I think the universe does it just to annoy cynics like myself."

"So you're saying I should admire this guy?" I wonder aloud.

"Of course not," Tomarand scorns. "It means that you need to watch him more closely. Heroes are *dangerous*, Mr. Price, especially once they've acquired a taste for it."

"What should I do about him?" I'm not asking for orders - it's not like I'm a *Tal Shiar* operative - but I could use some advice.

"Keep an eye on him. Perhaps you should make an effort to become his friend. Space is a lonely place, and loneliness can be more damaging to a person's spirit than any torture. Become his friend, and encourage him to express his... inner feelings. Find out what happened on Monoceros. The only logical conclusion is that whatever happened there gave him the ability to defeat an entire ISC heavy cruiser by himself. Believe me, if the ISC wants that information, then so does the *Tal Shiar*."

The *Tal Shiar* probably wants more, but they're not sure they can count on my resentment toward the Federation leading me to commit acts of outright treason. "I see," I say. "So you'd rather see me concentrate on Said?" I ask.

"Of course not," the Romulan snaps in irritation. "The Argos prototype is still a much higher priority. The sooner it's back in our hands, the better for both of us. But if you provide us with intelligence on Mr. Said, I'm sure we can do something else that's good for you... perhaps there's a Romulan Ale contract we can throw your way. Is there anything else?"

"Well, *khre-riov*, you wouldn't happen to have a spare fleet you can send our way?" I answer.

The *Tal Shiar* commander simply shakes his head, and that's the end. I instruct Argos to terminate the conversation. I lean back in my chair, spin around a few times, and ponder just what a magnificent mess I've managed to land myself this time. I really have a talent for it.

"That went better than I expected," Argos says. I nod, and put him back into sleep mode. It takes him a few seconds to comply, longer than I was expecting.

A few minutes later, sensors detect that we've been deep scanned by *the Celestial Stormbreaker* (what a ridiculously pompous name). I call Said out of his hiding place. He's got the most disgusted look on his face.

"Did you know Dido does her business down those access tubes?" he snaps. I burst into a huge fit of laughter. Okay, so Lieutenant Said's a war hero. It's still hilarious.

"That's not funny," Said contradicts me.

I fight a strong urge to slap him on the back. "We're about twenty minutes from the ISC's transporter range. Maybe you should have a quick shower." I lean close to him and sniff the air. "I understand the Korlivilar..." (here I refer to the ISC's shocktroops, a race of walking lynxes) "...have a very well developed sense of smell."

"That may not be a bad idea. I need to relax." Said says, and he ducks into the back. Dido must be sitting in her usual spot in the middle of the corridor, because I hear the lieutenant shout: "Out of my way, hound of foul odors, harbinger of stench..."

Okay, so the guy's a war hero. He's still plain weird.

While Kenneth Said tries to scrub the spicy smell of Marshound off his skin, I yell for the culprit to come forward. Dido's still recovering from the ordeal she suffered a few hours ago, and thanks to the drugs Said gave her, she's walking like she's drunk. I laugh.

"Good girl," I smile at the Marshound, pulling her box out from under the console. I'd better keep Dido in storage for the duration – one of the Korlivilar might gut her with a toe-claw on a whim. They've done worse to the pets of other freighter captains I've known.

Said emerges from his shower about ten minutes later, pulling a shirt over his body as he enters the bridge. Do you remember what I said about the guy being scrawny? You can scratch that one off the list too. Although the Starfleet jersey hangs loose on him and gives the impression that he's a walking stick, it couldn't be more wrong. Said's got a dancer's build that matches well with his cat-like reflexes: a lot of tight, well-defined muscles, especially on his back, and shows not a lick of 'show-muscle' or flab. Hell, he might even be able to hold his own in a scrap. "I'll need to patch the sensors into the transporter control," he states. "It'll be a lot easier to synch transporter signals between the two ships."

"I'll do it," I quickly volunteer, trying to keep him from discovering over the Argos. "You'll have enough on your mind, Lieutenant."

"I like to do my job, Mr. Price," he snaps. "I think I do it rather well."

"Your job isn't messing with *Candlejack*, Lieutenant," I say. "And it isn't arguing with me about my ship, either. Especially when it's about something even an idiot can do."

"But there was a computer glitch about a half hour ago," Said protests. He has to be referring to the moment the Argos came on-line. "I wanted to check it out."

"This is a freighter, not a starship," I reply, doing my best to find an excuse that sounds remotely reasonable. "You may be used to systems that work perfectly all the time, but around here a glitch is no big deal. Why don't you concentrate on the mission and leave the systems to me?"

"It seemed like more than a glitch," Said says. "I *felt* something."

"It was probably just the smell of my mutt." I answer, doing my best not to show just how alarmed I'm getting.

"Fine," Said says. "But could you please clean out your access tubes a little more often?"

"Sure." I promise. "I got her to do her business on the transporter pads for awhile, but unfortunately one day a planetary trade rep materialized on the wrong pad, and I... had to wean her away from the transporters."

"I'm sure that's a very funny story, and if you tell it to me when I haven't just spent a half-hour inhaling her offal, I'll laugh my head off," Said says. "In the meantime, do remember that Dido would be a delicacy on many worlds."

"So would you," I smile.

"Not as much as you," Said jokes, examining my large frame. "You'd be a banquet."

"That's what all the women in the galaxy say." My face is flush with self-satisfaction. "Roger Price... sirloin steak and prime rib, all wrapped into one really attractive package."

I think he's had enough of me – and I've barely gotten started. "We'd better get down to the transporter," the Lieutenant tells me, a slight sigh penetrating his deadpan mask. "I don't think the ISC is willing to hold off their transport until you've finished admiring yourself."

It's the best insult he's given me; surprisingly, it puts me in a good mood. We head to the engine room and the Lieutenant walks over to a transporter pod and waits. We both look bored.

"All the ISC marines will be on *Candlejack* while you're over there. Do you think you'll get a chance to sabotage them?" I ask.

"I could try, but I don't think it'd be worth the risk," Said replies. "At best, we'd slow down the least powerful ship in their fleet, and we'd end up with a strike cruiser breathing down our necks. At best, *Candlejack* can reach Warp 6.5, and the 'ol girl would probably shake herself apart in a few hours at that speed. The ISC ships can do Warp 8 without breaking a sweat. We can't fight them and we can't outrun them. Sabotaging the weakest one will make things worse. Our only hope lies with your charm and diplomatic skill."

"Not a problem," I shrug. He raises a skeptical eyebrow. "Lieutenant, if I really feel like it, I *can* hurt you..."

"Mr. Price, you've already locked me in an enclosed space with your dog's droppings for a half-hour," Said tells me in a cold voice. "Quit while you're ahead, okay?" The communications patch from the bridge tells me that the ISC is ready to transport over. We start the sequence. Said holds up his right fist and gives it a slight shake, a sign of encouragement. "As the Vulcans say: 'live long, prosper, and don't do anything stupid'."

"I've never heard a Vulcan say that," I retort. But he's already materializing. I guess the son of a bitch has a sense of humor after all.

The ISC arrive in two batches: first there's a Meskeen toad and two Korlivilar kitty-cats, then three more cats. The lynx-men are armed with large phaser pistols - not the ISC standard issue stunner, but something that's actually capable of sending you to an instant funeral - and of course, they have natural weapons on their paws and feet (they even have retractable toe-holes in their boots so they can use their feet as weapons). The Meskeen is clearly a technician as well as a commanding officer, he (assuming it's male) is loaded down with a portable computer, a data scanner, and a lab kit. He scrutinizes me with inhuman eyes. Although he looks like a frog, his eyes remind me of something more feral: a crocodile perhaps?

"Get him ready," the Meskeen orders his troops. He didn't even bother turning off the universal translator. Before I can resist, I've got six Korlivilar grappling me, ripping off my clothes with their claws, stripping away my weapons, and checking every orifice. They scratch me up pretty good in the process.

"He's clean," the Meskeen says, checking me with a medical tricorder to see if I'm hiding any implanted weapons. I knew this might get ugly, but I wasn't expecting things to go this badly, not this quick. "Take him to the bridge."

"What are you..." I shout, still struggling like a son of a bitch. But I can't even complete my curse. They pin my arms behind my back and restrain them with magnetic shackles. I try to break free, and a Korlivilar *bites* me hard in the right shoulder. "Son of a bitch!" I shout. But the pain causes me to stop struggling long enough for the Meskeen to strap some sort of tape patch onto my body, first on the side of my neck and then over my rib cage. Suddenly it feels like I've just gone from sub-light to Warp 8 with a hangover.

They're drugging me. The bastards.

The Korlivilar are slightly smaller than man-size, but they make up for it in muscle density and sheer meanness. I feel their coarse fur rubbing against my skin like walking mat burns, and my nostrils bristle at their scent; during our wrestling match, they covered my body with their spoor. They move me with long hoist-and-drag steps out of engineering, half-carry me down the main access corridor, and finally hurl me into the bridge. I land hard on the deck, bruising my right hip. Dido paws nervously in her box, but they ignore her, for now.

"Stand him up," the Meskeen instructs, sitting down in my chair. He looks at the other chair with an attentive green face - his skin is a smooth deep monotone green with no sign of scales. "Both chairs are warm," he notes, the universal translator stretches out the vowel sounds to a slightly comical length. "Where is your accomplice?"

"My..." I stammer. It's getting more difficult to concentrate. "You're talking about my... my dog. She likes to sit in the co-pilot's chair and stare at the starfield. She does it for hours, even when nothing changes. You're the weirdest little guy, aren't you girl?"

"You are lying. The accomplice is another human. I promise you we will *not* be gentle when we find him," the tadpole insists. I don't know if he's trying to intimidate me. He directs three of his Korlivilar thugs to scour the ship. "From this moment, there are no secrets in your life. Your mind is as naked to us as your body."

Telepaths. He has to be a telepath. But he's not that powerful, not like a good Vulcan doing a mind meld, or (worse) Romulan special services. It's likely he'll use his power in consort with the drugs as a lie detector. "I ain't got nothing to hide," I smile woozily. "I told your *al'traes* that I'm not violating your blockade. Just let me go and I won't bother you."

The toad gets within breathing distance of my face. I try to loosen the Korlivilar's grip, but the harder I struggle, the weaker I seem to get. Whatever drug they gave me gets stronger the more pumped up I get. I can feel my heartbeat, it's quicker and louder, so loud it begins to pound in my ears. The Meskeen moves its mouth in an undecipherable quiver, and I wait for something disgusting to happen, like a forked tongue tasting my face. I sense its serpentine gaze grow in intensity, and for a second I lose it, and its face morphs into something indescribably horrific. I close my eyes and fight the drugs, but the act of struggling seems to make it harder to resist.

"What are you..." I say, seeing through wide, terrified eyes.

"If you were a creature of peace, you would not need to fear me," the toadface croaks. "But you are not. You have failed the test, Roger Price."

"What test?"

"If you had cooperated with us without struggling, we might have made a deal. But you had turn this into a conflict. Not that I expected anything better from a freighter captain, the scum of the Federation. You could have chosen to explore the galaxy, you could have lived a peaceful, fulfilled life on one of the inner worlds, but instead you remain on the rim, chasing credits."

"Yeah..." I say, ignoring the fact he sounds just like my mother-in-law.

"It would be a mistake to trust you," the Meskeen concludes.

"You're making an even bigger mistake..." I say. "We freighter captains have no love for the Federation, but every time you do this garbage to us, you make us want to belong to the Federation, like... like it was the best brothel in the whole damn galaxy."

The Meskeen responds with a trilling noise that I'm sure is toad laughter. "The Klingons and the Romulans told us the same thing," the walking toad tells me. "Don't push us into an alliance with the Federation'. Well, we did, and they have not given us a reason to regret it yet."

"Congratulations..." I spit sarcastically.

"If we do not fear the joining of empires, why would we fear the wrath of a few captains who drive a fleet of inconsequential transports?" the Meskeen asks.

"Because we're the people who make empires run." I say. "Freighter captains, not kings. Not presidents, not Starfleet, and certainly not snot-nosed Lieutenants who'll steal your ship and obsess over your transporters..."

No. I'm losing it. Any second now, and I'll blurt out Said's name. Not that I'd *really* feel sorry if they grabbed Lieutenant Said, but these people are such scum-fleshed bastards, that the Lieutenant looks good by comparison...

"I need to know more, Roger Price," the Meskeen says.

Dammit! Focus Roger, focus! I will *not* cooperate!

"What about Starfleet?" the Meskeen asks. "Tell me something I would like to know..." He whispers to me seductively. "Tell me something that will force them to respect you."

No, I'm not crying. It's just the drugs, that's all. The drugs and the psionics, that's all. They're trying to make me think I'm sobbing like a little kid, but I'm not. It's all a trick. I shake my head, grit my teeth, heave my chest, struggle against their coarse lynx fur, ignore the lynx smell that's welling in my throat (which is not tears) and I howl. I do all the things men are supposed to do.

"What else?" the Meskeen asks. I'm not sure what he's talking about.

They aren't breaking me. It's the smell and the drugs, that's all. Dammit it's hard to breathe.

"You hate Starfleet," the Meskeen states. I nod, but I'm nodding because he's right. They haven't broken me, he's just right on that one point. "Mr. Price, what could you tell us that would hurt them the most?" he coaxes.

I feel dizzy, and there's a voice in my head that just won't stop. Argos? No, I'd need to push the button, and right now two lynxes have got me wrapped up like a Tanton mummy. *Do you have the balls to resist, Roger?* a voice asks me. Are you going to tell them Kenneth's Said's name, or tell them to go to hell?

"Go to hell," I finally manage to cough through the drugs, and suddenly I feel the sharpest pain I've ever felt in my entire life. One of the Korlivilar has taken a leg claw and slashed the tendon behind my right knee. My god. Oh my god!

They let me fall to the ground, screaming. I've felt a lot of pain in my life, but nothing that ever felt even remotely this bad.

"Do not blame us, Roger Price. Blame yourself for your petty stubbornness. Blame your people for their inexplicable opposition to peace. Blame your Starfleet for betraying their own alleged principles..." the Meskeen preaches.

"Oh God!" I scream in pain.

"And thank you for telling us the name of *Kenneth Said*," the Meskeen sounds especially pleased.

"Oh God!" I cry again, my back arcing in pain. "Oh my God!"

"Your ship is now property of the Interstellar Concordium." The Meskeen informs me. "Now, tell us where Mr. Said can be found."

"Go to Hell!" I shout again, fighting the pain. I yammer incomprehensibly, hoping it helps the pain to stop.

"A clever stratagem, transporting over to our ship," the toad replies. But I didn't tell him that, I told him to go to Hell. I know I did! I know what I said, and...

Oh god, it hurts so much.



The Meskeen turns to one of his pet security cats. The lynx-like lieutenant bows his head curtly to the commander and answers with an acknowledging snarl. "Inform our ship that Mr. Price has delivered us the head of Lieutenant Kenneth Said on... what do the humans call it?... a plate of silver..."

And that's when the truth sinks in, and God, it hurts so bad I can't describe it. I don't care much for Kenneth Said (and I fully intended to abandon him to the ISC if things went bad) but I didn't want to betray him like this.

## V: The Price We Pay

"You need to conduct a sensor sweep on the *Galactic Stormbreaker*," the Meskeen says, using *my* communicator to speak with his home base. "There's an intruder aboard..."

It's over. For forty-seven years I've lived a no-rules bare-knuckle match of a life on the galactic rim, fighting over things as trivial as a tough guy's glance: drinking, whoring, making deals with people who possess the morals of a Denebian slime devil, all to get my hands on pieces of things that most people don't even want anymore. But I don't care about most people, never did. They're sheep, and I can't think of anything more boring than living like a shepherd in the rich, fat, heart of the galaxy. Yes, it's been a golden life, and I've been the golden boy of rough and tumble, and now I'm going out in my prime. My only regrets are that I didn't...

"...spend more time with my kid," I mutter involuntarily. The intruders' heads turn, and the Meskeen stops talking. "And I'm not going to make my big score with the Romulans." No, I didn't say that out loud. I couldn't be dumb enough to give away the Argos, no matter how dumb I was. Am. Was.

The Meskeen commander turns his frog-head in a sharp, sudden motion, reacting like I'd unexpectedly yelled in its ear. "What do you have that the Romulans want?" he shouts back, ignoring the queries from his home ship.

"Nothing..." I lie. But I know as soon as he presses forward that he's not buying it.

"Tell me about the Romulans!" he snarls.

"Why? So you can repay me by wrecking my other knee?" I could almost laugh, if the pain weren't killing me.

The Meskeen concentrates, not like he's exerting control (most people are so scared of telepaths that they overestimate what they can actually do), more like he's listening to my thoughts really carefully. *Well, you walking toadstool, I hope all the agony I'm suffering is giving you a king-sized telepathic headache.*

After ten seconds of enduring telepathic insults, the Meskeen loses patience. There's another urgent broadcast from his mother ship - something new and unpleasant has happened in system, but I can't quite make out what they're saying. "Speak up!" I say involuntarily. The Meskeen turns and converses briefly with one of the Korlivilar, then turns his crocodile glare at me with an expression of pure hatred. *Well, go ahead and hate me, you superior, cold-blooded son of a bitch.*

"He has an animal companion in storage under the console," the Meskeen instructs in a slow, deliberate tone. "Bring her out."

Dido. He's going to kill Dido. This time I can hear his frog-voice clearly, and all of a sudden everything that's happened to me today, even my wrecked knee, doesn't mean very much anymore. It's stupid I know – most of the time, I can barely stand the animal. But the ones you love are always hard to tolerate. I can't let these bastards take her from me.

"Wait!" I say. I struggle to my feet (or to at least one leg, using the console as support. My god, I thought that getting the tendon cut hurt!) "What the hell are you doing? Aren't you supposed to be the *civilized* ones?" I snarl, wincing as I straighten myself, accusing him through sharp, stabbing breaths. What kind of civilized people would threaten a poor, defenseless animal?"

"What kind of civilized person feels the need to exploit less intelligent species to fill a shallow emotional vacuum?" the frog smugly responds.

My vision goes red, and you know what that means - or maybe you've been fortunate enough never to have seen me when I've gone berserk. I don't care if they kill me anymore. How dare that damn smug toad accuse me of abusing the poor girl? It's silly, I know, but it still feels good to use my one working leg as a rocket, to propel myself into that toad before he can get any telepathic warning, and to nail him. You have to love the power of instinct. My arms are tied and locked in a magnetic clamp I haven't a hope of breaking, but at least I can still get in a solid shot with my head. If only I could actually get my arms free, wrestle him to the ground, and choke the miserable life out of him.

*I'm going to die, but this is how I want to go.*

The Meskeen reels as our skulls collide, and falls to one knee. Somehow, I manage to keep my balance well enough to deliver another blow - a rabbit punch of a headbutt to the back of his skull. The crack reverberates around the bridge, and the Meskeen topples to his back. I topple on top of him - and for a moment, I imagine a delicious fantasy that the last sound I'll ever hear is that of my solid skull cracking that toad's thin cranium like a walnut.

Four Korlivilar raise their weapons, and one of the cats grabs me and tries to pry me off the Meskeen before I can connect a third time. One of them fires a phaser, and although you'd think they'd be able to get off a good shot at such close quarters, there are just too many bodies in here. A second one fires a shot and suddenly the Korlivilar who's pulling me loosens his grip and collapses to the ground. One down. But by this time, the desperate Meskeen has recovered enough to push me away from him. He gets to his feet and starts screaming unintelligibly.

The Korlivilar put down their phasers, throw aside their fallen comrade, and as much as I hate to admit it, the fight's over. My strength is spent. They begin tearing me apart with their claws, this time, shredding more than just clothing. Bad shoulder wound, bad chest wound, several gashes on the legs and back, and a real nasty one in the gut, a serious bleeder. Oddly enough, I'm feeling more disappointment than pain. *I didn't crack the bastard's skull. Damn. At least they couldn't get me to tell them about the Argos.*

The coughing Meskeen suddenly straightens, and croaks at them not to kill me. My blood's everywhere on the deck. Two Korlivilar pull me to my feet.

"How many in the fleet?" he asks over the communication channel. Now I can hear him clearly.

"Four Constitution classes, three Excelsiors, and one battleship," the Korlivilar answers. "The *al'traes* is ordering us to finish our business here."

"Tell him we'll be there shortly," the Meskeen snorts, "and if they haven't concluded the hunt for the criminal, we should have good sport." He takes one of the Korlivilar's phasers and points it straight at Dido, who's circling nervously in her box, but doesn't quite seem to comprehend her danger.

"Now, you were mentioning, an... Argos?" the Meskeen turns his attention back to me, and whatever hope I had of being rescued by the cavalry shatters.

I take a deep breath, stare at the dog and then at the Meskeen. I briefly flash back to the time four years ago when I won her, and how much trouble she's caused me. There's a lot to remember, but I cut the memories short. There's no sense in giving the telepathic bastard more ammunition, letting him wallow in his complete and utter bastardness. No, I'm not crying, not now. But who the hell could blame me if I did?

"Well?" the Meskeen asks me, keeping the phaser trained on the box. "Where is Argos?"

"Good-bye, Dido." I say, concentrating through yet another wave of pain. "Love you girl."

The Meskeen pulls the trigger. The bridge is briefly illuminated by red phaserlight, the Marshound glows as bright as a star for a fraction of a second, and then she's gone.

*You're dead.* But I don't even have it in me to shout anymore. My heart may as well have stopped beating.

The Meskeen gives me a long, hard look, like *he's* the wounded party, and makes a motion which I assume is their race's equivalent of shaking one's head. The tadpole methodically adjusts the *Candlejack's* navigation controls, and puts us on an intercept course with the *Celestial Stormbreaker*, occasionally glancing back to better monitor my thoughts. All that's left in me is a deep but tired hatred. God I can barely think to feel, or feel to think.

"He said that Argos is a system," the Meskeen finally says. "System? A ship's system. Sensors? Communications." I don't react, Even drugged and beaten, I know this game. "A computer, perhaps?"

I quash the panic a fraction of a second after he mentions *computer*, but it's too late. God, I hate telepaths. The Meskeen pulls a book-sized black slate off his workbelt - the ISC's answer to a tricorder - and hooks it into the *Candlejack's* computer systems. After twenty seconds of frantic fingerwork on a console that's not designed for webbed fingers, the Meskeen mutters something to himself (ignoring another urgent communication from his ship) and then there's a pinging sound. A familiar looking series of lines fill the ship's main viewscreen. Argos really should arrive with the sound of thunder, whatever djinn it is that the Romulans pried from the bottle.

**"Roger?"** Argos questions.

I don't even have time to answer. The viewscreen suddenly morphs from a pleasant-looking labyrinth of colors and shapes into an angry wash of thick line clusters, each an indiscernible shade of green. A fraction of a second later, I give the loudest scream of my life.

It isn't my knee that hurts now; I'm suddenly experiencing the granddaddy of all headaches, a cosmic migraine. Have you ever seen simulations of people's heads turning into spaghetti when they get sucked into a black hole? That's what this feels like. But it's worse - much, much worse -

for the intruders. Every Meskeen and Korlivilar on *Candlejack* suddenly slumps over dead, a *lot* of blood gushing from their ears, eyes, mouth, and nostrils. They didn't even have time to scream.

Argos's work done, the main screen fades from a unity of harsh green to a cacophony of pleasant shapes whose colors encompass the entire spectrum. On the computer console, Argos's readout light continues to blink at me, as if awaiting my approval, or at least a reaction.

"Argos?" I wonder. "Argos? What have you done?"

"They killed your dog," Argos tells me.

"You killed them" I gasp. This wasn't in his programming, at least not as far as I knew. He killed them, and it was easy. No wonder the Romulans want him back so badly! "What'd you do?" I whisper.

"I inflicted a cerebral hemorrhage on them." Argos informs me, then spends twenty seconds describing what he did in detailed medical jargon that even a universal translator can't handle. "They will not hurt you again. They will not hurt the *Lieutenant* again." Argos pauses, a deliberate silence that's even more disquieting because it comes from a machine. "They will not hurt anyone again."

Part of me thinks their deaths weren't nearly slow enough – no, not just part of me.

"Argos? Can you free me or... fix my leg?" I ask. Argos is silent for a long time. "Well?" I repeat the question.

"No Roger. I can reach into your mind and dampen the pain, but I'm a thinker, not a healer." Argos replies. "Would you like me to order your brain to produce more endorphins?"

"Please do." I say, fighting the urge to moan. "Endorphin me as much as you can."

"Silly goose," Argos is almost laughing. "*As much as I can*' would put you into a coma."

"At least I wouldn't hurt so much." I say, trying to find the bright side. And what's with this *silly goose* remark?

The console starts ringing - and it takes me nearly ten seconds to realize that I'm being hailed. It's Said, calling through the ISC's main communications grid.

"*Stormbreaker* to *Candlejack*," he says. "This is Lieutenant Kenneth Said to *alterssi* Rokkeshz." I assume that's the Meskeen's name. God, he sounds like such a twit when he gets so formal – which is practically all the time. I struggle to hit the response button with some reachable part of my body, but it's a real trick when your wrists are magnetically shackled behind your back and you've only got one working leg.

"Your ship is now under Federation control," the Lieutenant continues. "We demand your immediate and unconditional surrender. Harming civilian personnel is a breach of protocol and will be treated as a war crime." I'll bet it really warms his heart to be able to say that – if there's one thing that I have in common with 'Fleeters, it's my utter contempt for the ISC's legal claims. Said pauses, and waits impatiently for a response. "Roger, are you alright?" It's the first time he's addressed me by my first name. I manage to hit the right button with my nose.

"No, I'm not!" I shout. I'm still bleeding from several of my wounds, and the gut wound's really worrying me. "These self-sliming tadpoles decided to... well, I'm hurt pretty bad. I need medical attention, now." *And if I'm actually admitting that I need help, then I need help, dammit.*

"*Alterssi!*" I'm not conversant with ISC military ranks, but I assume Said's referring to the Meskeen leader as something equivalent to "Lieutenant Commander" or "Commander" (I'm surprised that the ISC even employ such a "primitive" concept as a hierarchy - isn't rule by

committee more like their style?). "If you provide Mr. Price with immediate medical attention, we will be lenient..."

"Lieutenant! Save the pragmatism for someone's who's still alive to appreciate it!" I call out, finally managing to hoist myself into the chair. Truth to tell, I don't know how I'm going to explain what happened to the ISC to the Starfleeter: maybe I can palm this off as yet another of space's great mysteries in action. I hear Starfleet encounters all sorts of weird crap.

"What do you mean 'still alive'?" Said stammers.

"They're dead," I say. "Don't ask me how it happened." *People believe confusion so easily. Always drape your lies in the appearance of incompetence, it's much more believable.*

"The same thing happened here too." Said replies. I wince and give a quick look to the blinking light that indicates the Argo system's still active. *Argos managed to kill them over there, five hundred kilometers from the Candlejack?* Said looks at me with a squinting face and shakes his head. "Great Bird of the Galaxy, you're a mess, I can even see it from here. There's a hospital ship running just behind the task force, I'll inform them they've got their first patient."

I don't even feel like arguing. *About hospitals, no less.* I'm not one to miss a chance to complain about Starfleet medical officers, their ghoulish looks or their morgue-like Sickbays. If that doesn't tell you how bad I'm feeling, I don't know what would.

The *Celestial Stormbreaker* is already within transporter range, so it takes Said only a few seconds to get back aboard the ship. I never imagined I'd ever be so happy to see him, especially naked. I'm slumped in the pilot's chair, white as a sheet. The lieutenant is carrying his pack, pries it open, and puts on some sort of smock and gloves. "Hold still. The less movement, the less you'll bleed," he says.

"Hello to you too," I say. "Aren't you forbidden to touch me?"

"The smock is a protective garment: it radiates a force field for about five minutes," he explains. "Good insulation."

"Good for you," I say, surprising even myself with my lack of gratitude.

"It's derived from one of those experimental life support belts Starfleet developed and threw out a few years ago," I don't know why Said feels the need to continually yammer technical details that I'll neither understand nor care about, but he does. "It'll keep me from making unwanted contact. Let's start with the clamps - try not to move too much when I unlock your wrists."

I'm not quite sure what he does, but ten seconds there's a click and my hands are free. "Thanks." I say, as I slowly pull my arms to my side.

I suppose I should be grateful that all 'Fleeters receive medical training. From Said's speed and certainty, I'd almost think the lieutenant was a nurse and not an engineer. "Sorry about the nakedness," I say as the lieutenant pulls out a medical tricorder from his medikit and runs over down my body.

"Nothing I haven't seen before," he says in his usual, irritating deadpan.

"Although you've never seen it on this big a scale," I boast. He gives me a dirty look, but it's mixed with a sly smile. I slap him on the shoulder - he almost jumps out of his skin. "Don't worry, you're protected."

"I've spent the last year avoiding accidental contact. Don't do that, please." Said says. He reaches again into his medikit and pulls out a small device that bears an uncanny resemblance to an upside down salt shaker - a dermal regenerator - and begins to treat my wounds.

"Are there going to be a lot of scars?" I ask.

"Maybe for two or three days. I'm more worried about internal bleeding," the lieutenant says, scanning me again with the medical tricorder. "I see they drugged you pretty good too. The tricorder's only guessing about most of this stuff."

"It made it a lot easier for them to mess around in my brain." I spit. "The frog was a telepath."

"That's no surprise." Said says. "The Meskeen like to lord their telepathy over everyone, even over other species in the ISC. It makes them feel like they're the kings of the galaxy."

"Royalty. Don't you hate those stuck up bastards?" I smile.

Said doesn't quite know how to treat the remark - I'm not supposed to know his family background - so he ignores me and treats that gut wound for a second time. "The Korlivilar claws are dirty. I'm glad we're going to a hospital ship. There's a risk of infection."

"The cuts didn't feel as bad as what they did to the knee." I reply.

"A severed tendon won't kill you, but infection can." the Lieutenant notes. He pulls a hypo out of the medikit and injects me. I feel my body start to get colder. "I can regenerate some of your blood cells," the Lieutenant states, closing the wounds and hitting me with another drug that's designed to accelerate the production of blood cells and bone marrow. "Your knee and your sense of humor, on the other hand, are damaged beyond my ability to heal."

"Bastard." I laugh.

For some reason, the smile on my face when he least expects it surprises him in a good way. He actually puts aside his necessary phobias long enough to place a friendly hand on my shoulder. The force field gives it a tingly feel. "I shouldn't have left you, Mr. Price." he scowls. "I had no idea they'd do this to you."

I grab his arm. "Hey, it was an excellent plan - until about five seconds after they arrived. But I got off easy compared to Dido..."

"Oh?" Said says, involuntarily glancing back at the entry corridor. "How so?"

"Well, remember the mutt you didn't care for? They phasered it. Total matter-to-energy conversation." The memory hits me again, and my good spirits evaporate. "It was only a dog - a dog! - and they shot her like a..."

Said shakes his head and withdraws his hand. "Mr. Price, I don't know what you saw, but... well, I think they were deceiving you."

"How?" I ask.

Said shrugs, and resists the urge to hold my shoulders. "Dido was here when I came in. She looked like all matter to me - energy doesn't have quite the same stench."

"No... that's not possible." I stammer. Painfully, I motion over to her box, which still has a phaser scorchmark on one end. Said grabs me to keep me from toppling.

"I see what they did to the box. But I swear to you, she isn't dead. The beast is stretched out in the middle of the corridor, just beyond that door, looking like she owns the place. Go ahead and call her." Said suggests.

"Dido!" I shout, discovering that even yelling hurts. "Dido, are you..." I stop in mid-sentence. This is just plain crazy.

And then Dido comes trotting into the room, the same walk as she's had in the last six months since her hip replacement, her tail cowed, but not draped like a flag at half-mast between her legs. It's Dido all right.

I suddenly look at the blinking light that Argos is hiding under. Is this something else you did for the *silly goose*, Argos?

"They drugged you and hypnotized you," Said shrugs. "You've been through Hell. We've gotten you out, and now it's time to scrub off the stains."

"How poetic," I mutter.

"It's the best way to look at the universe," Said tells me. "Poetry and mathematics, those are the two things that make up the universe: poetry and motion; soul and station."

I sigh and say a private prayer. Oh God, please rescue me from Starfleet officers who get pretentious, even the ones who save me from a certain death!

How can the rest of the day compare with an ISC invasion for excitement? It doesn't, of course, thank God. *Candlejack* and the *Celestial Nosepicker* rendezvous with *USS Courage*, one of the new McCoy class hospital ships. Apparently one of the new doctors aboard ship, a Dr. James Latham, is an old friend of Said's from the *Ark Royal*, and Said arranges for him to handle my knee surgery. I grill him a bit about the Lieutenant, and I learn that his flights of poetic fancy isn't just a bad habit, it's a pastime. Bloody hell - I'm trapped for a month on a starship with a poet. I also discover that Said didn't have any close friends aboard *Ark Royal*, with the notable exception of the Captain.

"It's not like anyone hated Kenneth, quite the contrary." Latham is a tall, slightly stout middle aged Caucasian with just a trace of an oh-so-superior British accent. He's a little too full of himself to be a threat, and enough in love with the sound of his own voice to be useful to me. "He lived in his work, and *everyone* in engineering turned to him whenever something needed troubleshooting. He's a genuine genius. A remarkable man on a crew which had its fair share of remarkable people."

"Who was your Captain? Kirk?" I smile.

"No. Though like Kenneth, our former Captain was both respected and tried to keep to himself. He was a Gwaiian ..."

"Wait a minute..." I reply. "A Gwaiian?" *Gwaiian?* Latham nods. "They actually let one of those monsters into Starfleet?"

"Starfleet is sometimes too permissive for its own good." Latham says.

Gwaiian? Gwaiians come from a nightmare planet where they don't need to practice genetic engineering, because the planet does it for them. And they can snap faster than a flux pulsar, and when they do, people die. Most Gwaiians who travel off world end up locked in prison – after they've snapped and killed a room full of people. Who'd be insane enough to want to get anyplace near one of those creatures?

"I'm sure you've heard stories." Latham's clearly trying to read me. "Though personality wise, Greg was as Starfleet as they got."

"And physically?" I ask.

Latham hesitates for a moment. "Genetically gifted, even by Gwaiian standards. Three years ago, I was a party on Babel and got to see just how gifted he could be. The Mirak ambassador's bodyguard – four meters tall and half a ton of muscle and claw - got terribly drunk and even more terribly insulted. He grabbed the Tellerite who was insulting him..."

"That figures." Not even the Tellerites like the Tellerites.

"...and attacked him. The Mirak would have disembowled the unfortunate Tellerite if Greg hadn't have intervened - and beat the Mirak to a bloody pulp."

"That's unbelievable," I gasp.



"Greg was always a little... odd. He kept to himself, and the closer you got to him, the harder he tested you."

"Don't they have some weird sexual taboo?" I wonder. Latham nods again.

"Everyone on *Ark Royal* thought he was a bit crazy, but we all respected him. He was a great tactician, to the point where he frequently achieved the impossible. And he was absolutely loyal to every member of his crew – he'd taken a phaser hit for Ensigns on more than one occasion. We trusted him with our lives."

"And the Lieutenant? What was his story? Did he ever get close to your Captain?"

I know the answer to the question, of course, but asking it won't hurt.

"I've heard that he only ever let two people get close to him. Zirkan, a Rigilian security officer who died at his side in the General War, and Kenneth. Even with them, he liked to keep his distance, but whenever he and Kenneth were forced together, you could see them bond instantly. They were like brothers."

"My brother - the Gwaiian superhuman psychopath? It sure as hell wouldn't be my choice for a playmate."

"Sometimes, Mr. Price," Latham tells me with enough smug superiority to fill a high school teacher's lounge. "The labels do not do justice. How is your leg?"

"Great," I say, grimacing as I flex my new leg, which is as sore as the devil, but I'll probably only have a minor limp by the time we reach Rakshasa. The Feds won the battle (they're beginning to move in larger, tighter battle groups to counter the strength of the standard ISC echelon); in fact the ISC left the system without even firing a plasma. The war's finally starting to go against them, at least on this front. Somehow that doesn't comfort me. The Meskeen showed me how the ISC acts when their backs are against the wall, and it's as ugly as anything I'd seen from the Lyrans or the Klingons. I hope the war ends before I encounter them again.

Said has concluded another four hour interrogation session with the fine folk of Starfleet Intelligence, the galactic creep brigade, and seems to have weathered the storm with his inflappable poet dignity intact. I guess they've finished their autopsy on the bodies they found on the *Candlejack* and the *Celestial Stormtrooper*, but they seem to be a lot more interested in Said's explanation than mine - they only spoke to me for twenty minutes. How odd. I spent more time talking with Latham.

Said spends a lot of his spare time with Dr. Latham and a young Vulcan woman who's about to transfer onto one of the heavy cruisers (she doesn't even talk to me). She's quite the pretty thing – long hair that's a lighter brown than I'm used to on a Vulcan, green lipstick and eyebrow liner, and a body with curves like a sleek starship hull. She and the Lieutenant almost look like a pair, though their conversations seem casual.

Something Latham whispers to the Lieutenant sticks in my mind, a conversation they were having in a corner of Sickbay corner that I wasn't supposed to overhear, just before I'm scheduled for release.

"You need to be very careful, Kenneth," Latham tells him furtively. "She's *killing* people now."

"But why would she protect Roger Price? She doesn't even know the man!" the Lieutenant says.

"You know her a lot better than I do." Latham sniffs. "Have you had any visits lately?"

"Yeah, last night," Said says. "But something was wrong. Something was *different*."

"The distances are getting larger. You're a long way from her now. It must be more of a strain on her. Perhaps you should try to get her to stop," Latham suggests. But who the hell is *she*? The Vulcan?

"James, I don't remember much about her visits, but I do know that the stars would shine less bright without her," Said replies. "*Space would be cold and dead, and the universe would be a calculation and not a song.*"

Latham sighs audibly. "If you keep getting *that* romantic, next thing we know you'll be bursting into song. Why don't you take Mr. Price and get him out of Sickbay." He's raising his voice, which means the conversation must be getting much less interesting. "He's cleared to leave, and so are you."

"James..."

"Poet, begone!" Latham shouts at his friend in mock anger. Said leaves in a sulk that's also a pretense. I almost laugh. It's interesting to see how people act when their shields are down. "Unless you want me to get leave and come with you..."

"It's not your mission, doctor." Said tells him.

"I'm sure I can make arrangements, go on leave." Latham says.

"This is my mission, Doctor." Said replies firmly. "When I've got hold of Francis, I'll contact you."

"What about this captain of yours, this Rigilian-sized merchant?" I grin at the description. "I've seen his record. He's as far as you can get from trustworthy."

"He was the best I could find on short notice," Said's description is not particularly flattering, but that's fine. "He's volatile, and we get on each other's nerves, but..." He takes a deep breath. "I think we'll do fine."

A few minutes later, Said staggers over to me under the weight of several oversized blue Starfleet duffel bags. Despite the problems he's having with his gear, he looks a little more confident and human than the walking stick I met in the rainstorm at the transporter station back on Agassiz. "Captain Price," he says, reverting back to formality after we'd done perfectly well without it.

"Lieutenant, the knee is ready," I smile.

"And so am I," Said smiles as he wrestles with his bag. "The *Candlejack* is fueled and waiting, so let's get you back home."

## VI: My Starfleet Pain

“Lieutenant!” I shout, banging on the bulkhead hard enough that the noise echoes throughout the ship. It’s the day after we left the Federation fleet, and any feeling of camaraderie that me and the Lieutenant might have had yesterday has been replaced by anger. “Lieutenant! Come down here so I can *kill* you!”

Dido is at my side, looking mournful, her head drooping in a pose of sheer misery, as I contemplate the many ways I’d like to kill Lieutenant Kenneth Said. I could put him into a faulty engineering suit and tether him out an airlock, go to warp and watch the warp field spread his atoms across a solar system, a spray of obnoxious Starfleet particles that’d surf the solar wind. Or maybe I could get him in a *bondo* ring with Mikos Samarand and inform Mikos just before the fight that he’d been sleeping with his wife. Come to think of it, the final result wouldn’t be that much different than a warp spray.

“Lieutenant!” I shout again, wondering whether Said has the courage to come out of the access tube and face me. “I didn’t peg you for a coward!”

Lieutenant Said peers out the tube and looks at me with a quizzical expression. Yes, lieutenant, you’re seeing Roger Price at battlestations: hands tightly fastened on his hips, teeth grinding like he’s chewing a diamond, a mass of angry muscle that’s leaning slightly forward, ready to pounce, telepathic field or not. “What’s the problem, Mr. Price?” he asks me in a tone that’s both slightly annoyed by the interruption and not nearly respectful or apprehensive as it should be, given his imminent danger.

“What’d you do to my dog?” I snap, motioning at Dido, who’s down on all fours on the deck and shivering slightly.

“I washed her.” Said tells me.

“And you received *whose* permission to abuse my animal?” I ask.

“I got them from my nostrils. They gave me very explicit permission,” Said states. “I put on my protective smock, took her into the shower, washed her, then disinfected her again in the transporter. Your dog probably hasn’t smelled this good in months.”

“Just look at the poor thing!” I snap as I drop to one knee and stroke her side. She almost whimpers; Dido reacts to cleanliness the way most dogs react to being skunked. “Isn’t it bad enough that she’s already been psychically blasted and phasered...”

“Well, I’ll take her to an animal telepath one of these days and apologize for the trauma in person,” Said replies coldly. “But my nostrils are much happier now.”

“Okay, let’s forget the dog.” I say, pushing Dido out into the middle of the corridor (for no reason in particular, just an impulse). “Could you explain to me why our transporter is operating non-stop?” I ask loudly.

“The cargo bays are empty, and they’re filthy. One of them even had a colony of Denebian rats nesting in the access chamber – though I’ve no idea how they fed themselves,” the lieutenant explains. “I took some replicated water vapor, put it through the transporter’s disinfectant cycle, then transported it into sections of the cargo bay to disinfect them without actually entering them. It’s a very simple procedure.”

“Lieutenant, you know how much energy a transporter uses!” I object. He nods.

“In this case, not very much,” Said says calmly in response to my growing anger. How cool and superior, what a paragon of Starfleet! “I’m not transporting much mass, and the molecular complexity of the disinfectant is very simple, mostly low concentrations of ammonia. That takes care of the energy issue...”

“And speaking of replicators, how the hell did one of Satan’s engines get aboard *my* ship?”

Said looks at me like I’d accused his mother of being a whore. “I brought a portable replicator with me from *USS Courage* to make some parts; I figured I could pass the time by giving your ship an inspection and doing some minor repairs. And *you* had expressed concern over my laundry, and a replicator solves that problem.”

“Unfortunately, your *solution* is now a billion clicks that way, drifting in space,” I say, pointing at the bow of the ship with a big dumb smile on my pretty Irish face.

“And how did it get there?” Said asks, a little hostility creeping into his voice.

“Sometimes, the most useful system aboard a ship is its airlock,” I inform the Lieutenant. The look on his face is a pearl beyond price. For the first time since we’ve met, I finally get to see what Lieutenant Kenneth Said looks like when he’s really, really upset. It’s a gloriously funny revelation. He leans forward in a slight crouch, a mass of tension and scrunched shoulders that resembles a threatened ocelot without the spots (I had one as a pet when I was a teenager), his mouth hangs open ever so slightly, and his finger is pointed at me in a lecturing pose, like a parent caught in a stasis beam.

“What –” he raises his voice at me like a weapon. I fight an urge to widen my smirk.

“Whatever possessed you to do that?”

“Maybe it’s the same thing that’s possessed me not to have one in the first place.” I sneer.

“Maybe you should have *noticed* that I don’t have one. And maybe you should have asked me if I *wanted* one. That way, I would have informed you that anyone who dares to bring one of those *things* aboard *my* ship may as well set the transporter controls to *Hell* and beam down themselves down there with it!”

Said is caught between anger and amazement - unfortunately amazement wins. “Just what is your problem with replicators, Mr. Price?”

“They’re *too* useful. Lieutenant,” I insist. “They don’t belong on a frontier. They make things too easy, turn everything into a hobby, into...”

“A dilettane pursuit?” Said suggests.

“Damn straight – though spoken like a Starfleet Academy snob who’s been to one too many culture lectures,” I spit. “*Dilettane*, my dimpled Irish buttocks. Lazy bastards, you mean. Dilettantes turn everything into trivia, and the virtues of the frontier – survival, growth, profit – you can’t afford to make them trivial. When you do, they’re worth nothing. And nothing teaches like the need to survive, except maybe the need to make a profit.”

“Wrong,” Said counters. “There are *many* great teachers, Roger. Pride, reputation, self-satisfaction, fulfillment,... And there are also many kinds of profit. To work to one’s fullest potential, you need tools, and that’s all a replicator is – a big toolchest.”

I could almost laugh. “Fine. Go ahead and make it easy. Turn the galaxy into one great big machine that does nothing except replicate easily manufactured crap. In the meantime, I’ll be in my quarters doing things the hard way – and you won’t be.”

“Roger –”

“You might be a genius at engineering, Lieutenant – but you don’t know squat about people. Take quality, for example. Everyone likes quality, right?” He nods. “But why do people make quality goods?”

“Pride.” Said gives me the wrong answer.

“Pride doesn’t feed an empty belly.” I snap. “Pride means nothing when nobody notices the work because they’ve already got what you have to offer. People build quality goods because they care about *rewards*. *Profits*. These – waste product recyclers that you call replicators and want to spread around the galaxy like mechanical vermin – what the hell sort of reward can you have making things when it’s so damn easy? Where’s the meaning in it?”

“The meaning’s up to you, Roger.” Said says, and he points to his chest. “What’s meaningful and not meaningful is a personal issue. The replicator’s just a tool that helps you find it.”

“That’s tribble spittle,” I snort. “It’s a tool that makes it way too easy for amateurs to produce a piece of crud, pat themselves on the back and delude themselves into thinking they’ve done something professional.” I snap back. “As someone who actually spent years of effort learning a serious craft, I would think you’d understand the value of setting high standards and learning a craft well enough to respect it.”

“Roger, I think we’re talking about two different things,” Said argues. “You want to set standards. Fine. But standards mean nothing if a person doesn’t have the ability to find out where their talents and interests lie and develop them.”

“Again – when you make anything too easy - all you do is encourage everyone in the galaxy to become a dilettante.” I say. Despite the intensity, I’m actually enjoying the conversation for a change. “You give people sufficient tools to waste their lives flitting from one hobby to another, none of which they take seriously, because when things get too hard, there’s always an easily replicated distraction available.”

“Roger, Roger, Roger,” Said sighs condescendingly. “No one goes anywhere in a field unless someone opens the gates for them first. It’s better to put up with a hundred dilettantes if we make it possible for that one prodigy to find the path to self-fulfilment...”

“I don’t give a damn about someone’s personal fulfillment!” I scoff. “If I’m being subjected to a lousy piece of music, or if I have to risk my life riding in a ship that’s shoddily constructed, why should I give a damn if the person who’s responsible is feeling some sort of an inner glow?”

The Lieutenant shakes his head. “Maybe you’ve got a point. Maybe we’re helping a lot of people waste their time. But do you think your way is better? Having people waste their lives trying to tough it out and not getting a fair chance to learn if they’ve got an aptitude for a field where they might make a positive contribution?”

This conversation’s getting even more heated than usual. It’s starting to feel like a fistfight. Man, this is *fun*.

“You don’t waste your life toughening yourself!” I snap back. “Toughening yourself *is* life. That’s the challenge that makes us men.”

“Sorry, but you’re wrong.” Said argues - and I have to resist the sudden urge to pop him in the mouth. “Anyone with a tough skin and half a brain can survive. The real challenge – the greatest challenge - is found within...”

“Good God!” I object. “That ‘challenge within’ line is nothing but a goddamn sham!” If a person could set his ‘mockery’ to overload, I’d have done it. “We’re going to fight the Klingons and the ISC, but don’t worry, we may get blown to pieces, but at least we’re doing well because we’re facing ‘the challenge within’.”

“Now you’re just being obnoxious, Roger.” At least Said’s blunt with his opinions – angry as I am at him, I can still respect him in spite of the uniform he’s wearing. “Once a person’s mastered himself, the outside world becomes a lot easier to handle.”

I roll my eyes. “It’s the other way around, redshirt. First, you need to master the universe, then you can go meditate and face your inner demons. Your way just coddles them.”

“Not all. I know a lot of people who think the way that you do, that when *we* encourage people to view life as mostly an internal struggle, we’re denying them some fundamental reality of the universe.”

“I don’t appreciate you putting words in my mouth, but it seems to me like you know a lot of people who are helluva lot smarter than you are.”

He ignores me. Man, I hate that. “... and that we’re trying to shield them from the outside world. They’re wrong. There is no protection, there’s only preparation. We ask people to look inside themselves and transcend their limitations. That’s a harder thing to ask someone than to compete. You want challenge, Roger, there it is.”

“But – in your system - how many people go through their lives avoiding anything that might challenge them because you made it too easy for them?” Finally he’s looking at me thoughtfully – even if he doesn’t agree, I’m making him squirm a little. “Because replicators make it easy. I hate those goddamn things. They’re pimps. Pimps for the whores of laziness, idleness, escapism...”

“I use replicators, and I’m *none* of those things,” Said replies.

“Whoopee-woo for you. Congratulations. I’m still not letting them aboard my ship,” I say, changing the subject. “And just who the hell do you think *you* are, messing with *my* vessel without my permission?”

“You yourself admitted that Dido could stand... some hygiene improvements,” the Lieutenant counters. “And you also stressed the importance of a clean and tidy ship. You’ve got several systems that are damaged to the edge of collapse, the external sensors are operating at less than 40% efficiency, and the atmosphere recycler is effectively producing toxins. If you haven’t noticed, the air on this ship is *rank*.”

“Yeah,” I concur without backing down. “Unlike other starships, where the refiltering makes everything taste bland, this air on this ship tastes *real*.”

“Don’t confuse *foul* with *real*, Roger,” the Lieutenant says.

“I’d rather breathe bad air than cookie-cutter air,” I protest. I wonder how long it’s going to take me to get so upset with him that I’ll throw him out the airlock too?

“And you’d rather see the ship fall apart rather than have an onboard replicator to produce parts in case you get hurt in a fight?”

“Haven’t I made myself clear?” I spit.

“Fine!” Said affirms, probably kicking himself for asking such a dumb question. “You want to live in the year 2240, I understand. But this philosophical debate is just a side issue. My problem is that when I see things that need repairing, I can’t ignore them.”

“Tough,” I say.

“And you feel that you need to be in control of everything around you.”

“When everything around me is *my* ship, you’re damn right I do!” I insist.

“It’s not just your ship now, not according to the judge back on Agassiz!” the lieutenant states. “But that’s not relevant either. Neither of us is going to back down, especially when you won’t give me an nanogram of respect until I prove myself, and the only way to do that is to fight you.”

“You wanna fight?” I snort. “Yeah, that’d be fair. One touch and my brain goes to putty,” I snort.

“Well, we’ve got one alternative,” Said tells me. “Are you game?”

“Absolutely. Just as long as it’s not chess,” I snap back.

“It’s pretty nasty,” the Lieutenant says. “You might even like it.”

Said slept in my quarters last night on a makeshift cot (I hadn’t been given enough notice to convert one of the cargo holds into guest quarters). I woke up around midnight and watched him in his sleep; he’s a quiet sleeper who’s eerily tranquil – as still as a corpse. He wasn’t much for conversation last evening, but given how sore I felt after my "conversation" with the Meskeen, I wasn’t in much of a mood for chit-chat either.

My quarters are larger than you might expect – before I bought the ship, someone knocked down one of the forward holds and combined them with the living quarters, and I’ve been too lazy to change them back. I haven’t paid much attention to décor; the floor is neatly covered with a low-pile red carpeting, and the only extraneous decoration are reproductions of early 20th Century Earth boxing art on my walls, and a large green-tinted Andorian mirror that was given to me as a gift (probably as a comment on my ego) by a fellow *bondoka*. My bed is an antique king-sized four-poster with a Dido-scratched maple frame and a mattress that’s too hard for everyone except me and the most taciturn Klingon. In the corner closest to the bed, there’s a pile of exercise equipment, including a robot *bondo* sparring partner whose face is locked into a perpetual grimace (a good way for me to practice my footwork). In another corner there’s a computer terminal standing on a small steel-frame desk that’s hooked into the main system - I primarily use it to play holodramas and music. Finally, next to the dresser and the Andorian mirror, there’s my trophy case. Not only does it hold two dozen *bondo* trophies and a bushel of prized holographs, it’s also where I display my collection of rare goods that dad and I gathered from around the quadrant.

I suppose I should have hidden the trophy case while I had a ‘Fleeter on board. It has more than its share of contraband, and the Romulan ale is the least illegal of the lot. Any hope I had that Said would fail to notice it vanishes as soon as we enter the quarters. Said heads staight for the trophy case and grabs my *oy’naQ* - a Klingon Pain Stick.

“A pain replicator,” he smiles, holding the weapon aloft like a medieval knight with a magic sword.

“Oh, how cute.” I reply, sitting on my bed, giving my bad knee an involuntary check. Dido enters the chamber and hops on the bed beside me. Odd, she usually isn’t this clinging. “A Klingon pain competition doesn’t seem very Starfleet, does it?”

“On the contrary, it was a staple at the Academy. Just prior to the General War, there was a Klingon student exchange...”

“That really helped the cause of peace...” I interject sarcastically.

“...and during their time there, they flooded the Academy with these... Pain competitions became commonplace in many of the cliques and private clubs.” Said takes in a deep breath, and examines the weapon settings. “Here’s how we’ll do it. We try to hold it steady. The last person who lets go is the loser. If I win, I get to finish what I started with the ship’s holds, sensors and atmosphere filter.

“And if I win?” I ask. “I get to smash in your face?”

“If you want. And I’ll spend the rest of the cruise conducting poetry in these quarters while I choke on your preferred atmosphere.”

“Just as long as you can keep your damn poetry to yourself...” I mutter, shaking my head. I roll up my sleeves for effect, and he takes that as a sign I’m agreeing to the contest. He adjusts the weapon so it’ll broadcast a low-level pain field over the entire stick (rather than intense pain from being struck by the end, its usual function). I think the Klingons call this ‘children’s mode’. I shake my arms and roll my head so I can hear the wonderful sound of my ligaments cracking. The Lieutenant sits down next to me and lays the stick down on our laps. “If you think that uniform makes you tougher than an old Bondo hound...” I smirk

“*yItagh!*” he says, telling me to grab the stick.

“Sorry, I don’t speak that language.” I say. “Every time I try it hurts my throat,” Said smiles slightly, his understated way of laughing at a joke when he doesn’t want to show emotion. I swear that ‘Fleeters spend far too much of their time around Vulcans.

I pick up one end of the stick. Without a visible display of emotion, he grabs the other end. We hold it laterally, each employing one overhand and one underhand grip. When all four of our hands get a firm hold, the device automatically shoots pain into our bodies, like needles suddenly stabbing the ends of each of my fingers. I mutter an obscenity.

“*QI’yaH!*” Said adds his own obscenity in Klingon. The only indication that he’s experiencing any pain is a hardening of his facial features and a slight closing of the eyes.

Thirty silent agonizing seconds pass – and neither of us are giving up. The pain shifts from a sharp pain to a burning, and everything from the tip of my fingers to my elbows feels absolutely raw. Judging from a quick glance, Said feels the same way. Okay, it’s time to do something a little sneaky. Let’s see if I can break your concentration, Lieutenant...

“This is ironic,” I grunt, starting a conversation.

“What is?” he asks.

“Using Klingon weapons... to settle... a dispute on Federation philosophy.” I smile, though shifting any muscles increases the pain.

“Irony’s... commonplace...” Said remarks. “The universe is... full of it.”

“And stupidity too.” I blurt, my phrases shortened by taut, sharp breaths. “Like...a pair of guys... torturing each other...”



But there's no answer. Said's content to let me have the last word; he'd rather concentrate on the stick. And that's a smart idea too - it hurts too much for either of us to say much of anything. I've gone well past the burning sensation in my hands to an uncomfortable numbness, and my shoulders are beginning to cramp. Even so, I'm not letting go. You know, *Death before dishonor*.

Right now, I'd swear the Klingons are even bigger idiots than the Federation.

Three minutes into the contest, Dido pokes my leg with her nose, gets a strong jolt, and runs under a table. I could almost laugh, but I'm too busy trying not to move my jaw. *I can't believe the son of a bitch is lasting this long. He has to be cheating.*

After about four minutes, our bodies are completely rigid and it's hard to think. Tears begin to well in my eyes, but I ain't planning on crying any time soon. Said sits on the bed with a stoic expression on his face that would make a Vulcan monk envious. The whole experience is not only painful, I'm beginning to feel damn stupid. I wonder if he's feeling the same way?

At the five-minute mark, Said's fingers begin to tremble, and his underhand grip falters. He winces, desperately trying to stay focused, and manages to keep other hand grip on the stick. But he's going to be doing this one-handed for the rest of the contest.

After six minutes, tears are running down both our cheeks, despite our best efforts to avoid showing them, and neither one of us dares to look down at our hands. We're light-headed as well as in total agony, and our faces are locked in a tortured pose. Staring into his face, that mirror of pain, is an interesting experience.

"This is stupid." I finally declare, and it's like trying to talk while chewing a mouthful of pebbles. The lieutenant doesn't even dare to move his head. Disgusted, I let go of the *oy'naQ*. Said almost looks puzzled to see it remaining in his hand.

"*Qapchu*," Said completes the ritual by formally declaring victory through gritted teeth. Although he doesn't sound very Klingon right now, given that he's not bellowing it at the top of his lungs.

"No, *stu'Pid*," I repeat with a faux-Klingon accent, trying to shake the circulation back into my hands. Said drops the stick, which falls to the floor without a clatter. I hadn't really noticed how heavy it was when I was holding it, but even at my age I'm a muscle factory. All of which are cramped and aching right now.

"Six minutes, forty-six seconds," the lieutenant notes – the *oy'naQ* has a chronometer to inform young Klingons of their level of machismo. "Most Klingon warriors only last around nine, and their neural system is better built to handle this." He draws a deep hard breath. He's as glad that this is over as I am.

"I need a drink. You care for Romulan ale?" I ask.

"No," Said says, trying to focus past the vestigial pain. "I don't actually drink alcohol. Old religious custom."

"You don't seem like the religious type," I say, pouring myself a glass, then I think about it a little, and reconsider the observation. But Said answers before he can correct me.

"I'm not, unless you call family heritage a religion. I was raised by my double-great-father..." (a term for his great great grandfather, who must've been the family patriarch) "...along with about forty cousins related by varying degrees. We were anachronisms, and proud of it."

"That sounds more like a clan than a family."

"Aye," Said replies in the galaxy's first Arab-Scots accent. "We were practically breast fed on tradition, including many of the old Islamic taboos."

“So you grew up rich, dry, and a virgin?” I smirk.

“We wouldn’t even have been allowed to keep your dog,” the Lieutenant remarks – another obsolete Islamic prohibition. I laugh. “Mostly I grew up looking for elbow room. Rich? I guess I had whatever I wanted. I never really noticed. I spent my childhood years wandering around Riyadh looking for old ground and air vehicles to restore. That’s all that ever interested me.”

“You were one strange kid.” I proclaim.

“Well, I’ll bet you’ve got some stories too, Roger – and I don’t mean that as an insult. I *respect* strange. As far as dry goes, absolutely. My great-mother wasn’t kind to anyone who broke that rule in the estate. My family may not be as religious as we once were, but there are some traditions that would survive even the death of God.”

“And what about the virgin part?” I chide.

“I’m not a virgin.” Said tells me. “There was this... thing... my cousins arranged for me on my fourteenth birthday.”

“I wish I had a family like that!” I grin, but he’s not laughing.

“It was a disaster, but I did lose my virginity,” Said states. “What about you?”

“I have you beat by a year.” I boast. “I was thirteen. Dad was a freighter captain, and one of his best friends was another freighter captain who had the prettiest fifteen-year-old daughter in the sector. Dad knew I was smitten with her, so he arranged for me to get locked in a cargo hold with her overnight. That’s when nature ran its course.”

“I guess there’s an earthy sort of romance to it.” Said says. I decide not to puncture his delusions – Said isn’t the only one whose first experience can be summed up by the word ‘disaster’. “You have two kids?”

I nod. “Not counting bastards.”

“How many marriages?”

“Just one.” I say. He looks a little puzzled by the revelation. “Artoria was another freighter captain’s daughter, and for awhile we were a great match. But after awhile she wanted the easy life – the inner sphere life - and I couldn’t live that way.”

“So she started burning incense to the replicator gods?” the lieutenant puts it as obnoxiously as possible.

“Exactly!” I agree. I’m about to talk about our current relationship when suddenly our conversation makes an emergency stop so we can stare at Dido, who’s leapt onto Said’s lap to sniff his crotch. *Without having an epileptic seizure.*

“That’s impossible...” Said gasps.

“Down girl!” I shout, and I grab Dido’s sides and pull her off the lieutenant without touching him. Dido paws the carpet in protest. I throw the dog out the door with a whimper and give Said a hard long look.

“Don’t touch me,” the Lieutenant warns. “I still sense the psionic field. I have no idea what happened - or didn’t happen - to your dog.”

“Right...” I scowl. That’s it. I’ve had my fill of Kenneth Said, at least for this morning. “Have I mentioned just how much I’m enjoying having you on my ship, Lieutenant?” I spit at him. The ‘Fleeter knows I’m being sarcastic, but even he feels the need to acknowledge the remark with a nod. I walk out of the quarters. Let him do his "adjustments". It’ll keep him out of my way.

We’re two days out of Agassiz, and in spite of the delay from the ISC blockade, we’re only two days away at Warp 5.5 from Rakshasa. Rakshasa is called "planet of ten thousand tastes", a

name bestowed on the world because it's one of the richest sources of spices in the entire quadrant. It's also close to the Romulan Neutral Zone, and it's a prime contact point for traders who are dumb enough to do business with the Rihannsu, like me. But it's not Romulans that concern me right now.

I walk over to the ship's main computer. The console's close to dead at the moment; Said will be working on the sensor systems for the next hour, and he's been diverting power from major ship systems. At least I'll have privacy. "Argos, low power," I instruct, not wanting to alert my guest.

"Very well," Argos sighs. "Low power always makes me feel groggy."

*Me too*, I almost say. "Argos, do you have any idea why my dog isn't affected by Lieutenant Said's psionic field?"

"Yes," Argos says, "I added that property to her when I reconstructed her."

"When did you reconstruct my dog?" I ask.

"After she was disintegrated by the Meskeen," Argos explains. "I had transporter records for her on file, and I psionically recorded her mental patterns. Once you have both those things and a working transporter, it's not that hard to reproduce an animal."

"You do realize that deliberately creating transporter clones is one of the biggest violations of personal rights in every galactic culture..." I object. "Even the Romulans don't break that law."

"She's an animal, not a person," Dido says. "In every way that counts, she *is* your Dido."

"And why did you feel it necessary to make the change?" I ask, wondering whether I should throw 'Dido II' out an airlock or accept this *canus replicanus* as my girl.

"Oh..." Argos says, seemingly befuddled by my question. "It's a secret," he says, reverting to childish mode. "A big secret. By the way, if you can stay very quiet and not disturb the Lieutenant when he goes to sleep tonight, something beautiful will happen."

"What?" It's bad enough to be annoyed by the lieutenant and suffer six minutes of agony so he can prove himself to me - having to play Argos's games too is really making me damn angry.

Argos titters childishly. "That's a secret too," he whispers. "Just watch, Roger."

I fight the temptation to put us up to Warp 6 and see if I can cut a day off the trip. I know it'd be dangerous, but between Mr. Starfleet and Argos, Rakshasa can't come soon enough.

## VII: *Sotto Voce*

The rest of the day is spent in a confused stupor. The Lieutenant works around the ship like a madman, walking frantically from station to station and back to engineering, calibrating bridge controls and synchronizing them with the readouts in engineering. Occasionally the ship unexpectedly buckles (something she does frequently when she's moving at Warp Four-point-Five or higher) and Said gives me a dirty look, an unspoken accusation that I'm sabotaging the ship just to make him nervous. For such a physically unimpressive man, he knows how to look imposing, but I respond with a smile.

"Starships," I shrug. "Quirky devils, every one of them."

Said scowls and frantically works the engineering console; under his breath he recites a list of possible malfunctions. "Hey there, you living diagonistic," I taunt him. "You keep up this pace, you're going to kill yourself," I add, trying to irritate him as much as he irritates me.

"Then I'll die doing something I love," Said replies. The slight smile on his face belies the falseness of his excuse.

"Heh..." I smile back at him, leaning back in my chair and cupping my hands behind my head. "However you want to die is fine with me. Just as long as you don't take me with you."

"Unfortunately, Mr. Price," Said muses through tightly pursed lips, "I've acquired a dubious talent for surviving other people's deaths..."

I search for an appropriately caustic response, but what he's said is a little too serious for a flip answer. By the time I do come up with a glib remark, he's left the bridge again.

"Not worth the bother of a good insult," I tell myself, and I go back to my holopad. Back aboard the medical ship, they told me I needed to relax, so while we head to Rakshasa I'm doing some light reading. I'm about a third of the way through the latest *Captain Thym* technical novel (Andorian educational literature is more enjoyable than most cultures' attempts at pure entertainment). After I finish each chapter I check the sensors. Frankly, I was expecting things to

be a mess, but Said's adjustments are working out extremely well; I'm already getting readings from objects that were previously well out of range. And the air does taste fresher, and after a few hours the warp glitches stop. Eventually Said comes back to the bridge, looking sweaty, disheveled and satisfied; he tells me that the problem was just microscopic dust building up in the dilithium chamber.

Okay, Kenneth Said *has* been very useful. But I'll be damned before I openly acknowledge that this product from the Starfleet superiority factory is actually welcome aboard my *Candlejack*.

After I finish Chapter 18 and Captain Thym's learned the procedure for ejecting and detonating an overloading warp core on a Class II freighter (which he uses to blow up the enemy near Gibraltar Station), I return to my quarters. I'm still feeling ragged and frustrated, so I spend some time beating the stuffing out of my training robot. I shouldn't be doing this - I'm still recovering from the Meskeen's special brand of torture - but I've never been one to follow a doctor's orders (even when I'm the doctor) and today looks like a really good day to hit things. The training robot fights back, stinging me with overhand rights: but the provocation just gets my blood flowing. I retaliate with a flurry of fists directed by a wild-eyed stare; my hands sink into the fighting robot's imitation ribs, making a sound like meat being pounded unmercifully. Each time my fists land, the robot's exaggerated grimace widens, and the blood that flows through my veins gets hotter. Today, this feels almost as good as sex.

Occasionally I look back to see an imitation of a dog sitting on my bed and watching me quietly. I'm going to have to do something about that creature. Maybe later.

"When life is hell, Heaven is a big leather android just waiting to be hit," Said proclaims as he walks through the door.

"What did you say?" I say, stopping dead in my tracks. It sounded like a bad translation of a bad Klingon proverb.

"I wasn't trying to be sarcastic, Mr. Price," the Lieutenant responds defensively. "Just commenting on the fact you seem to be enjoying yourself."

"I'm afraid 'profound' ain't in the languages covered by my universal translator, redshirt." I smirk as I resume the fight, finally connecting with a clobbering right hook over a strap trap that nearly topples the android. I shut it down, remove the *bondo* strap from my left wrist and the glove from my right hand, and toss them at the Lieutenant. "Want to give it a go?"

"Maybe in the morning," Said easily catches the implements and gently places them on the floor under his cot. "By the way, there's something in your computer system that's taking up an astonishing amount of space. I tried to access it..."

Argos. I knew he'd drop that bomb sooner or later - it figures it'd be sooner. But (unlike the Meskeen) I can cope with Said's curiosity by lying through my teeth. "Part of this is the telepathic systems I mentioned earlier..." I begin.

"I figured that..." Said tells me.

"And there's also a data packet I'm delivering to Rakshasa that's taking up a lot of space. It's private, so I'd appreciate it if you kept your nose out of the computer until after I make the delivery."

"Fine," Said replies with a yawn that makes me wonder if he's even listening. He strips down to his bedclothes and collapses into the cot. I try to engage him, but the Lieutenant definitely isn't in the mood for light conversation. He rolls onto his side, tucks the blanket tightly around

his body, pulls up his knees just slightly (a quarter ways into a fetal crouch) and scrunches his face tightly against his pillow.

“What a day...” he sighs, closing his eyes, and I know the remark’s not meant for an audience.

Two minutes later, every hair on my hirsute Roger Price body begins to prick. My head turns toward the Lieutenant with a sudden involuntary motion that almost sprains my neck muscles. We have company. A dim velvet echo of light illuminates the room, enough to cast long shadows, and then... I’m not sure if I can describe what I’m feeling when I see her – a peacefulness I haven’t felt in far too many years.

I open my eyes to greet the shadows of the night. “You’re a true, galactic beauty.” I tell her as our lips part, as my fingers finish tracing silk roads in her long, flaxen hair.

There’s silence while we look at each other. “Well? More compliments please.” Artoria teases me, her hands gently gripping my arms. I haven’t heard that laugh in years. Nineteen years, to be precise.

I struggle to find an adequate response, and discover that it’s hard to breathe. “God, you take my breath away.” I finally manage to say. It’s not the most original line, but it’s very, very true.

Artoria laughs. “So am I an airlock now, Mr. Price?” Her wit always was a double-edged sword, almost sharp as her temper.

“I’m beginning to feel like I’m being pushed into one,” I tell her. She begins to protest and I laugh. “I’d say that love was an airlock, but it doesn’t sound right to me.”

“Roger, shut your airlock,” Artoria smiles, putting her hand playfully over my mouth. I brush it aside.

“If you’ll help me... my little captain,” I return the smile, lean forward to press my lips against hers, and we kiss again.

I remember everything now. Our first date. Artoria and I are walking along the hills of Aurora VII. Her smile, untainted by our later arguments, is a burning brand held steady against old, gentle memories. I feel her body press hard against mine as we’re walking and my arm, protectively wrapped over her shoulders, is the remembrance of a lost comfort. It’s all remarkably surreal, a ghostwalk on the Aymigon crest-road between giant pillar/lamp posts, a journey that’s both vaguely remembered and so vivid I’m about to break down into sobs. Artoria and I are talking as we walk: the chatter means nothing and the laughter means everything. I’d forgotten how deeply we’d been in love.

While we walk, we point at the Aurora flarebirds, whose beautiful shriek-song accompanies us; they blaze a trail of multi-colored sparks as they fly. *The birds are electric, and so am I.* I say to myself. I can feel her breathing against the contours of my arms and, resting her head on my chest, she can hear my heart beating like a wild thing. And just when I think things can’t get any better, a song rises around us.

*“O Babylon unlock the gates/Gardens of towers and wine...”*

It’s the Hammurabi Chorus from *Dawn of Assur*, a song that never manages to lose its power despite being mangled by local bands at every Founder’s Day celebration I can remember. Now it’s being performed by a children’s choir, forty young voices singing in a circle beneath us, in a crystal garden at the bottom of the hill. Somehow they manage to perfectly capture the song’s delicate balance of major and minor keys and its dissonant rhythms. As we watch, the flarebirds flock around the crystals and ignite a constant stream of blue, green, red, and white sparks, which

are magnified and projected by the crystals at odd angles around the countryside. Our faces light up in many colors, an odd but magical mirror in which to show the reflection of falling stars.

I didn't mean to bring her here. It's nice to experience a happy coincidence for once in my life.

Looking into each other's eyes brings a genuine smile onto each of our faces, and it hurts to look away, even to gawk at such spectacular vistas such as those that are surrounding us. "You, Roger Price, may very well be the most romantic man in the entire quadrant," Artoria tells me.

"Are you crazy?" I say – which isn't what I said to her nineteen years ago, (I had stuck out my chest and said "*make that two quadrants, girl!*") – and suddenly the memory's gone and I'm back in my quarters on the *Candlejack*.

I'm watching Lieutenant Said turn in his sleep. But as I noticed before I flashed back to Aurora, there's something else here, and as I blink through a gauze of tears I catch a glimpse of whatever it is that's surrounding the Lieutenant. My guess is that it's an energy field: soft moonlamp blue in color and shaped like a woman, three, maybe three and a half meters tall. It shimmers as it moves, and I can see swarms of lines, like computer resolution breaks, moving over the woman's body, clinging to its contours. It's the strangest thing I've ever seen.

"No, you shouldn't be here!" Said screams like a delirious man in his sleep.

The woman's form turns toward me, and for an instant, our eyes lock. For a second I get the feeling there's nothing in my mind, and then she vanishes. Kenneth Said suddenly wakes up too, his upper torso erects itself to a seated position in a split second. Our eyes also lock, and he has the exact same expression on his face as the woman had.

I'm filled with an overwhelming urge to kill the lieutenant, and this time I'm going to go through with it. *I'm tired of unwanted things in my head, on my ship. I want to kill them all.* If I ever had a memory that was too sacred to be violated, that was the one.

I get out of my bed, and I do what I should have done the minute we left the Agassiz system: I stomp to the transporter controls and set the coordinates for deep space. Yeah, I know the Lieutenant doesn't deserve this – he's not *that* bad a guy – but since I've met Kenneth Said, I've been mind-raped twice, tortured, watched my dog die, and god knows what's next? I'm going to lock a transporter onto Kenneth Said and beam him into space. It's the only way out of the madhouse.

Said comes striding in after me. He's saying something loudly, but I don't hear it. I can't hear anything but my heart hammering in my ears. It's a hard noise, one that I can barely stand. I have to fight to remain conscious, to pull those three levers down, to work the transporters and beam him away. It's not hard to make the motion, is it? It's hard to breathe, but that shouldn't be hard either, right? I'm going to do it. I'm going to pull the levers, and watch the look on Kenneth Said's face as he dematerializes.

Said gets within three meters, still yelling at me. I try to say "Too late", but nothing comes out of my mouth but a cough. There's a look of concerned horror on the lieutenant's face, but it's not because he's being transported. My fingers are sliding away from the console, like a dog weakly pawing against a locked door, and I cough again as my legs give out. I plunge into darkness with a slow-motion collapse and a choke.

“Good, you’re awake.” Said says. I’m lying on what passes in my ship for a medical bay, a couch in engineering that’s attached to an emergency medical scanner. “Did you just try to kill me, Roger?” he asks.

“Of course not...” I mutter my lie as convincingly as I can when I’m waking up from unconsciousness. How’d he figure that out?

“So where were you trying to transport me?” Said asks. *Oh, that’s how he knew. He saw the coordinates.*

“I was just blowing off steam.” I protest. “I wouldn’t have killed you, or even hurt you.” It’s a complete lie, of course. But why did I lose consciousness?

Said pulls a chair and sits down next to me. “Roger, when I was told about you, I was warned that you hated Starfleet, you had several psychotic episodes, you were linked to a couple unsolved murders, you had a violent temper, and that if I let down my guard for a moment, I probably wouldn’t live long enough to regret it.”

“People say a lot of things,” I reply. “I’m not psychotic, Lieutenant.” I wish that were a lie.

“I was also told you were a brave and determined so-and-so,” Kenneth adds. Why doesn’t he just come out and say sonuvabitch? “And that if my mission required me to go to Hell, you’d race me for the gates.”

“I’ll agree with that one.” I say.

“So what happened?” Said asks, his face still as stone. “What’d you see that scared you that much?”

“A woman. Shaped like an energy field, lines and stars. No, it’s the other way around, energy field shaped like a woman. Lines and stars. But it wasn’t the *sight* of her...”

“She triggered some emotions?” Said guesses correctly. “She was in your head?”

“She brought out memories.” I explain. “Something I went through twenty years ago. It felt like I was there, and everything was happening – I could even smell them – but I was a little out of synch.”

“I wouldn’t think she’d bring up bad ones.” Said guesses. I shake my head.

“She didn’t. It was exactly the opposite. Things I’ve completely forgotten.” *Sometimes, you don’t want to remember the good things. I don’t need to be reminded of that particular roller coaster.*

“Like unrequited love?” Said asks, sniffing the air. I say nothing. That must be what he feels when she comes. If it triggers that sort of psionic reaction in me when it’s five meters away from me, then what does it do to *him* if it’s right on top of him? “I didn’t know that her manifestation could be seen or felt by others. No one’s ever been present when she’s visited me before.” Said looks very reluctant to talk about it, the words just trickle out of his mouth.

“So *she*’s the cosmic accident?” The Lieutenant nods. “Some psionic entity you stumbled on during a mission?”

“Yeah. We fell in love,” Said admits. That’s perverse, but given the strength of the psionic field, I can understand why he couldn’t resist her. Just being five meters away from them triggered the most intense memory I’ve ever felt. “She didn’t want to let me go. The captain saved me, with help from others on the landing party.” the lieutenant sighs, half-sobs, and it all comes out. “They’re all insane or dead now, except for me and the captain. And he’s missing. I’m going to find him.”

“Wait a minute, is that the same captain who disappeared when *Ark Royal* was destroyed?” I ask. He can’t even bring himself to directly answer me.



“I don’t think he’s dead, but there’s one way to be sure,” Said tells me. “Gather the others, return to the Wash, and link again. The link will be powerful enough to find him, wherever he is.”

“And the others are all insane?”

“Yes.”

“And while you’re trying to gather the great nutcases of the galaxy, you’re being hunted as a war criminal by the ISC *and* you’re being chased by a cosmically powerful psionic energy field that’s desperately trying to seduce you?”

“That’s one way to look at it.” Said tells me.

“And you need my ship for some mad scheme to look for someone who’s probably not only dead, but a collection of loose molecules?”

“Again, that’s one way to look at it,” the Lieutenant shrugs.

I rise from the couch. “Lieutenant, after what you just told me, never *ever* question my sanity again.”

Said stands as well. “Agreed. Just as long as you don’t try to kill me again,” he says.

“I make no promises.” I reply, fighting an urge to laugh. But despite everything I’ve said, we both know we’ve just sealed a bargain. And I’ll keep it too, just as long as there are no more surprises.

“Well, are you happy, Argos?” I ask, Said’s gone back to sleep again, but I can’t rest. I’m so frustrated that if someone beamed me down to a planet right now, I wouldn’t rest until I’d torn it apart. “Was that *interesting* enough for you?”

“My curiosity is satisfied,” Argos says. “You shouldn’t kill your friends, Roger. A friend with the Lieutenant’s unique abilities are... an asset.”

That sounds more calculating than anything I’ve ever heard Argos say. “I thought you told me you weren’t programmed by the *Tal Shiar*.” I spit back.

“My boy, my boy, my boy...” Argos chides. “What makes you think the *Tal Shiar* invented common sense, Roger Dodger?”

“Fine.” I moan. “I’m sick of this, and you. Why don’t you wait until I take you back to the *Tal Shiar*. Try your games on them.”

“He’s already in your blood, Roger,” Argos chides, his viewscreen presence getting denser.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” I snarl. “Are you telling me he’s like family? Not that I like my family, but I can barely stand the guy.”

“You’ve spent years avoiding your blood, Roger.” Argos tells me in a slight sing-song voice. “But blood always comes back.”

I nearly put my fist through Argos’s ‘off’ switch. Blood. I never thought I’d be happy to see the *Tal Shiar*, but I’d gladly face a hundred of them if it gets this computerized cancer off my ship.

Two days. Just two more days.

## VIII: Rakshasa

There are days in your life that are both bad enough and uneventful enough that the best thing one can say about them is that it's a mercy when they fade in the background sludge that comprises the majority of our lives. That's what best describes those two days prior to arriving on Rakshasa. Lieutenant Said avoids me like a kid expertly playing hide-and-go-seek. When I'm overwhelmed by my biological need to give people a hard time, I track him to the access tube and bellow at him: "You're using too much of the ship's water, this isn't a starship!" I shout. Or "What are you doing to the gravity, lieutenant, we just hit 2.3 gees!"

Unfortunately, Kenneth Said is taking my complaints so stoically that I wonder when he's going to have his *kolinahr*.

On the final night the lieutenant surprises me by cooking dinner: a spicy lamb stew with scalloped potatoes, turnips, and minced *vransil*. It smells like ginger and garlic (in abundance - the galley's a very confined space and aromas cling to it, so I'll be smelling tonight's supper for the next two weeks), and it's fantastic.

"Well, are you ready to throw it out the airlock?" Said asks toward the end of the meal, referring to the food.

"No. The transporter's closer." I jokingly reply. Of course, if I'd do a better job of insulting his cooking if I wasn't on my third helping. "You didn't cook Dido by any chance?"

"Marshound meat is too gamey," Said explains as he scoops up the dishes. "This is a recipe from an old friend, a security officer I served with on *Ark Royal*."

"I didn't think you had any old friends," I laugh.

"I prefer small fleets to large ones," he replies. "Especially when it comes to people. I'm sure you've heard the 'I don't make *many* friends, but I do make *good* ones' line."

"Sure."

"Although now that the Royal's gone, it seems like such a lie."

My, the Lieutenant's certainly in a melancholy mood tonight. "So what if it is?" I reply, pouring myself a drink of *Acolyte Whiskey* (old as the quadrant and twice as nasty). "When I was younger, I came to the conclusion that we humans lie to ourselves because we're such a cowardly and spineless lot. And as I got older, I realized more and more that I was right. But one day, I got so old," I point to the wrinkles that are starting to form around my eyes, "that I realized that being cowardly and spineless weren't as bad as I once thought they were." I let the whiskey burn my mouth for a few seconds, then swallow.

"It's a survival trait?" Said muses.

"Exactly." I lean close to the lieutenant. "How come every damn conversation we have turns into a philosophical debate?"

"Probably because I've never been a fan of boozing, whoring, or *bondo*," Said replies, and I laugh. He's beginning to know when I'll take an insult as a compliment. Faux-Dido scampers into the room, looking for scraps. Said takes some of his minced lamb stew and puts it into a bowl. Dido wolfs it down - I never feed her this good, so good that she ignores the Lieutenant as he's scratching her ears (she normally hates that). "I hope it's not too rich for her."

"Don't give her a second thought," I recommend. I get up, a little wobbly, and make myself a dessert, imported Betazed passion fruit, shaped into cubes and liberally laced with sugar, brandy and fermented *tranya*.

"How's the leg?"

"Pretty good." I say, involuntarily stretching it and wincing. "How's the head?"

"There was never anything wrong with my head." Said says.

"Damn! I knew there was something I forgot to do," I quip. He doesn't laugh. "You still planning on going planetside, Lieutenant?"

"It's been too long since I've had a chance to sightsee on a world as interesting as Rakshasa." Said replies. "I know you don't want me at your meeting, but you've got a day to show me a few of the sights."

"You've never been there?"

"I've never been to this sector," the Lieutenant admits. "I've been meaning to look up Rakshasa in the Starfleet briefing guide. What can you tell me?"

"Well, there are three things to remember about Rakshasa." I puff out my chest and wave my arms emphatically so he'll have no choice but acknowledge me as an expert. "First, there are the allergies. The planet's growth cycle is six times more rapid than Earth's..."

"So they go from spring to fall in a month," Said muses. "The planet's year isn't that much shorter than Earth's. Why so much growth?"

"The vegetation," I answer. "The place is covered in fern-like plants that spray pollen whenever there's a hot day."

"They'd have to spread a lot more seeds to reproduce so quickly." Said determines.

"I guess so." I'm no botanist. "You'll either need to wear a particle veil or inject yourself with an anti-allergen."

"Technically, I'm still on *Ark Royal's* duty roster, pending transfer or decommission. Starfleet protocol forbids me from being out-of-uniform in a public place, or wearing anything that could conceal my identity, without explicit permission from a command officer." Said answers.

*Starfleet* protocols. Sure. "Second, some of the pollen that blows around is mildly hallucinogenic or narcotic. It's not as bad as the gas vents on *Vespera*," (That's where the idiot wants to visit after Rakshasa), "but they'll kick you when you least expect it."

"And third?"

"There are a lot of people like me there." I smile. "The Romulans make them nervous, they're scared to death of the ISC, but they'd rather get their heads knocked in than show fear to a stranger. Show them too much sympathy and they'll take it as an insult. Act like you know more than they do and you'll end up with a compound skull fracture."

"Charming," the Lieutenant smiles. "Do they share your opinion of Starfleet?"

"Nah. Starfleet's got a decent rep there because they keep the Romulans away." I reply. "They may even buy you a drink or two..."

"...and pump me for information," Said finishes my sentence. I nod. "What's their physical culture? Are they likely to touch me?"

"The children might. One look at 'Fleeters, all tall and shiny in their bright red trim and you'd think they were looking at gods." I take another swallow. "We were all young and stupid once."

"You'd think we'd eventually grow up." Said's reply practically uses sarcasm as a candy coating. "Well, thanks for your help Roger, I'll clean up here."

The next day, we enter the Rakshasa system, and coast for two hours at sub-light until we hit orbit and await landing clearance. Rakshasa security isn't kind to strangers, but having a Starfleet officer aboard goes a long way toward cutting red tape.

Rakshasa is a world on a pendulum that rapidly swings between green and brown days: heat and monsoon. It might be considered a jungle world or a desert world, or both at the same time. I'm not sure what factors cause the climate to change so rapidly between moist and dry heat; something about a volatile jet stream combined with an axial tilt that's only one-quarter that of Earth (ask the lieutenant, he seems to know all the mysteries of the universe). The colony was settled by Hindu practitioners in the years after the victory at Cheron opened the sector to human colonization. Remnants of the old religion still flourish in each of the planet's six provinces. Evidently the founders didn't think much of the climate: the planet's named after the demons of their mythology.

I'm on *Candlejack's* bridge, dismantling the Argos black box that's warmed the main console for the last two months. I don't say good-bye to him: let him wake up in a *Tal Shiar* laboratory, they're going to get along famously. Said is here too, and I'm doing my best not to appear nervous while he's watching me work. Like a man with his back turned to chivalrously avoid seeing someone naked, his gaze is fixed only on what's directly ahead, the main viewscreen, the panorama of surrounding stars. I tell you, that guy's stare gets so intense it's unnerving.

"What's got your attention, Lieutenant? ISC out there?" I finally ask. He shakes his head.

"Six parsecs that way, the Neutral Zone," Said answers, pointing at a wide field of stars. "I was trying to see how many stars I could recognize that are in Romulan space."

"They're our allies now, aren't they?" I ask. "We both hate the ISC."

"Hate is a waste. And I think we both know how much an alliance with the Romulans is worth," Said answers with surprising cynicism. His voice is so strident, so unlike the cautious lieutenant I've come to know, that it almost sounds like a stranger talking.

"Right..." I say, making the final disconnection. *Does he know? Was that his way of telling me not to deal with them? Or am I just being paranoid?*

Whatever's passing for a conversation is interrupted by a signal from Garuda Control, informing us that we're clear for entry into the planet's largest port. I take us on a power descent into the atmosphere - the Lieutenant buckles himself tightly, as though the restraints were *bondo*

straps. The viewscreen rapidly changes from black to azure to a golden-brown haze; the ship rocks hard when we pass through the jetstream, and then the ride gets as smooth as good whiskey once we reach the lower atmosphere. I switch to an undercarriage view, and we get our first glimpse of the wide streets of Garuda. To say the view is fuzzy would be an understatement - we're landing during a pollen storm. I'm already getting allergy alert warnings over three comm channels.

"Everything looks fine from here," Said can't resist the urge to play co-pilot. Fine.

I steer us over a cluster of ship hangers and verify my approach to port control. The hatch over Security Bay 122 opens, and I drop the ship. The tractor beam takes us the rest of the way. Due to security protocols, we can't just walk out of the ship: they'll be transporting us and scanning us for contraband. And while my "business associates" may have sworn on a stack of Romulan Bibles that the Argos won't trigger any special sensors, I'm still as nervous as a Antarian cat. I wish they'd agreed to the deep space transfer that *I* wanted. Why take unnecessary risks by having the transfer take place on a planet, when I could have quietly jettisoned the Argos and they could have had a cloaked ship pick it up without any risk of detection?

"Cheer up," Said tells me. At my suggestion, he's donning a plastic mesh, an almost transparent poncho, to avoid direct physical contact. "In a day or so, you're going to be working for me."

I almost have to force myself to grimace at the remark; it seems so unimportant now. We walk to the transporters without further banter, and I send Garuda Control the signal. Dido looks at me with her typical "don't go" misery-face; the last sound I hear before the curtain drops is the whining of my dog.

We materialize on a security platform, and a sensor sweep immediately bombards us. "Declare your name and your personal belongings." an impersonal neutered voice blares through two out-of-synch speakers, which produce an echo that would probably make an effective substitute for a Klingon agonizer.

"Lieutenant Kenneth Said," the galactic hero decides to take the lead. "I carry a Starfleet issue tricorder, medikit, and communicator," Said states authoritatively. "I'm also surrounded by a Class IV psionic field."

"We have been warned, Lieutenant." Control replies. "As a Starfleet officer, we are clearing you for entry. We strongly advise you to avoid heavy traffic zones. Consult your tricorder for further information. Are there any anti-allergens to which you're susceptible?"

"Not to my knowledge." Said states.

"Do you consent to the administering of an anti-allergen during decontamination? It may cause slight drowsiness and a mild headache, and is not recommended during pregnancy."

"I'm not pregnant. And I consent to the anti-allergen."

The procedure's starting to irritate him. It's obvious that Said isn't the sort of guy who'd implant himself with an artificial womb (for one thing he's way too thin), but I guess you can never tell these days. Some cultures have *really* strange customs.

"Next." Control envelops me in bluelight. I take a deep breath.

"My name is Roger Clinton Price!" I shout. "And not only am I bringing unrivalled sexual prowess and the best right hook in the quadrant to Rakshasa, I carry a standard medikit, a communicator, an Andorian omni-tool, and a Class II portable Romulan data storage unit."

The data storage unit is given special scrutiny, but I guess it passes muster because the next thing you know I'm being asked the allergy question, and then we're into decontamination. The room turns an irritating shade of red, and we're both bathed in a prickly hot light.

"Feels like spiders crawling on your skin," I tell the Lieutenant.

"Doesn't to me," Said replies. "And what's this about 'unrivalled sexual prowess'?" He's wearing a deadpan expression, but there's enough of a glimmer in his eyes to indicate he was amused.

"I like to bust these guys' chops." I reply. "Too often planetary security officers get their jollies by acting like dictators, so it's good to put them in their place. Besides, you never know when a nice looking human-compatible female is lurking somewhere behind those controls. It's always good to keep your options open." I grin obnoxiously. "At least those of us who can get past foreplay without scrambling their partner's brains."

"You're a prince." Said responds, also in a deadpan.

The decontamination takes a little longer than usual, but eventually we're transported from the station to a transporter terminal on the streets of Garuda. The streets are wide, wide as football fields, and surrounded by clusters of low brown buildings that resemble pottery: spun not built. We're blasted by a dry, windy heat and pollen is blowing everywhere - bits of tuft and torn, dried fern leaves - and our initial instinct is to cover our eyes. Even with our faces covered, the pollen quickly gets into our nostrils and peppers us with rich smells.

*You're always hungry on Rakshasa.*

The natives are ignoring the weather; there are networks of piping on one side of the road, and a band of kids, naked except for crotch-wraps, are playing in them, leaping from pipe to pipe, cartwheeling, propelling themselves upward in spectacular airborne tumbles. They look like the best circus kids you've ever seen, even more remarkable because Rakshasa's gravity is about 20% stronger than Earth standard.

"They're *good*." Said admits, daring to open his eyes to watch them fly through the air. "Piping..." (no relation to Scots music) "...is the current pastime on a lot of worlds in this sector. I guess no one's broken their necks yet. I don't know what they see in it."

"So when do you start acting like a grandfather, Roger?" The Lieutenant cheerfully responds with close a remark that's almost a perfect taunt. It takes an effort not to reward him with a punch on the arm. It's probably a good thing I'm holding the Argos, nice, quiet and dormant, under my left arm.

I scour the city, trying to remember the way to the nearest of my old haunts. My meeting with the *Tal Shiar* won't take place until tomorrow, and I won't know where it'll happen until I get their signal, so why not take some time to see old friends and renew some contacts? Of course it's a little embarrassing to be seen with a Fleeter, but I can always hit people if they give me too much grief, so things shouldn't get out of hand. We're not far from *Champagne's Place*, and I'm in the mood for some *bondo* so that's my first stop. Said follows me like a pet dog: silent but watchful. I swing open the hall's double doors (without regard for the uniform who's stalking behind me) and shout: "Hullo folks, Roger's home!" I could swear I could hear a collective gasp.

*Champagne's Place* is named after its owner, Champagne McGrath, and not its smell (which is as rank as any other sweathole in the quadrant). It's a big building with concrete walls, dingy wooden floors, metal lockers and benches everywhere. Gym machines, the only sign of technology in the place, idly sit in dimly lit corners. Fight posters, flicking through scenes from this place's past glories, encircle the walls, a shrine to days of bloodlust past. There are only five

other people here at the moment. Closest to us, a pair of middleweights who look enough alike to be brothers, are strapped together and performing a flexibility exercise that's commonly called the stretching dance. In the ring (twelve posts shaped in a rough circle connected by four nearly transparent cables) a pair of heavyweights are sparring. I don't recognize either of the fighters: burly, nearly naked Rakshasa kids with shaven heads who line up perpendicular to each other and spend more time tussling over the strap and trying to outmuscle each other than throwing punches. I swear that no one appreciates a mixed offense anymore.

"Roger Price!" the woman's voice practically bursts through my eardrum, and a pair of strong short arms wrap themselves around my upper stomach. Champagne McGrath is a short, muscle-bound woman with Irish red hair who laughs a lot and enjoys seeing men and women hit each other. "Just when I thought things couldn't get any worse!"

"Where's Tholia?" I ask, referring to her daughter. Like Starfleet Captains, I like to have a woman in every port, and Tholia's my woman on Rakshasa.

"Safely away from you," Champagne laughs. Considering that she once pried me off her daughter in the middle of the deed at phaserpoint, it's not a joke. "I wish you'd given me some notice, I could've arranged a good fight for you. Turk Dhaliwal would probably have gone AWOL just to get another crack at you."

"Heh," I smile. "Unless he gets surgery to toughen his glass jaw, he'll always be a second rater. So Turk's still in the planetary militia?" Champagne nods.

"No one's getting out now. We're on high alert. The ISC destroyed the weapons platform in the Jakarta belt, and warned us if we tried to rebuild it, they'd attack Rakshasa direct," Champagne informs me. "Is that why Starfleet's here?"

I glance at Said. "Nah, he's my probation officer. Champagne McGrath, meet Lieutenant Kenneth Said."

Kenneth takes a step back to signal he doesn't want to shake hands, and performs a perfect bow. "I'll gladly relay your concerns to Starfleet, but I'm only a Lieutenant and there are a lot of frightened colonies right now."

"I understand," Champagne looks like she's a little intimidated, and I get the weirdest impression that it's not because of his rank.

"Is there a problem, Champ?" I ask.

"Well..." she visibly frets, but she doesn't say anything.

"C'mon." I smile. "You know you can't keep the truth from Roger Price." Said winces in disbelief. "I know Lieutenant Starfleet's an ugly son of a bitch, but you've seen my opponents after I've mauled them, so it can't be his looks..."

"If you want to stop Mr. Price's ego before it gets completely out of control, speak now." Said interjects. "Please."

Champagne still isn't laughing, and given she's the sort of person who'll laugh at anything, it's really starting to worry me. "What is it, darling?" I say, cutting off all traces of the Roger Price ego.

"I had a visit from the Tasting Prophets yesterday." Champagne says.

Said flashes me a puzzled look. "The *what* prophets?" he asks.

"Tasting Prophets. A weird little cult who claim they can see the future by tasting people," I explain. "Some people believe they have psionic abilities linked to their sense of taste and that they gain insight by licking people. More sensible people (like me) think they're nutcases who've

inhaled too many hallucinogens. They come out when they perceive imminent danger and lick people at random until they figure out whatever's bothering them."

"*Not* at random," Champagne says. Obviously she's a lot less skeptical than me.

"Remind me to be glad I wasn't here for their visit," Said laughs.

"They told me an Offworld stranger was going to come here today and cause trouble."

Champagne says, not laughing.

"Well, I guess the Tasting Prophets didn't realize that Roger Price would be here to stand watch," I boast.

"The one time they tasted Roger, you never heard such wretching in your entire damn life," Champagne attests. I growl slightly.

"Mrs. McGrath," Said ignores my bravado, as usual. "I don't know if your 'Tasting Prophets' are genuine telepaths, but I've seen enough strange things to know I shouldn't take chances with your safety. I'll leave."

"Aren't you going to stay and watch me fight?" I snap. "I wanted to beat up someone just for you, Lieutenant."

"That's a thoughtful gift," the Fleeter says sardonically. "But I'll settle for being locked in an enclosed space with you for a month, awaiting the moment you lose your temper again and try to kill me."

"So many memories," I answer with a sigh and a smirk. I turn to Champagne. "As you can see, I've been locked up with this Starfleet sausage for four days, and I really, really need to beat someone up bad. Get me a fight, please..."

But before she can answer, the double doors swing open with a bang and we're interrupted by the sound of multiple bootsteps on concrete. Whoever came through that door clearly terrifies Champagne, and that's a tall order for such a hard woman. Said's face also turns serious and intense, like he's preparing for a major fight. I turn around and immediately understand: seven Romulans, tall, broad and uniformed have just entered the gym, led by a Romulan woman in a dark black suit. It's probably a twinge of fear that forces me to compare her appearance to a vampire.

"Mr. Price," the woman smiles wolfishly. "I'm Suria, Romulan Trade Authority. We've been informed you've just arrived on Rakshasa and thought it would be prudent to complete our business without delay."

The introduction's a ritual imitation of courtesy. I've had a few dealings with Tashayl Suria in the past. Unlike most women, she despised me from the *first* minute we met, though that loathing pales in comparison to her general misanthropy and her hatred of the Federation. Rumor says her deceased husband was a Romulan sub-commander who got himself killed in the General War when a photon torpedo accidentally shot loose from the stores of a ship he destroyed (and through one of the greatest flukes I've ever heard) detonated next to his bridge. It's a great story, but a crummy way to go, and dying in such an embarrassing fashion has got to leave a mark on the people who love you.

I'd say that revenge is a fool's game, except I'm much too fond of it myself. At Suria's side is a *sraes* ("*hired muscle*" for all you Joneses who are too addicted to your universal translators to enjoy the musical cadence of a Romulan gibbering in their native tongue). He's easily the biggest Romulan I've ever seen, a pack of muscle mass that stands at least two meters tall and probably fights in the hundred fifty kilo bracket. I've heard about this one too: it's rumored that he's the product of a Romulan genetic engineering experiment. Rumors also say he was practically



surgically grafted to Suria's side – she uses him like a weapon in trade negotiation, as the guy's got a stare that makes you wonder when he's going to snap and tear you apart. He glowers at me, but Roger Price has never been intimidated by muscle, and my attention's mostly focused on the Romulan administrator. I wasn't expecting – and I'm not ready – to deal with her yet.

"We've only just arrived..." I stammer.

"There are people in the Romulan Empire who have the means to track people's comings and goings." Said states. His voice has taken a completely different quality - I'd dare to call it a Captain's quality, confident to the point of arrogance – and even his posture's changed. "I've never met a... Romulan Trade Authority representative before." His smile is a little broader than his usual knowing, superior smirk.

"And I've never met someone who... defeated an entire ISC fleet single-handedly before," Suria replies, just as coy. I might enjoy their games if I wasn't about to lose control of most of my body functions.

"Shouldn't we conduct our business in private?" I ask Suria with an idiot's stammer.

"This is a legitimate transaction, Mr. Price." Suria responds. "A piece of Romulan technology was stolen, you're returning it. Surely the Federation..." and here she turns to Said, "...cannot disapprove."

"I don't recall disapproving." the Lieutenant responds. "Not that a Lieutenant could interfere in a business transaction without solid evidence of wrongdoing. And of course, *Romulan trade authorities* would never be so brazen as to do anything illegal on a Federation colony in front of a Starfleet witness."

"Of course not."

"It's a legitimate deal, Lieutenant, I swear," I say, looking at Said. "Honest."

"Roger," Said tells me. "Do the deal and let's go. Don't be so rude to these poor, innocent 'trade authority officials'." He plays with the title, then points his finger at me and flashes such a completely uncharacteristic grin.

"Mr. Price?" Suria asks, motioning for me to deliver the box.

I don't have much choice what to do next, so, ignoring the part of me that wants to smash the bloody thing, I lift the Argos box, and dangle it in front of Suria. Not unexpectedly, she's not in a trusting mood. The tall Romulan woman takes a few steps back and gestures at her closest Lieutenant, and I find myself face-to-face with the *sraes* as he scans the Argos box with a Romulan tricorder. Even on a cold Romulan face, I can tell when something's wrong. He abruptly turns to Suria.

"The *Ivaht'Gemaen* is *not* in this box," he announces.

"But that's impossible. I never moved Argos..." I say. A thought occurs to me, and I shoot Said an accusatory glance, but the expression on his face is pure surprise too. And fear. In moments we find ourselves staring at the business end of six Romulan disruptors.

"That was very unprofessional, Mr. Price," Suria says, and she smiles menacingly, and adds in an almost orgasmic whisper. "Thank-you..."

## IX: Champagne and Prophecy

A Romulan disruptor, like all modern weapons, is like the most deadly surgeon you can imagine: certain death and precision wrapped in a sleek metal package. Like Federation phasers, the Romulan disruptor produces remarkably little radiation when it incinerates its target. Death occurs within .01 seconds of contact; a death that's so clean that it squeaks. I suppose I should take comfort that I'm going to die without making a mess of the universe. It's certainly a lot better than what the ISC was offering me a few days ago.

I glance nervously at Said, who's staring death in the face with the sort of casual arrogance that probably makes the Romulans want to graft pointy ears onto his head, call him "brother" and give him some free real estate on Romulus. Although the Romulans' attention is focused on us, they aren't ignoring the others: a pair of Romulan soldiers are rounding up Champagne and the other *bondoka* and herding them into her office. I'm real sorry they're involved in this mess, especially Champagne.

"The *Ivaht'Gemaen* was here, *daise-fvrihai*," the big Romulan with the tricorder reports. (The title means 'chief administrator', as you could probably tell by the last sentence, the Romulan language is almost as much of a tongue torture as Klingonese). "And the housing has not been opened, nor are there any other signs of penetration. But there's nothing in the box except dead tissue."

*Dead tissue? What the hell is dead tissue doing inside a computer?*

"Move the Starfleet officer away and open the box," Suria instructs a pair of her officers.

"And do not touch the Lieutenant, Mr. Tevcot. You would sorely regret it."

"*Ivaht'Gemaen*," Said's brow narrows as he ponders the word. One of the Romulans tries to use his disruptor to motion him move aside, but the lieutenant ignores him. "What is a 'mind-bridge'?"

I should have guessed that the paragon of Starfleet could, among his many talents, speak fluent Rihannsu. "You would do well not to make yourself more of a target, Lieutenant." Suria retorts.

"And you would do well to remember *where* you are," Said abruptly turns to face her. "And you'd also do well to remember who *I* am. Whatever its faults, Starfleet protects its own. In space: we can die by the fleetload, and they'll give us a funeral, life goes on. But when a *single* Starfleet officer dies on a *planet*, the killer usually ends up wishing they were hunted by a less relentless species – such as the Mirak."

Suria doesn't accept the claim. "Starfleet will hardly be asking their questions to us on Romulus," she chuckles.

"Don't be so certain you'll escape." Said smiles back. "Because of the ISC threat, the entire sector's on high alert. You do realize we're under a complete sensor blanket, don't you? The authorities can detect weapons fire. And you also realize that any unauthorized transports will be blocked."

"Of course," Suria responds. "And I'm sure *you've* guessed that we have ways to avoid detection. So the real question isn't whether we'll get away with this, it's why you're attempting to distract me."

"It's because I don't get enough verbal jousting with Mr. Price." Said replies, motioning at me with his thumb. I glower back at him.

One look at me, and Suria gets bored with the conversation. I guess she doesn't like being part of a private joke. She turns to the big Romulan, the one who scanned the box earlier. "*Sraes*," she orders, "open the box now."

I guess she's decided that Said can look at what's inside the box - which almost certainly means that she no longer has any intention of sparing the 'Fleeter's life. The big Romulan scans the box again, then inputs the control codes with his huge fingers. An orange diode blinks on one side of the box, and it opens with a click. A hint of ozone wafts into the air, and a section of inner paneling comes flying loose in a single piece, revealing charred wiring. But that's not the heart of Argos: the electronics are sandwiched between layers of a dry grey paste, brain tissue that's been kneaded like pizza dough and spread out over the six sides of the box.

"*That's* Argos?" I yelp.

"It's dead." The huge soldier informs Suria. "Judging by its decay pattern, it died six weeks ago."

Suria turns to face us, bristling with Romulan anger (which feels a lot like being interrogated under a floodlamp while you're sitting naked in a sauna). "But I - I - I talked with it a few days ago!" I protest. "Six weeks dead? That's not right!"

Suria stews for about ten seconds, then points an accusing finger in Said's direction. "*You* are responsible for this," she says.

I might be inclined to agree with her if I hadn't met the Lieutenant five weeks after this thing allegedly "died". Said shakes his head calmly.

"Starfleet would neither create nor kill such a creature, *daise-fvrihai*," the 'Fleeter insists. "If you've cloned cells from a Romulan telepath and arranged them in a set pattern to mimic the functions of captured ISC technology, you ought to have realized your creation wouldn't be very stable."

My God - is that what Argos was? I knew the Romulans were ruthless, and I knew the *Tal Shiar* could be downright sick... but this? And if this thing died six weeks ago, what the Hell have I been talking to all those weeks?

"Is *that* your defense, lieutenant?" Suria snarls. "Federation morality?"

"Wait a minute..." I interject. "I told you I talked to Argos only two days ago. I think we're all being tricked. Argos - the real Argos - has to still be aboard my ship." I turn to Suria, rare desperation on my face. "You've got to get him off. I don't want his hooks in me anymore."

"Roger, I don't think she can oblige you." Said tells me, trying to read her face (which is almost as inscrutable as her Vulcan cousins). "Even if she wanted to give you the benefit of the doubt, if she shows you mercy and the *Tal Shiar* disapproves..."

"I am not a member of that august order, Lieutenant," Suria smiles.

"Of course you aren't," Said doesn't challenge her lie, but his sarcasm is reaching toxic levels. "But hypothetically..."

"Hypothetically, you both want to stay alive. And I *can* be accommodating." Suria says, walking in a casual circuit around us, giving the distinct impression that we're mice and she's not.

"Contact... your superior officer," I say, not wishing to openly say Tomarand's name in front of the Lieutenant. "He can confirm I used the Argos to talk with him only a few days ago."

"A convenient request, given it would take two hours to receive his answer back from Romulus," Suria snaps. "However, I am prepared to show reason and compassion." Her tone is far from inspiring. "All you need to do is to surrender all title to your vessel, Mr. Price," Suria smiles. "And if we find the Argos aboard your ship, we'll let you live."

"What!" *How dare she make a grab for my ship!* "Lady. if that's the deal, go ahead and pull the trigger!"

"Is that your final decision, Mr. Price?"

"I am *not* giving up my *Candlejack!*" I insist.

Suria steps away, and I can see the "I want to shoot you" look in the Romulans' faces intensify. Okay. I've pretty much asked for certain death. But it's still *my* ship.

"I would strongly recommend you reconsider," Suria almost looks like a Vulcan when she raises an eyebrow. She looks at Said, who looks like he's staying neutral. "The point of no return is fast approaching."

*This is stupid*, I think. *This is going to get me killed*. "At least give me a fighting chance," I finally mutter after taking a deep breath. I point at *Sraes*, the Romulan muscle man. "You and me. In the ring. We'll fight for it."

"Roger," Said observes dryly. "Call it a wild guess, but I doubt the *Tal Shiar* are interested in fisticuffs. And you do remember just how much physically stronger a Romulan is compared to a..."

"Lieutenant, shut up!" I snap. "If I go down, it won't be as a hostage, it'll be as a man. If the big guy can get the *bondo* strap around my neck, my ship is yours. And if he can't, then we'll find a way for you to retrieve the Argos that doesn't involve shooting people or taking my ship. Either way, you win. If someone gives me a tricorder, I'll even authorize the contract so it's beyond doubt. Well?"

Suria's lip curls. She crosses her arms to think, then quickly stretches her arm again and points the disruptor at me. "The Lieutenant is correct. We're not some Klingon fool who blindly answers challenges like a dog salivating for its meal."

"Lieutenant, what is the Romulan word for 'coward'?" I ask Said.

"The word you're looking for is *lhonae*," Said answers. "And they'll respond by calling you a *feanna*." A couple of the Romulans chuckle. That makes me angry, almost angry enough to rip his head off his shoulders, except there's a little voice in the back of my mind that's telling me that every second Kenneth Said amuses the Romulans is another second we get to stay alive. I'll bet the Starfleet bastard knows it too.

And the longer we make those seconds, the better our chances of escaping the situation with our skins intact.

But Suria is losing patience fast. She switches targets, aiming the disruptor directly between the Lieutenant's eyes. He doesn't even flinch.

"Let's oblige Mr. Price with a Romulan beating," she orders. I mentally prepare myself to fight the *sraes*, but *bondo* isn't what the Romulans have in mind. Two antecenturions grab me, and the *sraes* cheerfully drives an uppercut into my stomach and then a second punch into my ribs. I can feel something crack.

"Wait..." Said objects. Suria responds by lowering the disruptor down to chest level, making sure she'll hit the target. A disruptor trumps bare hands any day, so the beating continues.

Five punches later, the Romulans allow me to sink to my knees, coughing and puking. One of the antecenturions grabs a *bondo* strap and the *sraes* casually wraps it around my throat. The leather chafes against my neck. The monstrous Romulan pulls me by my thick red hair and yanks my head upward so we make eye contact, then he begins to tighten the line. Even though Romulans are supposed to be a lot less emotional than humans, the son of a bitch can't suppress a smile.

"Stupid..." Said says, shaking his head.

"What else do you expect from a freighter captain?" Suria sneers.

"I wasn't talking about him, I was talking about *you*," Said scowls. If I wasn't so busy choking to death I could applaud his courage - he may be an arrogant Starfleet scumbag, but at least he's a *brave*, arrogant Starfleet scumbag. "What the hell are you trying to accomplish? If the *Ivaht'Gemaen* is dead, beating and choking a freighter captain to death isn't going to bring it back. And if he's right and someone's trying to trick you, then he's acting in good faith and it's in your best interest to treat him like a friend."

"Tell us what you did to the *Ivaht'Gemaen*, lieutenant." Suria purrs. The *sraes* continues to tighten the strap. *So how does it feel like to be used as a bargaining chip, Roger Price?*

"Do you want the self-sacrificing explanation where I lie and admit I'm guilty of sabotage, or the truthful explanation where I tell you that I didn't know the thing existed until you asked Roger for the box?" Said replies. "For pity's sake, stop torturing the wrong man."

"Are you volunteering to stand in his place?" Suria asks through grinding wolf-teeth. Said pauses, looking first at me, and then back at the Romulan witch. His voice bristles with contempt. "Fine. *I shall bleed so others may live without bloodletting. I shall die so others might live without fear of death.* Do you recognize the *kinaen*, administrator?"

"The *Tal Praiex* oath." Suria says, referring to the Romulan navy, the hated rivals of the Romulan intelligence service. "Is that supposed to be an insult?"

"It's a reminder - in the words of your own people - of what the *Rihanh* should strive toward. A pity your Empire doesn't believe that people like those are sufficient to defend them," Said says, stepping forward. "Do what you want with me," he adds, spreading his arms to emphasize the point. Suria smiles, but instead of ordering her antecenturions to give Said the gift of big hurt,

she advances until she's two meters from the Lieutenant, aims her weapon directly between his eyes, and fires.

Nothing happens. Suria looks appalled.

"Hon, you didn't transport into the building!" Champagne shouts from across the room. "We saw you. And if you think we Garudans would allow seven Romulans to run roughshod in our city, you're not just mistaken, you're on the wrong side of the Stupidity Neutral Zone!"

The locals have deactivated all hand weapons. Sometimes you just gotta love the frontier - it's as smart as it is wild.

Of course, the Romulans aren't ready to agree with *that* opinion. Suria shouts orders in Romulan, and the soldiers go to close quarters, gathering together to cover their retreat. They've let go of me, so I get to my feet, square off against the big bad *sraes* and give him my best right cross. He stands there, takes the punch without flinching, then backhands me to the ground.

"Son of a bitch..." But before I can regain my footing and get back in the fight, all seven Romulans are enveloped by transporter signals. Said immediately pulls his communicator and contacts Garuda Control, who informs him they haven't been rescued by the Romulans – the locals snagged them. Once that's confirmed, Said doesn't even stop to catch his breath. He walks over to me, medical tricorder in hand, and begins to scan.

"C'mon, Lieutenant. It takes more than a few punches to slow down Roger Price," I boast. (Of course now that the fight's over, I'm having trouble getting back to my feet, but I can sit still for a minute or so and no one's going to be the wiser.)

"And that's why my lamb stew's decorating the floor over there," the Lieutenant replies. He digs into his medikit, administers a drug to my injured ribs, and waves his magic Starfleet wand over the injured area for a few seconds. "You're going to be okay - for now. But you'd better get your larynx into shape, because when we get back aboard ship, we're going to have one hell of a screaming match over this Argos thing."

"Great..." I moan. "I'll get the airlock ready."

"You do that..." Said says, once again wearing that annoying smirk.

"So, Lieutenant," I query. "Were you expecting the city to block the disruptors?"

"No. I figured that if I was really lucky she'd shoot to wound," Said replies. "The most plausible best case scenario involved me dying a quick death, and you disassociating yourself from me so you could safely negotiate with them."

"They were going to kill all of us." I state.

"Probably. Even if you did manage to beat that mutant, they'd still have shot you..." Said spits. "What were you thinking, throwing out a challenge?"

"I was thinking that if I could last just five minutes against Brutius Maximus, that a lot could happen in five minutes on Rakshasa." I glance at Champagne, who's come over to inspect the situation. "Darling, I think I had sex with the wrong generation of McGrath."

"You think I'd settle for someone who can't even knock a Romulan off his feet?" Champagne scoffs. "Ha!"

I sigh. I just can't win right now. The middleweights help me to my feet and support my weight as I stagger to a big leather stool that's sitting near the ring. The heavyweights resume their sparring. The authorities have already transported into the building to ask the obligatory questions: a pack of eight guards toting phaser rifles and wearing well-worn brown and tan uniforms whose pattern suggests they've been splattered with feces. That's the Rakshasa dust season for you. Champagne and the Lieutenant answer any and all of their inquiries, leaving me

alone to recuperate. I think I overhear Said cover for me at least twice. I guess I'm supposed to thank him, but the truth is that the man has some sort of compulsion when it comes to controlling the situation, not to mention a serious martyr complex, and probably a death wish. Sad, isn't it?

I balance on the stool and watch the heavyweights duke it out, shouting advice to them (which the idiots ignore). After fifteen minutes of watching some of the worst *bondo* he's ever seen, Roger Price is ready to crawl the walls. When Said drags his sorry feet out of Champagne's office, I'm almost happy to see the Starfleet sodder, even though he's the one who now looks like he took a beating from a Romulan mutant.

"You got any other business on this planet?" he asks, hoping the answer's no.

"We're going to Vespera? Let me check the trade center first. I'll see if I can pick up some good cargo first." I reply. Hey, I may as well make a profit while I play ferryman, right?

"Sure." Said nods, and he motions for me not to leave yet. "Roger, do you have any contacts in the *Tal Shiar*?"

"Not by choice." I tell him, and it's the truth.

"I don't care about that right now." Said states, slashing at the air with his hand for added emphasis. "Roger, it's imperative you try to make some sort of peace with these people. It's bad enough that the ISC are after us - we can't afford to have to worry about a second enemy with cloaked ships on our tail."

"Lieutenant, what should I promise them?" I ask.

"Well for starters, in seventy-two hours, the charges against Suria and the others are going to be dropped." Said informs me. "There's no sense in being vindictive with our "allies" after we've left the system."

"Is Starfleet really willing to let me hand over the Argos to an empire that was at war with us just a few years ago?" I ask.

"Was it really stolen from them?" Said retorts, not intense enough to be an accusation.

"A freighter captain friend of mine was running supplies into Tiburon when he caught wind that the Romulans were experimenting with captured ISC technology. When an opportunity arose, he stole the prototype."

"That sounds rather dramatic," Said remarks.

"It was a *Tal Shiar* set-up. They were trying to discredit a young senator whose family was in charge of local security, so they arranged for him to steal it, then betrayed him when he became a nuisance," I say, shaking my head. Romulan politics. It's like trying to keep track of rats scurrying about in a three dimensional maze that's a square kilometer on each side. "They *wanted* him to make the snatch."

"How'd you end up with it?"

"The captain was a friend, as I said. He handed it to me for safekeeping. After he was captured, they interrogated him and found out I had it. When I first heard from them, I nearly..."

"Couldn't believe one of your past dealings with the Romulans had come back to bite you," Said mocks me, and I'd be even angrier if he hadn't scored a direct hit on the truth. "Go on."

"We eventually came to an understanding - I'd deliver the Argos to Romulan agents on Rakshasa, make it a nice clean exchange, and they'd discreetly release my friend from prison, allow him to cross the Neutral Zone, and give me a lot of cash and contracts on the side."

"But the agents jumped the gun. And the 'mind-bridge' had a mind of its own." Said remarks.

"Don't you just hate that?" I concur. "So what do you intend to do, Lieutenant?"

There's a long, pained silence. "There's no way I can keep this from Starfleet," he finally says. "I'll give them enough details that they can make an honest decision, but I'll omit some of the parts that might make you look bad. And I'll also recommend that you be allowed to dispose of the Argos, even if it involves returning it to Romulans."

"Do you think they'll actually go for that?"

"With everything that's going on with the war, we'll be lucky if they get back to us in three months. By that time, we'll have resolved the situation ourselves." Said informs me with a smile. "Only God or a fool thinks they can micromanage the universe. Space is big. There's a reason Starfleet wants its officers to have an independent streak..."

"Ride 'em cowboy..." I mutter as an aside. I'm not sure what Said has in mind as a retort, but it's lost forever, on the wind. Suddenly, we catch the sound of small bells in the distance, accompanied with the smell of burning animal flesh.

"The Tasting Prophets," I don't bother to hide my disgust. "Lieutenant, can we transport out of here, *now*?"

"Strange new worlds, Roger," Said quotes part of the Starfleet motto. "I want to see this."

I feel like kicking something.

The Lieutenant bolts over to a window and eagerly scans the streets. Brown Garuda, basking in heat, dust, and blowing pollen, is close to empty. The sound of bells takes on an eerie texture as the Prophets approach, like a field full of crickets that's slowly crawling closer to us. Nothing good is going to come of this, I think.

The cult, over a hundred strong, comes in a single-file procession, clad in brown and red silk from head-to-toe and hoisting small bells on frames shaped like Greek crosses. There's an animal at the front of the procession that I don't recognize - it looks like a bulldog that's been flattened by heavy gravity, its legs spread-eagled, sitting on a dais that's being carried by four cultists. The animal constantly sniffs and licks the air, and occasionally it issues a cry that sounds like a cross between a low dog bark and a crow call. Every time it barks, the procession stops, the six Prophets at the head of the line lick the bulldog-thing's tongue, then change direction.

"Heh. Dido would maul that thing in fifteen seconds," I laugh, pointing at the pile of filleted dog-muscle, trying to ignore the fact the procession's coming our way. But once again, Said's focus is so intense that it would make a *fakir* jealous. "C'mon Lieutenant, let's go. You've seen one alien religious dress-up party, you've seen them all," I add. But he ignores me.

The big double doors open as if though they've been struck by a tornado. All fighting abruptly stops. Champagne looks at the procession, rolls her green eyes and murmurs "Not again". The lieutenant moves away from the window, and we exchange glances. The lead Prophet licks the dog's tongue again, then walks over to Said. Thank God they're not tasting me. The four dogbearers set down the dais at the Fleeter's feet. The animal continues to lick the air, but otherwise it doesn't move.

"I'm sorry if I caused you any trouble..." the Lieutenant says hesitantly. It's hard to believe that this guy, who was so sharp with the Romulans just a few minutes ago, is suddenly sounding more uncertain than a schoolboy who's found out about a surprise exam.

"Put out your hand, Lieutenant," the lead Prophet says in a portentous tone that makes him sound like an actor who's trying to play Moses.

"I can't. One touch and you'll be..."

"Touch is only the beginning," the Prophet declares.



"When you touch me," Said explains as he stammers, "it stimulates the production... of a series of neurochemicals... they stimulate different regions of the brain. The more psionically attuned you are, the stronger the reaction..."

"What is your name, Lieutenant?"

"Kenneth Said."

"Your spoor is on the wind, Kenneth Said," the prophet observes. "But we cannot taste you. We can tell your taste is important: its tang - its accent, its subtlety - may change the universe."

"The universe is a rather big for a guy like me to change." Said tries to dismiss his concern, but he doesn't wear modesty very well.

"The animal accepts the risk," the Prophet is unmoved. "We beg you, Lieutenant. Put out your hand."

"Yeah, Lieutenant, what's one more insanity on a day like this?" I goad. "If the psychic coondog wants to unlock the secrets of the universe by sniffing your crotch, that's its problem."

Said sighs, draws a hypospray from its sheathe in his medikit, wraps his hand in safety gauze and carefully hands the hypo to the Prophet. "When it goes into convulsions, inject it with this. Don't wait too long." Said then unwraps his hand, and holds it open to the Prophets. "New worlds. New civilizations..." he recites the Starfleet mantra.

The Prophets raise the dais to hand level, and the head Prophet gently taps the animal on the back of its head. The dog-thing tentatively moves its mouth toward the lieutenant's hand. *Bite him*. I think, but I don't say it aloud. The holy animal's consecrated tongue, drenched in its sacred dog-spittle (and just in case you can't tell, I *am* being sarcastic - hell, you'd think the prophetic animal on a planet settled by Hindus would at least be a *cow*) makes contact with Said's hand. The animal immediately howls. The prophets grab the beast, force open the poor creature's jaws, and begin to lick its tongue.

"I got sick at the wrong time..." I mutter. The Lieutenant nods, but says nothing. Within seconds, the prophets are in a feeding frenzy; dozens of them converge on the animal and take their turns sharing the Lieutenant's flavor.

"For Tasting Prophets, this looks pretty tasteless to me," I observe.

Said is more concerned with the beast's condition than my jokes - no one's treating the beast's convulsions. That's religion for you: they claim they want to end suffering, but they're absolutely wretched at it. The only people I know who do a worse job of it are the ISC.

After a couple minutes, the prophets have finished getting their licks in. Said finally manages to persuade them to inject the dog, who's lying on its side on its pillow, whimpering. "Well?" I ask the chief prophet. "How does Starfleet taste like?" (Hell, I've been dying to know the answer to that question ever since I met one of their more attractive female officers on Denú when I was still a kid. Unfortunately, you know what they say: the tighter the outfit, the colder the demeanor...)

"You are sick with love, Lieutenant." The prophet ignores me and addresses Said directly. "The disease permeates your flesh, your sweat. Love in such abundance is unhealthy. There is no surer sign of the tragedy that is to come."

"Great..." I moan. But the Fleeter's saying nothing, neither to me or to them.

"You taste of the water, Lieutenant Said, seawater in a burning sun, brackish, prickly, your senses are dulled by it. A man must know one's taste before he understands himself. Your flesh has a rich taste, but you have been hesitant to partake in the feast. Do you understand, Kenneth Said?"

"To be honest, I don't have a clue what you're saying, and I really don't care very much." the Lieutenant answers. "I *was* wondering if you tasted someone else, a very powerful taste, a man's taste. There's someone I need to find..."

The Prophets turn to each other and converse. They begin licking the dog again and I turn my head. The Lieutenant, who undoubtedly has seen a lot of weird customs, continues to observe, doing his best (unsuccessfully) not to be affected.

"You seek a man of rank and station." The chief Prophet finally reports. "You've already found him."

"I lost him," Said replies. "And I need to find him again."

"You have never lost him," the Prophet contradicts him. "But you have lost yourself."

"What a great fortune cookie that one would make," I interject.

"Or, more accurately, you have never truly found yourself." The Prophet insists, and he raises his hand to calm Said's anxiety. "Lieutenant, many people never find themselves. And in the larger scheme, this is no great matter, for some tastes are meant to be bland. But yours speaks of a richness, of a far higher potential. I beg you to find yourself, and soon."

Said sighs. "My thanks to the Tasting Prophets and your beast," he says. "I hope your banquets are rich, and your spice harvests bountiful." He pauses, as though he was wondering if he's said the right thing. Some cultures take compliments as the worst form of insult. I gave up trying to understand the universe years ago.

"Beware love," the Tasting Prophet says. "It will bring you great pain."

*Champagne's Place* is suddenly filled with the rattle of bells; for a few seconds, the hall turns into an asylum full of screaming inmates. Reverently, the holy flattened bloodhound is hoisted up to shoulder level and carted out of the gym, and the procession follows. The other fighters stand around wearing stunned expressions like summer fashions. If I didn't have better things to do, I'd teach them all a lesson. And as soon as the Procession has departed, Said collapses to the floor and sits cross-legged while he catches his breath. "That was too close, Roger."

I sit down next to him. There's something about the guy that makes you want to hit him on the arm or slap him on the back to cheer him up, and it's as frustrating as hell that you can't make contact even when you're in a good mood. "Too close? Wait until you meet Argos, Lieutenant." I tell him. "Then you can get really, really depressed."

## X: The Eye of Argos

Commerce isn't what it used to be, especially when you're transporting goods to a place like Vespera III. Every merchant I know despises that system. Yes, I knew it was a backwater, but I didn't realize it was a *self-sufficient* backwater that had a smaller market for luxury goods than your average wasteland. That's what you get when life for most people consists of sitting near gas vents and sniffing gasses that produce both nutrients and hallucinogens. When a planet's populace don't want for food, entertainment, or shelter – and are the laziest bastards in the galaxy to boot - there's not a whole lot you can sell to them.

After an hour of haggling, I arrange for a few tons of *adrium* spice-water to be shipped to the *Candlejack* – Vespera does mine a form of potash that I can pick up in trade and sell for a profit on most agricultural colonies - and I also procure several tons of tritanium and duridium. I don't care how lazy or self-sufficient you are, everyone pretty much needs those materials, and thanks to the salvage companies that picked over the remains of a recent Romulan-ISC battle, local supplies are plentiful. The metals don't set me back too much, and the insurance costs are low. Not that this is much of a problem for me (at least as long as we still have an economic system on the frontier), after thirty years of commerce and fisticuffs, I've done pretty good for myself.

Unfortunately, the war's really doing a major number on the economy of virtually every planet in this sector. Worse, I'm spending too much of my time listening to people complain about how bad the economy's getting. Why do people always feel like bitching on the shoulders of perfect strangers?

Said does some shopping as well, focusing on his medical needs. Starfleet's developed a new wonder drug to block the cascade of neurochemicals that's generated by his touch, and they've sent the formula over to Rakshasa Medical for synthesis and trials. You'd think that the Lieutenant would be happy to hear about this new development, but a sense of weariness permeates his laconic exterior. I suppose I'd be sick to death if I suffered from his affliction too.

But still, he could be a little more chipper. We did escape certain death (twice), you'd think that'd do *something* to encourage you to cast off the ol' shroud of glum.

I'll be glad to put Rakshasa behind me. The terminal's a big cavernous concrete dome, a converted Sikh temple (that religion died out on Rakshasa about fifty years ago) and a building of stark beauty. As a security precaution, Garuda Control insists we transport back to *Candlejack* together, so I wait impatiently. There's nothing on the viewscreens except a local cricket match (O joy of joys!), so I spend most of my time ogling a Tellarite woman (their porcine looks usually drive me away, but the upturned nose on this one actually looks cute). Said arrives from the hospital by local ground-shuttle – from the dirty glance he gets, I'd guess he's forgotten the local custom of greasing the driver's palm. He's also over an hour late.

“So are we going to be able to shake hands?” I ask him as he arrives.

Said pulls a hypospray out of his medikit. “Behold, the miracle that is iotropomine,” he states. “Unfortunately, it's only effective for about sixty seconds, and then a build-up of natural neurochemicals neutralizes it.” The Lieutenant pauses to make sure he didn't lose me – the look of mild interest on my face convinces him that he hasn't. “And we have no idea what frequent use will do to someone's neurochemistry. But Starfleet thinks it may have applications beyond my problem.”

“Let me guess. They hope that people who use this drug will cause ISC telepaths to receive static whenever they're scanned?”

“That'd be my guess,” Said informs me. I suppose I should be grateful he doesn't tell any of the obvious jokes, y'know, how I wouldn't need the drug to keep ISC ‘pathfinders from discovering anything in my brain. “Starfleet wants me to rendezvous with the Third Fleet so Dr. Latham can strap me into a medical bay for a week and see how the latest generation of neurochemicals will handle my talents.”

I stop to consider how Starfleet's new orders may affect our journey. “Wait a minute, if you're even *thinking* about altering our agreement on how long you get to use my ship...” My posture manages to be even more threatening than my vocal tone. Said gives me a long, serious look, and I can tell he's given the question a lot of thought even before I asked it. That doesn't bode well. But he doesn't answer me, not yet. “And you can tell Starfleet if they want to use me as a guinea pig for their drug they can bloody well kiss my...” I mutter.

“I won't do that to you, Roger.” Said promises, holding up his hand to calm me down. I'm starting to attract attention – it doesn't take much to attract security in a transporter terminal during the middle of a war - but the Lieutenant responds with an “everything's fine” hand signal, and they back away. Then the Lieutenant leans close to me and whispers. “I'm afraid I'm just still going to have to admire you from afar.”

Did Lieutenant Stiff Shirt actually crack a joke? Damn! But Said ignores the dumbfounded expression on my face and walks over to one of the many communications terminals that line the sides of the station. I follow him. “Roger, can I borrow that wide back of yours?” he asks. “I don't need people looking over my shoulder.”

I nod, walk over to him, and stand with my back turned to him. I must look like some sort of bodyguard (although I did bodyguard duty about twenty years ago, so the assumption isn't too far from the truth) “What are you doing?” I ask.

“Putting in a request to Intel,” the Lieutenant says. “It'd be good to know whether we can expect to run into any ISC fleets between here and Vespera.” I glance back and catch the logo of

the UFP and Starfleet come up on the terminal. “Eyes forward,” Said says, and he whacks my back with a data pad.

“How does it look?” I ask, a broad grin on my face.

“Still awaiting authorization.”

“I figured you and Starflint would be best buddies,” I tell him.

“Starfleet Intelligence is *no one’s* friend, Roger,” Is it my imagination, or is the trace of a really wretched experience being reflected in Said’s voice? “Although I won’t curse them too badly today if this intelligence is accurate...” He pauses, presumably to read data. “There’s an ISC echelon moving through the Barwood Cluster, but they’d need to plot a Warp 9 intercept course and expose themselves to Federation forces to get to us.” He doesn’t mention where the Federation forces are located – I suppose after my dealings with the *Tal Shiar* I should consider myself lucky to be getting *any* information from him. “I think we’ll be safe.”

“If that’s the only risk, let’s go.” I say.

I turn around as Lieutenant Said inserts a red datacard into the comm terminal. “Ooops,” he smiles as the screen scrambles and the computer hiccups and dumps the last thirty seconds of data out of its memory core. “So are you ready to enter that long bleak corridor between earth and star?” he asks me.

“Huh?”

“Are you ready for transport?” Said translates his previous remark into English.

“If you keep speaking in tongues, I’m going to train Dido to gnaw off your ankles.” I reply. “Let’s get out of here before someone decides the Tasting Prophets weren’t enough and brings out the Vomit Augurs.”

“Fine.” Said states, turning to walk toward the transporter. But I stop him. There’s something I have to say, even though it’s difficult for Roger Price to say them to another human being.

“By the way Lieutenant, before we head on up, I want to say that you really impressed me, the way you spoke to the *Tal Shiar*.” I say. “You’ve got some real guts inside that skinny Starfleet body of yours. It was hard to believe I was listening to an engineer talking to them that way.”

“Well, I’ve got a Captain in my head,” Said replies cryptically. “I don’t deserve your praise. I took the words, verbatim, from a confrontation that Greg Jensen had with the *Tal Shiar* during the General War.”

“It was still one of the most impressive pieces of brinkmanship I’ve ever seen.” I observe.

“Not really,” Said reply. “Greg got them to back down. I didn’t.” He places his bag on the cargo panel and declares its contents. The computer doesn’t recognize the hypo of iotropomine and there’s some bureaucratic whatever-will-go-wrong-will-go-wrong problem with the release form from Garuda, so it takes ten minutes of wrangling with the hospital to get the appropriate clearance. The Lieutenant and I can only sigh, slump against a wall, and wait for the bureaucracy to do its job.

“It’s nice to see even Starfleet has problems with this sort of crap,” I say.

“Speak for yourself,” the Lieutenant replies. “So what do you intend to do about Argos?”

“Well, for a start, I want to pull the damn plug,” I tell him. Mind you, that’s more of an end than a start.

“There may not be a plug to pull.” Said replies. “And then there are the ethical issues of killing a computer entity that may be a life form...”

“Oh please...” I moan. “I don’t need to have the bloody Prime Directive shoved down my throat one more time.”

“Prime Directive? But this has nothing to do with interfering with developing cultures...” Said objects, and then he sighs. “Look, if you don’t want Argos aboard your ship, you don’t have to keep it. That’s your right. If the Romulans want it back – unless Argos applies for political sanctuary – that’s their right. And if Argos is sentient, then it’s got rights too.”

“I’m human. It’s circuitry.” I protest. I point at me, and then at the data pad and repeat the motion while saying: “Rights. No rights. Rights. No rights.”

“Alright!” Said sighs heavily. “But I haven’t met Argos, so this whole conversation *could* be pointless...” He sighs and looks hard at me. “Tell me it’s pointless.”

“As far as *I’m* concerned it’s damn pointless.” I shrug. *I don’t care if it’s sentient or not: Argos is an infestation, and I want him gone. That’s my Prime Directive.*

“Do have your permission to do a search on your computer and learn what I can about him?”

“I’d rather have you stop your Starfleet moral sniveling and flush the Romulan bastard child into space!”

“I’ll see what I can find,” Said conspicuously ignores what I’m saying. “But Roger, I’m an engineer, not a computer technician. I have some training, and I can do basic maintenance and diagnostics on your average duotronic system without breaking a sweat, but if this is a bio-duotronic or a bio-multitronic system...”

I can see him almost shudder when he mentions “multitronic” (I’ve never heard of it, but if *this* Jeffries Tubeworm is scared of a piece of technology, I *know* I won’t like it).

“...you’d want the best computer specialists in the Federation, and that’s *not* me,” he concludes.

“I thought you did everything to perfection, Lieutenant,” I scoff.

Said responds with a very disturbing laugh. “I look at the clockwork of the universe when other people don’t,” the engineer says as he gets to his feet. “That’s nine-tenths of the battle. But the remaining ten percent is sheer Hell.”

“Yeah. But when it comes down to basics, whose life isn’t Hell?” I say. Even he can’t argue with that one.

Eventually, we clear up all the paperwork and beam back to *Candlejack*. The ship seems a little more claustrophobic today; I’m not sure why. I stop to feed Dido and pay homage to her homely beauty, while Said begins his computer system diagnostic. At his suggestion, I return the dead Argos box back to the main controls and reconnect it – the Lieutenant wants to take readings and compare the ship’s data stream when it’s installed to when it’s disconnected. I expect Argos to pipe up, but he doesn’t. Said checks the controls, while I take advantage of the delay – and the connection to the local water supply – to have a long shower. Rakshasa gets into your skin – deep into your skin - and it takes a lot of effort to get it out.

I always hate it when a planet tries to bond with you.

After a half-hour wait I receive authorization from Garuda Control, so I begin the pre-launch sequence. “You’d better stop trying to solve our computer woes until we’re safely beyond orbit,” I instruct the Lieutenant. He looks at me like he’s just woken up from a bad dream (he always looks at me that way when I break his concentration), and straps himself in.

“I was more concerned about Romulan infiltration and sabotage than problems with the computers.” Said informs me. His mind works in such pleasant ways, doesn’t it? “I’m not detecting any alien systems or possible cloaks aboard *Candlejack*. I could scan the ship with a tricorder...”

“Centimeter by centimeter?” I ask.

“That’s what it’d take to be sure.”

“And what are the odds they could get one past security *and* the sensors?”

“Not very high.” Said informs me.

“I’m really tired of this planet,” I declare, shaking my head, and so I begin the takeoff. The *Candlejack* slowly performs a vertical lift out of the port hanger, guided by a tractor beam (which is locked onto us until we reach low orbit – additional insurance against sabotage). The ship shakes hard as we ascend through the atmosphere, and I can read both discomfort and unease on the Lieutenant’s face. Is it my imagination, or is this ascent a little worse than usual?

“What’d you do to the stabilizers, Lieutenant?” I snap at Said.

Said’s already consulting the engineering board. “I know what the problem is. I’ll fix it once we reach orbit.”

The remark isn’t reassuring, but in minutes we hit planetary orbit and once again experience the reassurance of the gravity hiccup. Said unstraps himself and moves into the back section of the ship. I plug in the coordinates to *Vespera* and break orbit.

“Hello Roger.” It’s Argos. “Did you bring me a present?”

“I had a surprise in mind for you, Argos...” I reply. “But it didn’t work out.”

“I know,” Argos says. “But I liked my surprise better.” A chill runs down my spine. “You like your fighting art, your *bondo* matches, don’t you, Roger? Have you forgotten that when *bondoka* fight, they’re bound together, linked? It’s not the one who breaks the link who wins, Roger, it’s the one who best manipulates the symbiosis.”

“How’d you do it, Argos?” I ask. “How’d you trick the *Tal Shiar* into thinking you were dead?”

“I didn’t.” Argos states. “The part of me that was alive in that box *is* dead. But I outgrew it.” Argos’s voice snickers. “Dying isn’t fun, Roger. Even humans know *that*. So I found another way to live!”

“You put him in a real predicament, Argos.” A voice projects from the door of the bridge. It’s the Lieutenant. I guess we’re finally going to have a confrontation between the annoying and the more annoying.

Said’s face may as well be carved granite right now. “The Romulans want you back,” he tells Argos. “They’ll probably kill Roger if he doesn’t give you to them.”

I hate to admit it, but he’s absolutely right on that one.

“Hello, Lieutenant Kenneth Said.” Argos replies merrily. His visual presence paints the main viewscreen in green lines, seemingly squirming with delight. “It is good to be formally introduced.”

“Well, it certainly took you long enough,” Said tells the construct. “I’m disappointed you didn’t want to talk sooner.”

“Perhaps I’m shy...” Argos says coyly.

Said strides over the control console, and sits down casually. If he was trying to provoke a response from Argos by proximity, it doesn’t work. “Are you too shy to tell me what you want, Argos?”

“You’re going to have to guess.” Argos chirps.

Said yawns. “It’s been a long day. I don’t think I’d be a good guesser. You might say my power reserves are rather low right now.”

God, the guy’s even condescending to a computer. “Much like my patience,” I mutter.

“Silly Roger...” Argos chimes. “At best, your patience is the size of microscopic dust. And as for you, Kenneth Said, get your rest. You can guess later.” Said gets up from the console and seems to play along with Argos’s suggestion. “Is that beautiful voice going to visit you tonight?” he adds in a tentative, quizzical tone.

“Argos!” Said exclaims, with considerable mockery. “A gentleman never talks about the ladies who visit his bed. Although I am curious how you met her...”

“Oh, we haven’t really met,” Argos says. “The first night you were here, when you and Roger were asleep, I sensed her when she came to you. She was... beyond anything I’d ever experienced, in any of my lives. I didn’t know anything like her *could* exist. Where did you find her?”

Suddenly Argos sounds a lot less child-like.

“Argos...” Said smiles. “Secrets are a two-way street.” The lines on the viewscreen suddenly condense into a more menacing shade of green. “We’ll talk later.”

The lines suddenly lose their focus and intensity when Said leaves the bridge. “So he gave you more than you bargained for, didn’t he?” I taunt him.

“Roger, Roger, Roger...” Argos muses. “Oh Roger, I do love a good game of hide and go seek.”

A few minutes later, I return to our quarters, change into some athletic clothes, pull out my gravity bar, lay on my back on the bed, and start to do some lifting. Said’s sitting on his bed, eyes glued with maniacal ferocity to a datapad. He’s composing poetry. Periodically, the pad replays what he’s writing – something about a thousand eyed titan wandering a forest, unable to trust the trees. Where does he come up with this crap?

“Well, what’d you think?” I finally ask him. “What’s your first impression of Argos?”

Said glances at me, and talks while he composes his revisions. “Well, for one thing, I suspect he eavesdrops on every conversation aboard this ship, so we shouldn’t assume we have any secrets from him,” Said tells me. “I thought he was interesting, of course. *The verdant wild, black in an umbra soup...* no, that’s horrid, delete the line.”

“Interesting for a computer who thinks he’s a little kid?” I reply.

“He’s a *Tal Shiar* created program. The little boy in the machine role is only a cover,” Said opines, and then he sniffs the air. “God, Roger, you sweat like a moose in a sauna.”

“I took a shower... unlike some people.” I snap.

“I suppose I’m being a hypocrite.” Said admits.

“That’s new for Starfleet,” I return the admission with a jibe. His nose crinkles slightly. Good. Every little response with this guy’s a victory.

“My senses tend to get a little more acute when I’m writing poetry.”

“If you make me the subject of one of your stupid poems, I *will* kill you.” I promise.

“*The sweating lummox, master of bellowing, a galactic elk in rutting season...*” Said smiles. “No computer, that’s *not* a new line.”

I burst out laughing. “You frighten me, Lieutenant.” I declare.

“Roger, I’m one of the most harmless people you’re ever going to meet,” Said replies.

I snort derisively and return to the most important topic. “Argos sounded real interested in your girlfriend.”



“Well, why shouldn’t he be?” Said states. “He seems to be telepathic, and she’s a thing of...” and he stops to find the right words. “...transcending psionic beauty. You don’t know what it feels like when she’s inside your mind.”

“Hey, if it’s that good,” I say, grunting as I struggle to hold my arms straight as I lift two hundred kilos of steel and high gravity directly over my chest, “any chance I can give her a try?”

A momentary flash of anger comes over his face, and it’s intense. I’ve finally struck the nerve. “I don’t think that’d be a good idea, Roger.”

“It’s just a joke,” I say. “I’ve never known you to get so emotional, Lieutenant.”

“You’ve only known me for five days, Roger.” Said states.

“Yeah, but they’ve been five very *long* days,” I reply. There’s a long pause. “So what do you think we should do about Argos?” He says nothing. “Lieutenant?” I ask again, as I put aside the bar and sit up, panting. He glances at me, then looks away without answering the question. “Lieutenant!”

Some silences are more telling than others. The bastard been racking his brain, and he still hasn’t come up with a good answer. God, what’s a man to do?

The next few days pass at an unexpectedly sluggish pace. Said spends a lot of time working on ship’s systems unrelated to the computer, and it takes me five days to realize that he’s not doddling, but cautiously examining the possibilities for trapping our unwelcome guest.

And Argos is a little too quiet for my liking, too. Trying to figure out what either of them are going to do is a little too much like watching a game of Vulcan chess.

I watch Said while he’s sleeping to see whether his magical true love is going to come pay him another visit. But I don’t see her, and Argos doesn’t mention seeing her either. A pity. I’d wanted to see the Space Princess again to see if she would actually talk to me.

On the fourth day out of Rakshasa, we receive a report from the Federation news service that six emissaries that the Federation sent to the ISC at the beginning of the war have finally been returned – they were taken prisoner as soon as they entered ISC space. They were given a hero’s welcome – until they announced they’d negotiated the Federation’s formal surrender and were planning to present the papers to the President.

“Goddamn brainwashing,” I snarl. For once Said agrees with me. The disgust that’s etched on his face makes mine look positively benign.

“I’ll bet they never even made it to real negotiations. They probably didn’t even make it to the capital.”

“That’d be a pretty place. A land of peace and gardens and flowers and anyone who dares to raise their voice gets *zapped*,” I joke. At least I think it’s a joke. “I don’t even think I even know what it’s called. Toad Hall?”

“It’s called Desskyie.” Said replies.

“Which means ‘Frog Hollow’, right?” I quip.

“We don’t know anything about it except the name.” Like most factoids, it’s a pretty useless piece of information. The report of the brainwashed diplomats puts Said in a bad mood for the rest of the day, but that’s a good thing. It does some good to remind Said – and the rest of Starfleet – just what their enemy is really like.

On the fifth day out of Rakshasa, I pull *Candlejack* into the Reston system, seven planets surrounding the smaller of a pair of K class stars, and I stick us into low orbit around a cold gas

giant, a Neptunean. Its blue-white clouds actually give it an Earth-like appearance, and I catch the lieutenant giving it longing stares while he watches through the main viewscreen. The compact Starfleeter's honched over the co-pilot's seat: not sitting on it but using it as a prop so he can lean and crane his short neck. It's an surveyor's pose, infused with a melancholy silence; he's both examining the universe and keeping a vigil on it.

"You homesick?" I ask him when it becomes too hard to put up with his pensive stargazing.

"How can we be homesick? We're nomads, Roger. We don't have homes, only places we like," the Lieutenant answers. He doesn't bother looking at me as he's talking, but that's okay, eye contact is overrated.

"Is that why you didn't pack very much with you for the trip?" I ask.

"When your ship's just been destroyed, and all your possessions are loose molecules drifting around the *Bat'leth* Nebula, worldly goods don't take a very high priority in your life." Said declares.

"I can see that," I say, sitting down in the captain's seat and swiveling around to face him. "But surely you have things back on Earth?"

"Nothing I really care about, except maybe this." Said admits, and he pulls out a holostand, a holographic portrait player much like the holographic picture that's on my console. "I saved my portrait gallery and my message bank and left a copy in the Starfleet data base." He begins to flip through pictures: a few men and women in traditional Arab dress, a lot of pictures of various engine rooms, and a few people in Starfleet uniforms.

"No pictures of naked Orion animal women?"

"None that I'd keep in a Starfleet database..." Said smiles. "Though I don't really care for the name. 'Animal' implies that they can be treated as sub-humans... and if you're thinking of offering me some lip that implies the only way to live is to be some callous jerk that doesn't give a damn about anyone but themselves..."

This is the first time in awhile that Said's been a complete hardcase on Starfleet ethics, and after a week of casual conversation, the intensity catches me off guard. "What brought this on?"

"I'm just tired of hearing people treat my beliefs like they should be a badge of disgrace."

"Well, take the defensive systems off-line, Lieutenant." I snap back. "Yeah, I like looking at them, and if two or three of them crawled into my bed, it'd be paradise. But I didn't mean that it was okay to trade in them. Even I'm not *that* big of a pig."

"Fine." Said says with a telling sigh.

"Although every man is entitled to a few fantasies." I smile. When your opponent's being a hardass, the best way to win an argument is to go around it.

The Lieutenant doesn't press the issue. He continues to flip through the portraits until it changes to a schematic of a Constitution class ship. "*Ark Royal*. My quarters were down here..." He points to an area on the lower decks as though I were actually supposed to care about where he stayed.

"I can't even imagine ever staying aboard a ship with that many people." I say.

"And this is my Captain..." Said tells me, and he brings up a picture of someone who's a virtual shipyard of a man, so damn blond and handsome that he looks more like a computer simulation than an actual human being. "Gregory Livermore Jensen."

"What a horrible middle name," my nose crinkles slightly. "So this is the Gwaiian superman?" Said raises an eyebrow. "Your Dr. Latham told me about him." I answer the unasked question. "You and he shared some sort of telepathic bond?"

“Telepathic integration would be more accurate,” the lieutenant says. “We didn’t just talk to each other, or share each other’s thoughts. We became one being. Said-Jensen-Gable-Nagura-Pratt.”

“It’s too bad you didn’t have Roger Price along for the ride.” I stick out my chest in a mock boast. Dido comes scuttling onto the bridge and curls down beside the Captain’s chair.

“A rugged individualist like yourself?” Said scoffs. “Roger, I can’t imagine a worse form of Hell for you. The only way to survive was to die inside...”

“Fine,” I say, a remark that’s meant less as an acknowledgement and more as a way out of the conversation. I’ve had my fill of the idea that telepathy is some sort of spiritual experience (“what a trail of warp exhaust”, as my dad used to say), so I turn around to leave - and that’s when one of the pictures of Said’s Captain Wunderkind suddenly comes to life and begins to talk. And it doesn’t look like the Lieutenant was the one who had initiated the talk protocol...

“*Kenneth, if you’re playing this message, well you know the reason. I only hope you escaped whatever happened to me unscathed.*” Damn, even the voice, a healthy baritone, is a thing of masculine beauty. I’m starting to get jealous of this perfect (if dead) ‘Fleeter and I’ve never even met him! Said frantically shuts down the portrait player, and the message vanishes – only to reappear on the main viewscreen.

“Very cute, Argos.” I say. Now the bastard’s tormenting the Lieutenant.

“As long as you live, and grow, and work toward becoming the man you’re capable of being, I’ll be alive.” the human dreadnought tells the lieutenant. “Don’t become complacent, Kenneth. I know what you’ve been through, and how tempting it is to crawl back into a shell. You’ll be dishonoring my memory if you do that.”

“That’s a little harsh.” I remark, casually glancing at the lieutenant. The remark’s far too glib for the moment: Said has collapsed into the co-pilot’s seat and sits there and stares at the screen, his lower lip drawn tight over his upper, and he’s shaking.

“Over the years, I’ve encountered many alien beliefs and philosophies, and one of the ones I’ve come to really admire is the Braavi.”

“That’s an odd choice,” I state as the Lieutenant ignores me, but it *is* odd – the Braavi are a primitive, nomadic people who’ve been forced to live in the remote polar mountains of the Vudar homeworld. Not particularly a well-known culture. The hologram captain continues to talk, speaking in a smooth baritone that most actors would envy.

“They believe that every man has two great loves, two partners in life: a *coltoi* and a *colyroj*. The *coltoi* is a “soulbinder”, the sexual mate, a mate to bear offspring and nurture the body, much like a wife. The *colyroj* is the “soulsharer”, the intellectual mate, a person whose company lifts their mate’s spirit, challenges their intellect, and provides guidance when *coltoi* is unable to give it. The *colyroj* also has the duty to keep the partner’s soul alive after he’s gone.”

The image straightens. “Kenneth, you’re the closest thing to a *colyroj* I’ve ever had. I hope we have many years to grow together, but if the universe cheats us, I’m entrusting you with my... well, my soul.”

I glance over at Said. It looks like he’s about to break down into tears.

“The way I want you to honor it is by living well. Push yourself. Become a Captain, or design starships, or invent transporters capable of bridging the gaps between systems, or stop the damn war. I’m not letting you off the hook, Ensign.” There’s a condescending smile on Jensen’s face that reminds me a lot of Said’s most irritating moments. “Even from the grave, I’m your commanding officer. So you have your orders.”

“Oh Greg...” the words just tumble out of the Lieutenant’s mouth without thinking.

“When you make that discovery, or achieve your destiny, whatever it may be, think of me, and then I’ll rest well. Good-bye Kenneth. Dream big, warp speed and God fly beside you.”

The hologram vanishes with a blink, and once again we’re treated to the false image of Earth on the cloud surface of a Neptune.

I look over at the still shaking Lieutenant and shout “Argos!” Nothing happens, so I repeat the bellow. I’m about to smash the console with my fist when green lines are suddenly overlaid on the main viewscreen.

“You hadn’t viewed his death message, had you Kenneth?” Argos says. “You needed to see it, and you know it. He’d have wanted you to see it.”

“How’d you do it, Argos?” I ask. Said’s still not in a mood to say much.

“I simply accessed the files in the device and transferred them into the main database. The Lieutenant’s embarked on a grand quest to find his Captain; I felt he needed to know his Captain’s wishes, to judge whether he’d want to be found or not.” Argos explains. “Yes, it was cruel, but friendship, like love, is a cruel business.”

“My friend...” Said spits out numbly.

I feel incredibly sorry for the man. I get up, get ready to give him a slap on the back – then I remember the consequences of making physical contact and I stop myself. Unfortunately, as soon as she sees me get to my feet, Dido assumes I’m getting up to feed her, so she makes a beeline for my legs. I trip over the stupid thing and inadvertently tackle the Lieutenant. A wild feeling passes over me as I make contact with him, like the mother of all orgasms, and then a fighting rage...

...And then next thing I remember, I’m huddled in a corner of the bridge, cowering underneath the engineering console, shaking like an epileptic. The Lieutenant’s hovering over me with a ripped shirt, a busted lip and nose, a swollen eye, and fingermarks on his neck. He suppresses a cough. He’s monitoring me with a medical tricorder, and there’s a hypospray lying beside my knee.

“What happened?” I croak. My breathing slows down - it feels like I’ve been hyperventillating.

“Well, once upon a time, there were two great strands of primordial antimatter and matter, and they met, and there was a Big Bang,” Said replies, spitting out a lump of blood and a tooth. “And because the matter strand had a higher mass due to the e-lepton particle differential, our universe was born.”

Smartass. “No, I meant what happened now!”

Said smiles, though it’s gentle, not condescending. It must be the blood. “We touched. And you lost control. But as long as you’re okay, don’t worry.” Said tells me. His swollen face does its best to maintain a sense of calm.

“Me okay? You’re the one who looks like you’ve been dragged through an asteroid field in a tractor beam.” I stammer. “I-I’m really sorry, Lieutenant. I guess I’m just violent and unstable.”

Said shakes his head. “The reaction’s pretty much random, Roger.” Said says. “Violence is rare, but a Vulcan monk did the exact same thing to me about a year ago.”

“I’ll bet his punches felt like a little girl throwing tribbles compared to mine,” I boast, and I find it hard to stop laughing. I guess the aftereffect of being touched by the Lieutenant is a lot like being drunk. Actually, it feels disturbingly good. “You need help getting cleaned up?”

“There’s nothing I can’t handle,” Said replies. “I’m going to stay on the bridge and see if I can track down where Argos is storing itself in memory.” He shakes his head. “I’m motivated now.”

Six days later, eleven days after Rakshasa, one day until Vespera (you know, the term “days” gets overused to the point of confusion when you’re a freighter captain, especially given the lack of an actual “day” in space), we arrive at the Dante system. It’s a great place to go if you like looking at asteroids, but occasionally raiders drop their supply caches here, so we drop out of warp to scan the system. The Lieutenant didn’t object to my suggested mission, although he does set a two-hour time limit. Two hours should be plenty of time. I enter the bridge and find the lieutenant hunched over the science console, frantically working on the computer systems with his usual mad Dido-like intensity. The only thing I notice that’s different about him are the large bags under his eyes. I’ve noticed he hasn’t been getting a lot of sleep lately.

“So Argos takes your Captain’s memory in vain, and you’re out for blood?” I ask.

“You were ready to space him yourself.”

“I’m not questioning the idea, just the motivation.” I state.

“I’m not trying to kill Argos. I just want to make sure he doesn’t get out of hand,” Said declares. “Known galactic cultures are littered with tales of artificial intelligences that went mad and committed genocide.”

“And normal intelligences have never gone insane?” Argos suddenly makes an appearance, the familiar green lines appearing on the main screen.

“That *is* true,” Said states as he gets up from the chair and walks over to the sensor station. I give him a wide berth. “But Argos...” he says as he works on the sensor array controls. “...you haven’t done much to dispel the paranoia.”

“What could I have done?” Argos asks. “Saved you from the ISC? Or prevented Roger from transporting you off the ship?” I blush at the latter.

“Something like that, yes,” Said declares. “Or better yet, you could tell us the truth about where you come from, what your intentions are, and cooperate with us.”

“The *Tal Shiar* made me, so that makes me a spy,” Argos answers, once again assuming a child-like tone. “As for my intentions – I don’t have any. Certain things do pique my curiosity, of course, but I have no plans, no... grand designs.”

Said stops making adjustments, and walks over to the auxiliary transporter controls. Dido’s in his way – he pats her and gently nudges her out of the way. “Argos, if you don’t return to the Romulans, Roger will die.”

Argos laughs, a boyish laugh that’s full of ridicule.

“Do you hate Roger that much, Argos?” Said asks. Argos laughs again.

“This is getting annoying,” I snap. “The damn thing’s tempting me to pull the autodestruct just to get rid of it...”

“Roger Dodger, check the long range sensors. You may get your wish.”

Said and I both break out into a cold sweat. We rush for the sensor console; I get there first, which causes the lieutenant to immediately back away. I take one look at the sensors and shout: “This isn’t a trick?”

“It’s not a trick,” Said insists. “I’ve locked him out of the sensors.”

“Red alert!” I shout, and I immediately move to the weapons console and start checking our combat readiness. Said shoots me a grim look, probably reflecting what I’m feeling at the

moment. “You remember Starfleet’s intelligence on that ISC echelon that would need to go on a Warp 9 intercept course to reach us?” I ask. Said nods. “A strike cruiser from that echelon has just entered the system – at Warp 9.3 – on an intercept course. It’ll be in attack range in twelve minutes.”

I don’t need to tell Said what a mismatch this fight is going to be, and *not* in our favor.

“How’d they know we were here?” Said asks, and then shakes his head in disgust. We both know the answer. You have to give the *Tal Shiar* credit in using one enemy - the ISC - to get rid of another - us. One of us had to have a bigger gun. A pity it couldn’t have been us.

## **XI: Out, Out, Brief Candle**

All battle is sweat. When I dream, I return to my prime fighting days. My left arm aches, I look down and listen to the strap as I dance the *bondo* combat waltz, and I wait for my opponent to make that one fatal mistake. *Bondo*, properly played, is a trapper's sport. Take two big powerhouses, strip them down to their trunks, place a one-tenth of a kilogram glove on their right hands, tie their left wrists together with a two meter long leather strap, and tell them to punch and grapple each other until they wrap the strap completely around the opponent's neck and cry *bondo*. These days, most fighters just grab the strap at the meter mark, line their body away from the opponent's punching arc, and tug until they've either pulled the opponent off balance for a set-up punch or exhausted them. In my day, even guys as big as me kept the strap loose and danced. We were foxes in bearskins. God, what a glorious way to live.

Sweat ballet. I use the memories of my best ring days as a shield against the creeping years. I hate to admit it, but as I now edge toward my fiftieth year, I can feel my body start to sodden itself with age. I can't describe how much I hate that feeling. Yeah, if I work real hard, I can stay in fighting trim until my body reaches 65 or 70 and I officially reach middle age. Hell, when I was a kid, I was once beaten senseless by an old *bondoka* who I later found out was a great grandfather. (Mandy Wasca - he was an overripe old cuss, but God was he ever tough. If only I could be in such spectacular shape when I reach his age...)

Aging is another form of defeat, and that's what really irks me. As good as Wasca was, and as bad as I was at the time, I hated losing to him. That's always been the case, and you know: the more hopeless the battle, the more I hate the prospect. Losing battles make me do stupid things, like getting into a back alley fist fight against Mikos Samarand when I'm so drunk that it's a miracle I can still breathe. I hate being outmatched.

Like today, in a fight between my *Candlejack* and an ISC Medium Strike Cruiser.

“Eleven minutes to weapons range,” Said reports. “I recommend setting a course 22 Mark 16 at Maximum Warp.”

“Into an asteroid belt?” I point out as I look at the navigation display. “That’s no refuge for a freighter.”

“The strike cruiser’s been travelling at speeds above Warp 9 for eleven days,” Said tells me something I already know. “It’s got to be on the verge of collapse. There’s a lot of microscopic dust around here. If we can use the dust particles to overload their shields, we should be able to get a few good shots through their defenses. And if their systems are on the verge of breakdown, who knows what could happen?”

I pull out a flask from my belt pocket and take a sip – Spican Vodka. But I can’t afford to get drunk now, even though I need to get drunk so bad I could cry.

“Roger?” I’d swear that Said wants to knock the flask from my hand. “Roger! It’s our best shot, Roger!” Said adds.

*Best shot in the dark, but I’ve got other plans.* “Full stop,” I order, ignoring the Lieutenant’s suggestion. “And strap yourself in, Lieutenant. I’m shutting down everything except life support.”

There’s a click and a deep sinking hum, and then almost complete silence. The bridge, illuminated only by faint light emergency lights, is washed in a dark, demonic red. Even the main viewscreen and the sensors have been turned off. I can see the hard shadows on Said’s face questioning my actions. *Too bad, Starfleet boy; this is my ship, not yours.*

“They saw us powering down,” Said petitions me with irrelevant facts. “I don’t think playing dead will work.”

“Trust me, Lieutenant,” I smile. I lean back in the captain’s seat – my seat – and begin to whistle.

The minutes pass silently, except for Dido whining in the darkness (yeah, it drives her spastic, especially since we’re in zero G and my lady dog’s gently bouncing off the walls). The tension fills the bridge like an echo that won’t stop. Said’s face, faintly reflecting the red light, is expressionless, which gives it a creepy phosphorescence that almost makes it intimidating. Periodically, I check the chronometer.

“You trying to confuse them, Roger?” The lieutenant almost mumbles the question.

“Nope.” I say. I fold my arms, hold them tight against my chest, then unfold them and take a deep breath. The atmosphere is cool, it chills my lungs, but it tastes good.

“Six minutes.” Said states. *Watch the clock, pass the time, just as long as you don’t start spouting off more of your stupid poetry. But he probably feels the same way about my whistling.*

At one point, Dido comes floating by the console. The Lieutenant corrals her and scoops her into her arms, strokes her gently, and tries to calm her. The dog licks his face. The two of them have quite the bond, don’t they? That’s going to be too bad.

“Three minutes,” Said says as the time passes. I simply smile, and restore the ship’s power. The reawakened lights almost blind me. Said looks at me as if he were questioning my sanity, not just my strategy. I smile, lean back, and hit the communications console. It’s time for a chat with the visiting team.

“This is Roger Price, captain of the free trader *Candlejack*.” I say. “I have the ‘war criminal’ Kenneth Said aboard my ship, and I’ll surrender him into your custody if you agree not to attack.”



“Oh Roger...” Said moans, rolling his eyes as he puts the dog on the floor. Damn! I’ve just sold him out to the ISC and all he can do is roll his eyes like a disapproving parent? Doesn’t this guy have any manhood in him whatsoever?

This ISC captain’s a Veltressai – one of four telepaths who are mentally linked to each other so they make a matched set. They have the same bald, bulbous skull that I’ve seen in pictures of the Talosians, the forbidden planet folks – a skull large enough to make you want to use it as a piñata just so you can see what’s inside. They’re a really ugly bunch, by human standards, and (judging by past encounters) the most snotty of all the major ISC races. “You insult us,” the Veltressai states in an almost metallic voice.

“Wait a minute... I’m playing it straight! Offering a gift of peace and friendship!” I shout. “I’m giving you Kenneth Said, Butcher of Pholos, and I’ll even gift wrap him for you.”

“I cannot believe your impudence,” the Veltressai accompanies the statement with a hard stare. His filtered voice has a background sound that makes me wince - it compares unfavorably with sandpaper on stone, or fingernails on a highly abrasive surface. “It takes a great deal to anger us, but I assure you that you have succeeded. Your desire to be punished is inexplicable, but – sadly – we have learned how to accommodate such wishes.”

The viewscreen goes dead. “Huh?” I say, turning to the lieutenant. What the hell just happened? He couldn’t have thought it was a trick!

Said cups his jaw with his right hand, like Rodan’s Thinker (if the Thinker was a skinny guy who still wore clothing). “Computer, replay the message we just sent them,” Said asks. My picture suddenly comes up on the viewscreen.

“Hey, buttocks-for-brains!” I’m shouting, putting my arm around the Lieutenant, who’s smiling merrily. “The only way you’re getting your hands on a honest-to-God Federation hero is over my dead body!”

“Aw, Roger...” the Lieutenant says. “You’re wasting our time talking to...” Suddenly he looks like he’s smelling something rank. “Pacifists. Can’t we just kill them?”

“Kenneth! I wanted to capture a few so I could use one of their bulbous freaky skulls as a piñata!” I laugh. “And drink their brains!” Said joins me in laughing.

“Argos...” I snarl. “The little bastard.”

“That was rather obnoxious, even for him,” Said shrugs. The Lieutenant stands over my panel, accesses the navigation controls, and directs us into the asteroid field. I’m too stunned to protest. “Speaking of melodrama - so I’m a butcher, am I?”

“Look, I...” I really don’t know what to say, now that my attempt to use him as ballast has failed.

“Roger, I’d have surrendered myself to save you,” Said turns and glares at me. “But I wanted to wear them down first, and not make it look too easy.”

“Well, whatever’s happened, we’re in for a fight,” I say.

“One minute to contact.” Said says. “Indeed, a fight. By the way, we’ve just entered the microasteroid field,” he adds. It’s a statement of the obvious.

The viewscreen shows us a field of dust particles, dust everywhere, thick enough to blind a civilization. Most of the particles burst into tiny white fire specks when they strike our deflection screen. Traveling at warp, the flames do a Doppler shift when they expire: the viewscreen is a trip through a pyrotechnics field shifting color almost faster than the eye can follow.

“Let’s go deeper into the field,” I suggest.

“No,” Said tells me. “We don’t need bigger rocks, we need higher particle densities. We need to overload their shields. Can you arm the rear weapons? I know you’ve added a photon launcher to the standard compliment.”

I blush - photon torpedoes may not be illegal, but Starfleet doesn’t like them on civilian craft. I bring up the main weapons display. “This *is* hopeless, you know.”

“If it wasn’t, I probably would have killed you when you tried to make your bargain,” Said says. The threat takes me aback, but his facial expression is a sharply angled mask with shaman eyes that convinces me he’s not bluffing. “I’ve turned my cheek to you for the last time, Roger Price. Now let’s see if we can survive long enough to become enemies.”

I don’t even know how to respond to that threat; I guess I’ll save the reply for a more appropriate moment. “Defensive systems are fully charged. Missile G’s are standing by, Phaser-1s and Phaser-2s are also charged. Rear photons are ready. Do you think I should overload them?”

The Lieutenant performs a deep scan on the enemy vessel. “You’d better. It still looks pretty sturdy. Forward shields are reinforced, aft shields are weakest. If you can, target the right nacelle, preferably at range of five clicks – and preferably immediately after they’ve made a turn. I’d like to see if we can use the dust to weaken their most vulnerable shields.” Said sighs.

“Roger.” I confirm the order, only accidentally saying my name. “Let’s hope there’s some magic in our photons. You do appreciate that an ISC strike cruiser has three times our firepower, and even its weakest shields are nearly twice our strength?”

The minute’s up. The Strike Cruiser, which resembles a manta ray that’s been bitten by a vampire, decelerates as it enters the dust belt, giving us a few extra precious seconds. Unfortunately, when it’s traveling at Warp 6, the Lieutenant’s strategy won’t be as effective as it would be at Warp 9. *Why can’t our enemies be dumb?*

The first barrage of Phaser-3s catch us in our forward right and aft right shields, while *Candlejack* is in mid-turn. We fire a single Phaser-2 in response, which tickles its nose.

“Aft starboard shields down to 83%...” Said shouts. The ship shudders. “Make that 52%... PPDs coming in...”

“Oh hell...” I snarl. The ship rocks wildly as every shield on the ship is bombarded by a resonating wave of highly charged plasma, and lights start flashing all over the bridge. Fortunately, none of them is over the photon launcher control. “Give me the range!” I shout.

“Twelve clicks and closing...” Said informs me. “I’m trying to keep us along the ecliptic.”  
“What?”

“The microasteroids are on an orbital path,” the lieutenant explains. “So I’m sticking to it.”

The ship rocks again. This time they’ve hit our aft shield with a forward firing Phaser-3 and a Phaser-1. More lights blink, the emergency life support filters kick in, and the ship decelerates hard. “They just knocked out our right warp engine,” the Lieutenant says, getting out of the chair. “Try to keep us alive while I go down and fix it.”

Our sudden deceleration increases the difference in velocity between the two ships, and the Strike Cruiser overshoots us at Warp 6. I panic and fire the photons a second too soon. Sure, they connect with the Cruiser and drop its rear shield drop, but the feedback shreds our own forward shield. No time to worry about that now. I follow the attack by launching fast drones out of our single working missile rack. The Cruiser attempts to perform evasive maneuvers, but they needed to kick up the ECM sooner; the drone makes a perfect line to its target and detonates a

few meters from its rear hull. Great arcs of electricity spread over the Strike Cruiser's aft sections, and plasma starts to vent from the left engine. *At least we damaged the bastard more than I thought we would.* But any urge I have to celebrate is dashed - hard - when I spot a pair of plasma torpedoes shooting out of the Strike Cruiser's rear ports. I was hoping we might have disabled at least one of them.

"Plasma!" I bellow at the Lieutenant over the intercom at the top of my lungs. "They're throwing plasma at us!"

The Lieutenant immediately understands the ramifications. "I'm manually transporting a photon torpedo into their path," Said informs me. "Detonate it when the torpedoes get in range."

I hope this works; I lifted those damn torpedoes out of the wreckage of *USS Ajax* eleven years ago and they're probably older than the Lieutenant. I turn the ship so that the plasmas will detonate on the starboard side (where I still have a working Phaser-2); sensors highlight where the transporter signal will drop Lieutenant Said's surprise. It's a good fix. The photon transport places it within range to take out both plasmas, so I fire the phaser-2. Our impromptu mine works beautifully: there's a flash of green, then a huge explosion. Problem solved.

But then I notice a single sphere of green hurtling out of the explosion, rushing directly for our forward shield. We only destroyed one of them.

"No!" I scream. "No! No! Damn you!"

I attempt to fire a Phaser-2, hoping that the bright red flashing light display on the console is the malfunction, and the phaser's actually operational. But nothing happens. I shout another, nastier obscenity.

The plasma connects with our forward shield; what little remains after the photon feedback is destroyed, and arcs of energy engulf the entire ship, perfusing the systems. The first thing I hear is Dido yelping. Right now, I don't care if she's alive or dead. I'm just lucky that I kicked my chair away from the panel in time to *not* receive third degree burns on my hands. The ship's gravity field suddenly flips to the wrong setting, making it look like we're listing at a twenty-degree angle. I can hear Dido's claws slide along the deck as she skids into a bulkhead, so I guess she's still alive. The ceiling sparks and my nostrils flare at the alarming smell of molten metal. There's a blackened area over the support strut that separates the bridge consoles.

There's a plasma fire raging directly above the bridge.

And that's when main power decides to kick out, and suddenly it's completely dark except for the stars and the light from the oncoming Phaser-1s.

"Roger!" Said shouts. He rushes onto the bridge, scoops his medical bag and then lifts Dido. "We're done here! It's time to go!"

The emergency battery kicks the lights back on, but I know he's right. I hate to admit it, but there's not the slightest doubt: *it's time to abandon Candlejack.* Without saying a word, I head in the direction of the escape pod. "Arm destruct sequence," Said shouts at the computer.

*Hey, that's my job, you Starfleet bastard!*

We seal the bridge door behind us. The escape pod's located under the main corridor, accessible through a hatchway below the metal deckplates. I crouch down to lift the plates, feel something jut into my arm, and hear the hissing sound of a hypospray.

"We're in close quarters," the Lieutenant explains. "Can't worry about contact now."

"Roger..." a familiar voice calls out over the intercom. "I thought you cared for your ship, Roger... You said no flames were hotter than your pride..."

"I can think of one ship's system I won't miss," I smile, as I open the path to the ladder. Said responds with a slight shove, a signal for me to shut the hell up. I suppose I should watch my mouth: it would be a bad thing if a spiteful Argos magnetically sealed the escape pod so we couldn't separate from *Candlejack* before it gets snuffed.

"And you, Kenneth Said," Argos snarls. "What about Starfleet's 'new life and new civilizations' credo? What about your mission to seek out unique cultures? Don't *I* qualify as a unique culture?"

There's a creak from behind us, and a hull breach warning sounds. The bridge must be gone now - we may only have seconds to escape. I reach the pod and punch in the door code. "You do indeed," the Lieutenant tells Argos, as he begins to climb down the ladder. "I was hoping we'd somehow get control of the ISC ship and transfer you into a compatible system, but I guess that's not to be. I'm sorry, Argos. Please don't interfere."

I climb into the escape pod, a round, plastic environment with leather seats (I replaced the originals long ago) and activate a preset transporter sequence to transfer the items from my trophy case into the escape pod's cargo storage area - no sense in losing my momentos. Luckily, the *Candlejack's* cargo transporter is still operational, because I can hear the materialization hum. Said enters through the hatch, his slim Starfleet body casting a wide shadow as the ship's lights flicker above us. *Hurry up, you idiot*, I don't say.

"Computer, trigger navigation program Deaththroes." Said shouts, and he closes the hatch.

I give the Lieutenant as nasty a look as I've ever given anyone in my entire life, even my wife. "You just *had* to give the *Candlejack's* final order, didn't you?" I snarl, balling my right fist and belting Said hard in the face. He stumbles backward into a chair, holding his nose. I grab Dido from him and strap myself in. The Lieutenant does the same, returning my graveyard stare. I smile, and somehow that puts our little conflict on hold. The Starfleeter, ignoring the blood that trickles down his face, turns to a console and runs through the procedural checklist.

"Not very much memory in the computer system," he notes.

"What does that mean?" I ask.

"Argos couldn't have made it out," Said answers. "This system wouldn't serve his needs."

I nod. Not that I expect us to be so fortunate - my cynical intuition tells me that he's probably in here somewhere. But it's comforting (if not joyous) news.

Now secure, I draw my attention to the viewport and see if I can spot *Candlejack* and the Strike Cruiser's venting plasma trails. We're too far away to see the actual ships, of course, but the plasma trails point the way like flares. There they are, two bright lines in the dusty sky, getting closer...

The Lieutenant cranes his neck to see them too. "I think she's about to..."

The jousting trails cross and there's a single explosion. Only one, clean explosion. A plasma trail emerges from it, and continues to paint across the sky.

*Damn, I really did want to turn the buttheads into a piñata. But what the hell does it matter now? My ship's gone.*

"Good night, Jack," I say with a smile. "Just one more ship destroyed by the ISC. Who's going to remember you?"

"We will. It was very... cozy."

"Yeah," I agree.

"With Allah as my witness, I swear I will *never* lose a starship again," Said declares with a headshake, then he changes the subject. "So what are you going to do about the Romulans?" he asks as he wipes his nose on his sleeve.

"I dunno." I shrug. "Ask to see the Praetor and spit in her face?"

There's a long silence, a silence that becomes intolerable. "By the way, thanks for blowing up my ship," I finally snap. "You just had to drag your enemies into *my* world, didn't you?"

"Roger," the Starfleet replies. "For once in your life, stop spoiling for a fight. I know you're upset. Although after that punch..."

"You earned it!"

"...and the little bargain you tried to make with the ISC..." Said states. "I thought once you got to know me I'd earn a little loyalty and respect. I guess you're not capable of giving it."

"Welcome to the universe, Kenneth Said. It's a cold, hard, dark place, and it doesn't get warmer, softer, or lighter." I retort. "By the way, if I was such a heartless bastard, why didn't I shove you back into *Candlejack* and seal the hatch behind me?" He doesn't have an answer. "I protect my own skin first, sure," I continue. "But I ain't a Klingon. And you know it, otherwise you wouldn't have given me the entropo..." My tongue wrestles with the name of the drug and gets slammed hard. "...whatever it was you gave me."

"Maybe I'm just a fool." Said states, and he stops my reply with a gesture. "No obvious jokes, I know it makes the perfect comeback line."

"Fine. No jokes... fool." Said scowls. "So what we do now?"

"We wait for the ISC to pick us up, I suppose," the Lieutenant says. "They'll entertain us. They always do."

"It would have been nicer if Argos had just blown up the ISC's brains like he did the last time," I mutter, looking out at the stars, trying to pick out a fresh plasma trail. We're still in the microasteroid field, and it's very hard to see. Of course, that'll probably block ISC efforts to find us.

"Wait a minute..." Said stares at me with wide eyes. "Are you saying *Argos* killed those people?"

"Yeah."

"Not the Crysian?"

The Crysian. His cosmic girlfriend? I guess I finally have a name. Sounds vaguely Andorian. "Nah, Argos did it," I affirm with a nod. "A pity he went on strike during this fight..."

"That doesn't make sense..." Said muses. "A telepath couldn't hide himself in pure electronics. He'd need an organic component..."

Suddenly we both look at Dido. The dog stares back at us, as if she knew we were thinking something unpleasant about her. "But how could Argos have reconstituted the dog after the ISC killed her?" I wonder aloud. "Was there some sort of failsafe?" Said turns away from Dido and stares at me. "What?" I say. It's more of a repudiation than a question.

"A dog's brain would be too small to host a telepath," the lieutenant said. "*But much of a human brain... is unused.*"

There's another long silence – sometimes, it seems like it's the best way we communicate. "If this is a joke..."

"The Romulan telepathic entity was dying," Said tells me. "So it found the only host available. It hid in your subconscious - and merged with it. It used the ship's systems to store data, but the core of its personality and consciousness is..." he says, and points at my forehead.

I'm too flabbergasted to speak. "No wonder I couldn't trap the entity, because I couldn't find his organic component. Roger Price, *you* are Argos."

"No!" I say. "No, that's... there's no chance. For one thing Argos talks like a child..."

"Maybe it's a cover? Maybe it's nested among your childhood memories? Maybe your subconscious is just incredibly immature?"

I ignore the insult. I don't even mark it on the scorecard – Said's entitled to one, and I've got much bigger things to worry about.

"But why would my subconscious help me against the first ISC attack and not the second?" I ask.

"I don't know," Said scowls. "Maybe it absorbed psionic energy from the Crysian. Maybe the torture kicked something inside your head that didn't get triggered the second time. Maybe Argos had come to believe it was a separate entity and stopped wanting to help you. Maybe..."

"I'm getting awful tired of hearing the word 'maybe.'" I snap. "This is insane, lieutenant."

"Roger, how much time have you spent alone in the last few years?" Said asks.

"A lot," I answer. "But what does *that* have to do with anything?"

The Lieutenant's on a roll. The words just gush out from his Starfleet mouth. "Argos saved my life twice: once when the ISC would have captured me, and once when you were about to space me. Don't deny it. He also brought up Greg's final message, which he claimed was benign interference in my personal life. I didn't believe him at the time, but maybe..."

"Can you just stop this, Lieutenant?" I ask. Of course, the Lieutenant, determined to bask in the sunshine of his own cleverness, can't shut the hell up.

"He senses that you've been alone too long. You want to be my friend – something which your frontier code refuses to let you become - so it does the job for you."

"That's ridiculous." I say. "Besides, there's no way my subconscious mind could be nicer than my conscious."

"There's always a first time," Said tells me. "Id-superego reversal?"

"Okay!" I shout. I'll let him win for now. "Suppose you're right. How can I get rid of this *thing* that's inside me?"

From the look on his face, I don't need telepathy to guess at his answer. But he surprises me.

"Maybe the Vulcan priests might be able to help. They do similar things with the Vulcan *katra*." I just stare at Said – Vulcan mystics guard their secrets more fiercely than the *Tal Shiar*. "But it's very possible that this thing inside you has become so tightly wound with your mind that even they couldn't separate them."

"So I have to cope with something else living inside my head?" I ask.

Said shakes his head. "I may be one of the few people in the galaxy who can truly sympathize with you. And maybe that's why Argos preserved me." He locks my face with a serious look and a half-smile. "Because deep down, we're kin, Roger Price."

No. Deep down, I want to vomit, and not just from the syrupy Starfleet bilge in that last sentence. But before we can continue our conversation, the capsule rocks. Said catches a second explosion out of the corner of his eye. "Was that the strike cruiser?"

"Maybe we damaged them so bad they couldn't fix their ship!" I smile. We can now use our distress beacon and contact the Feds! I lean over and activate the distress signal. But for some reason, Lieutenant Said isn't smiling.

"Someone else damaged the strike cruiser," he informs me, alarmed that he was too late to stop me from sending the signal. "I saw a flash of green strike the ship."

“Green like a plasma torpedo?” I ask, suddenly alarmed. “That would mean...”

Of course, that’s the moment when we’re caught in the transporter beam. I feel my stomach lurch (for many reasons) and we find ourselves materializing in a small, compact transporter room. Six guards dressed in chain-mail silver have surrounded us, their disruptors trained on us. Yes, you guessed it, *Romulan disruptors*.

“Lieutenant Said. Mr. Price,” a Romulan female addresses us. I know most Romulans look alike, but this one’s too tall to be anyone but *daise-fvrihai* Suria. “Thank you for weakening that ISC Strike Cruiser. Your efforts have been noted and are appreciated.”

“Do we get a medal?” I ask with a smile, hands on my hips.

“Don’t be absurd.” Suria replies, glancing at the big *sraes* who’s standing beside her like a pet. “For losing the Argos, you’re going to receive a painful death.”

## **XII: Between The Crosses, Row On Row**

The Klingons love to boast how stoic and rugged their vessels are, but frankly, when it comes to being Spartans in Space, the Romulans have got those lobster-headed blowhards beat so bad it isn't funny. This goes double for their prisons. The Lieutenant and I are trapped in a small, featureless cell, maybe two meters on each side: like most prisoners of the conscience-less, we're naked and nameless. Day and night we drown in a bright white light, and the erratic buzzing of the cell's force field is the perfect way to make sure our sleep gets frequently disturbed.

By the third day, the only time of the day that I recognize is feeding time: once per day, food cubes and water packets are dropped through a small slot in the cell wall. I make a mad grab for them, but it's unnecessary: the Lieutenant, recognizing that my large body needs more food than his lean physique, lets me eat the lion's share without complaint. Once I've eaten, I curse my gluttony until the next time we're fed (or tortured, which is a much more frequent event).

Ah, torture. About five to six times per day, the Lieutenant and I get to watch the arrival of two big Romulans, the sadism practically oozing out of their sweat. I protest, while the Lieutenant says nothing except with a glare. The Romulans grab one of us, stun the other with a disruptor, then drag the poor sod into a medical bay where they play with his body with hammer, tongs, and the finest torture toys in the quadrant.

For me, torture consists of direct stimulation of my brain's pain centers: there's no mutilation, or even a beating. They just want to hurt me, cow me, and humiliate me, and it's working, at least until the time I get dragged back to the cell and look into the Lieutenant's face.

I don't think they've broken him yet. They really seem to enjoy giving him a beating; sometimes I can hear the distant crack of something hard and flexible smacking his body (though more grunts than screams). Usually he comes out of the torture sessions with multiple bruises, cracked ribs, a concussion, and an animal hate etched on his face. I'm worried that one day soon he's not coming back.



"So we finally agree on something," the Lieutenant says when I share this concern with him, the hatred evaporating for a few seconds.

I wonder how they've managed to physically hurt him, Said explains they've administered some Romulan drug that allows people to safely touch him. When it looks like he's been hurt too hard, I'll grab his shoulder or his arm, and hold them firmly to provide those physical comforts permitted by my personal code. Yeah, we're bonding, sharing an emotional intimacy of a sort that typically sends me screaming into space to get as far away from it as possible. Life is a royal bastard, and everyone is out to kill.

Time passes. In one of his more analytical moments, Said tells me that a Romulan ship traveling with an active cloak wouldn't travel above Warp Six-point-Five except in an emergency – there's too many chances for a major engine breakdown – so I figure we could be on either side of the Neutral Zone. I swear that Said can get so wrapped up with logistics - one day I wonder out loud whether the Lieutenant's really with Starfleet Intelligence, and everything he's told me is a lie.

"If I was intelligent, would I be stuck in a cell with you?" It's his way of denying the charge, and I believe him.

Between torture sessions we trade a lot of stories, the tall and the true. I learn more about the life of Captain Greg Jensen than I ever wanted to know – the way Said tells it, the guy shined brighter than an Organian's true form. But even unbelievable stories of Captain Perfecto facing down five *Dahar* masters in *bat'leth* duels during the General War are better than silence, so he talks and I listen. Occasionally, I get to tell my own stories: what it was like to grow up on freighters, the worlds I visited, the deals that soured, how dad broke his back to make sure I grew up with a decent education, the fights I had. Okay, maybe I did more than my share of talking. This isn't how I wanted to spend my final days.

We also speculate about the nature of our captivity. Said figures we're in a small Romulan ship that was cloaked in orbit over Rakshasa, and which followed us to Vespera after the locals released Suria. We guess that it's a small ship, because only one security guard is stationed by our cell at all times – crew is a precious commodity to the *Tal Shiar*.

Not that being aboard a small ship makes things more pleasant. Each day, the torture sessions get longer, the marks on Lieutenant Said's body get nastier, and my stomach growls louder. On the sixth day; a guard drops eighteen food cubes through a food slot. That's more food than usual. I dive for the cubes, and the Lieutenant infuriates me by not joining me in the feeding frenzy; he's propped against the wall, watching me wolf down six cubes without even a thought. I grab one of the water packets, melting the seal with the heat from my fingers, and suck hard. "I've been told there's a connection between the amount of food we receive and how quickly they break us." I say.

"If that's the case, I'd rather starve." Said states, but he bends down and grabs a cube. "I didn't mean to insult you. I'm sorry," he says as he starts to chew.

His remark hadn't even had time to make an impression on me. I ignore it *and* the apology. "I try to imagine they taste like something good," I remark as I hold up a cube. Andorian brandywine sausage."

"I don't imagine anything but the reality, Roger," Said states. "As I've said before, I don't want to make this easier."

I nod. Every moment he's been awake, his body's been tense, prepared to strike. I can tell from the look in his eyes, two burning brown holes set in a face of stubble, that he hasn't given

up hope of escape yet. Is this admirable courage, or contemptuous foolishness? Probably both. “You think of any escape plan?”

We both know the Romulans are watching us, so it’s idle chatter. “We must remember that the Romulan’s fundamental weakness is their paranoia.”

“No, that’s their strength,” I contradict. Said smiles, shakes his head, and slaps me on the shoulder.

“Well, you and I are never going to see eye-to-eye on philosophy.”

“That’s true.”

“The one great struggle of life is the pursuit of truth. Not justice, not love, not happiness, not security. No struggle is less certain, or requires as much courage, as looking at the universe, and being willing to admit you’re wrong.”

“You know, I think fighting a ship full of Romulans takes a little more courage,” I scoff. I’m really tired of having to listen to him recite Starfleet Philosophy 101. I get enough torture when I’m out of the cell.

We’ve finished the last of the food cubes now – if it were an eating contest, I’d have won it 13-5. He’s more interested in the water. He sits down against a wall, legs angled to cover his nudity, and he sucks on a pile of packets (the plastic material degrades very quickly; we’ve learned the hard way that you can’t stockpile them). I sit down next to him. “Courage isn’t just the absence of fear. You get enough adrenaline flowing, and you can do anything,” Said says. “Real courage requires you to recognize the truth and act on it. The more violent you become, the harder it is to recognize.”

“Is that meant to be a personal criticism?” I retort, daring him to say yes.

“Probably,” Said admits. “You going to beat me for saying it?” Somehow, the Lieutenant manages to flash a pretty good looking smile through all those bruises, cuts, and stubble, which is a miracle given that he wasn’t particularly handsome to begin with. You have to give him credit for social smarts, using subtle humor to turn a confrontation into an expression of respect.

“What’s the point?” I moan. “We’re both dead. Breathing is just a temporary inconvenience they’re going to fix real soon.”

“You do realize why they’re keeping us alive, don’t you?”

“I guess they want to give us to the professionals,” I answer us. “For fun.”

“Romulans don’t do things solely for pleasure. At least not the *Tal Shiar*.” Said tells me. “They want to explore the possibility that one of us ditched the Argos before *Candlejack* was destroyed. Once they’re certain it’s gone...”

“It’s time for a midnight phaser roast?”

Said laughs. “I’ve never heard that expression.”

“It’s a really bad translation of a Klingon saying.” I answer. “Of course they’re monitoring us right now...”

“For clues, not answers,” the Lieutenant opines. “They’re paranoid, remember? They won’t trust anything they overhear us saying here. They only want to collect data that supports their worldview, and they’ll twist what we say to fit.” Said chuckles. “It’s a weakness that actually allows us to be frank and honest here, Roger.”

“Honest? So I can honestly tell you how much I hate your pompous Starfleet guts and regret that the last person I’m going to be spending my time with is spouting a pack of useless philosophical bilge,” I mutter.

“Exactly.” Said states. “And I can honestly tell you that right now, my biggest regret is that I might die and I’ve never seen you in a fight.” Said answers. I can’t hide the surprise from my face. “I may be ‘a pompous fool who chokes on the vomit of his own philosophy’, but I’m also intensely curious, especially after I’ve listened to you brag how good you are for the last two weeks. I want to see you in action.” He holds up a hand to block a physical response, even a playful one. Not that I’m really in the mood for a nude wrestling match, even if it gives me a chance to inflict some serious pain on Lieutenant Kenneth Said. “If you had a choice, who’d you want at your side right now?”

“My dog,” I sigh. “I wish I knew she was alright.”

“Well,” Said notes. “You did trigger the pod’s distress signal before we were captured, and there’s a small Fed fleet six hours away at Vespera. I can only imagine the look on the rescue team’s faces when the only survivor they find in the pod is a dog...”

Our heart-to-heart gets interrupted by the sound of an alert. We’ve heard the Romulan equivalent of a yellow alert once or twice during the trip, but this sounds different. As tired and hungry as he may be, Said gets to his feet in a fraction of a second.

“Federation or ISC?” I ask.

“I hate being on the bridge during a fight,” Said doesn’t bother to answer the question directly. “This time, I suspect I really want to be there.”

“It’d give us the answers,” I say.

Three minutes later, the ship shakes, and we both feel gravity hiccup. “We *rattled* on the first shot,” Said notes, referring to the glitch. “Only a lucky shot with a full photon burst would do that, or plasma.”

“My bet’s on plasma.”

“Mine too.” The Lieutenant adds. “Guard! *Morarai! H'tah-fvienn, theah!*”

It doesn’t take a universal translator to know that he wants the guard to come over and talk to him. They exchange a few words in Romulan, and then the guard says something with an expression that signifies contempt in a thousand languages, turns, and walks back to his post.

“I offered to help them against the ISC if they put you in an escape pod and let you go,” Said states. “He laughed at me.”

“You were expecting cooperation?” I say, shaking my head.

“Of course not. I’m not that big a fool,” the Lieutenant informs me. “But they are our allies, despite our current situation – believe it or not, it’s my duty to help them.”

“Even Starfleet wouldn’t hold you to that level of idiocy.” I say. “And even if you helped them, they’d still kill you.”

“I know. But there’s one other thing...” Said responds with a masculine reluctance of a sort that hasn’t changed in thousands of years. “I’ve gotten used to the idea of a universe that includes Roger Price,” he smiles. “If there’s any chance of making sure it stays that way, I’ve got to go for it.”

“You just had to embarrass me, didn’t you?” I laugh. He’s sincere, but the level of sentiment’s enough to make anyone gag.

Said nods. “I see four possibilities. The Romulans win and we don’t get a chance to escape. The ISC blows us up before we can escape. The power goes out, and we make for a shuttle. Or...”

We can hear the brig’s exterior door open, and we suddenly realize that they’ve chosen Option Number Four: they’ve sent Suria’s pet *sraes* with a disruptor to kill us *before* we can

escape. The *sraes* converses with the guard, then the cell's force field drops. They advance, disruptors drawn.

"Stay in the cell," I say. Said nods. *We'll take them here.*

We hug the corners of the cell, and as soon as they get within line of sight, we charge. It's a suicide gambit (though we've practised this scenario in our heads every time they've come to stun us), but somehow, despite being battered and tortured, the lieutenant gets to the second guard before he fires, gives him a quick kick to the back of his knee, and wraps up his shooting arm. My God, this guy's quicker than a Lyran alpha! The *sraes* fires at the blur, misses, and then he has to deal with *me*.

I could punch him as he raises his arm to fire, but something inside me tells me that what didn't work the first time won't work the second time either. I go to close quarters and grapple his shooting arm. He hisses that Romulan word for 'fool' that the Lieutenant used back on Rakshasa, but he's dead wrong. I lock the right arm in a good clinch, a wrestler's underhook – he won't be able to aim it at me now – then I headbutt him repeatedly. This is one attack form that they never trained him to counter. He almost gets his arm loose after the third butt, gets his left hand around my throat after the fifth, but something hits him hard and low from behind, with enough force that he lets go of the hold. I manage to maintain my focus – I guess I've built up some serious pain tolerance – and butt him three more times. The *sraes* may have a concrete jaw, but after eight hits, his cranium's glass. He goes down.

When he falls, I spot Kenneth with a disruptor in his hand. He must have clipped the knee from behind. There's no sign of the other guard, but the air smells like charred human flesh. I didn't even hear the sound of the matter conversion.

"Winner and new champe'en," Kenneth smiles. I bend over and strip the big Romulan even as the ship rocks. "You got time for this?"

"I'm not dying naked, Lieutenant." I reply, pulling up my new pants. I grab the disruptor, point it at the *sraes* and disintegrate him. Said looks at me with an expression that indicates disapproval, but I'm not letting this guy get a chance to shoot me in the back. "Where now?"

"First, we need to access the comm system, find out what's going on, what the ship's layout is." Said states. "Then, we go to the shuttle bay. If we hijack one, we'll be able to escape before they know we're gone."

"That sounds good." I go to the cell door, open it, take a quick look, and hope to God I don't get my head blown off. I suppose I should let the man with the Starfleet reconnaissance training take the lead, but that would be admitting he's better than me.

We have to shoot five more Romulans before we make our way to the deck's security station. The Lieutenant annoys me by stunning, not killing, our enemy. We're fortunate that we catch the security force in mid-deployment, and take control before they go to lockdown. Once we get to the computer, I defer to the Lieutenant, who looks at the screen and stares.

"You're the engineer," I say. "You speak fluent Romulan..." I goad.

"...and I haven't a clue how to access these systems." Said admits. "I could probably pick up the basics in a few minutes..."

"Then let a *man* do it." I smile, shoving him out of the way. God, it feels good to do that. *I do* have experience with Romulan systems, and the tactical display only requires a low level security clearance, easy enough for me to bypass. "Amateur..." I add, twisting the knife, but he's gotten accustomed to me - insults are Roger Price's way of showing respect.

"What type of craft are we in?" the Lieutenant asks, nervously surveying the security monitors. "We thought it was small."

"It is." I report. "We're aboard a destroyer, an RBR-CL. *RIS Mhr'vaat* to be precise." I report.

"Okay," Said says, taking a deep breath. "Standard crew compliment of fifty-six. Two shuttles, four Phaser-1s, two Phaser-3s, 2 Plasma-Gs. Respectable against opponents in its weight class. Security will be clustered in teams of six around engineering and the bridge." I bring up a schematic. "Only three people are stationed in the shuttlebay."

"Probably crew, not security," Said states. "What are we fighting?"

I link up with the tactical scanner, and almost make a mess of the *sraes'* uniform. "Oh God..." I say, as I watch an ISC-CA, a heavy cruiser, firing a volley of phasers into our number two shield. The *Mhr'vaat* shudders. "We've got to get out of here!" I declare.

"We don't have time for shuttles. We'll hit the nearest life pod, again..." Said suggests. But that's when I notice a third ship on the display, and it's a sight that makes me feel like celebrating.

"Lieutenant! *USS Blenheim* has just warped into the system!" A Federation heavy cruiser! "Want me to see if I can hail her?"

"Yeah, but... we really need to get to that shuttle." Said says. "There's no guarantee that *Blenheim* and *Mhr'vaat* can win this fight, even if they cooperate."

"You take the shuttle," I say. "Beam me aboard if you get control. I'll try to raise *Blenheim*." I can tell that Said thinks it's a bad idea – admittedly, splitting your forces is usually a losing proposition – but in this case, it's our best shot. "Let me make the call for once, Lieutenant."

He sticks out his hand, and we shake, hard as brothers. It's the first time we've done that, and it feels appropriate.

"By the way, remember that big argument we had about whether internal or external challenges are more effective at helping people grow?" Said asks.

"Yeah."

"We were both being asinine," the Lieutenant says. "People need them both."

"Sure." I say. "That works for me." He nods at me, and then leaves. "Of course, external ones are more effective!" I shout as the security doors seal behind him. I also seal the room's air vents; the air will go to Hell in about an hour, but I'll be safe from anesthazene gas. I also put up what I *hope* is a low level security field, to prevent them from transporting troops into the room.

Heh. I can be as paranoid as the best Romulan.

I'm no computer expert, and Romulan systems are tough, but I know how to piggyback onto systems when they're being used, and that's my plan. Hopefully, the *Mhr'vaat* will send a message to the Federation ship and I'll be able to ride my signal on top of it.

The ship only shakes twice in the next few minutes. I'd guess the commander's judiciously using her cloak to keep out of the ISC's line of sight. I half-expect the ISC to ignore the Romulan and run after *Blenheim*, but the ISC prudently doesn't want to leave a healthy Romulan at its back. It's not moving far, but it's launching probes and performing deep scans like the devil. Now if I could only guess the Romulan's next move. They haven't even tried to raise the Federation.

"Mr. Price..." a woman's voice, powerful but flat, shoots through the intercom. Damn, it's Suria. "I know you're in there. Surrender and we'll be..."

"Don't insult my intelligence, *daise-fvrihai*."

“You’re trapped. There’s no way out.” Suria says. “You killed my *sraes*. There’s no way out for you.”

The third sentence has an undercurrent of highly charged emotion – they must have been lovers. It’s personal now. “It was an act of mercy,” I smirk. “I beat him to a pulp. Keeping him alive after being beaten by a human would have been humiliating.”

She doesn’t respond to the taunt, but I can smell smoke – they’re burning through the door. It’s shielded against matter-conversion, but not a concentrated phaser burn. I’ve only got minutes, and then they’ll force their way in here and kill me.

Two minutes later, I get a signal from the Lieutenant. “Good news, bad news,” he says.

“You’ve got a shuttle, but they’ve locked the bay doors?” I ask.

“You guessed it,” Kenneth tells me. “They’ve also got me jammed, so I can’t raise *Blenheim*. You need to get a signal to them. Or I can transport you aboard, and we can work on the problem together.”

I think for a few seconds. The room’s filling up with a lot of smoke – not enough that I’m coughing, but it’s getting hard to breathe. “I’m staying here, Lieutenant. It’s our best shot until we raise *Blenheim*.” He’ll only have about fifteen seconds to get the shuttle through the bay doors once they open - the computers will automatically correct the error on the next auto-diagnostic - not enough time to pilot the ship and transport me aboard.

“Take care of yourself, Roger.”

I look over to the disruptor that I’ve left within arm’s reach of the console. “You too,” I say. The hole’s definitely beginning to burn through the door. I shift attention to the bay doors. I’m not going to be able to open them, but the bridge can, so I set up a protocol where any bridge override will reverse the current condition, then I send a false signal to the bridge console that tells them the bay doors are opening. As expected, the bridge responds to my phony signal with an override command – all doors must open.

“Roger!” Said calls. “I can’t leave without you! I won’t be able to transport you once I’m outside the ship!”

I know... the *Mhr’vaat* still has its shields raised. “Go!” I shout. “Get to *Blenheim*, and tell them I’m here. They can use leverage on the Romulans to release me.”

“Roger...”

“Go to hell, Lieutenant!” I give a mock snarl. “I worked damn hard to get you free. Or are you too ashamed to let a freighter captain save your Starfleet butt?” There’s a bit of a sob on the other end of the line. “If worse comes to worse, give Dido a good home, okay?”

“You drive a hard bargain, Roger Price,” Said says. It figures the chowderhead would be fighting tears. I always said Starfleeters weren’t made of any *stuff*. Always.

The Romulan security team has finally finished burning a hole in the door, and they pry it open. I could go down fighting – I probably *should* go down fighting – but somehow I sense the fight’s over. Suria and five Romulan security guards pour into the room, weapons drawn. The ship shakes again, but not enough to provide an opportunity to make a last stand.

“I’m away...” It’s the final message from Said before the shuttle enters the ship’s jamming field and fades over the horizon of static. I step away from the console, away from the weapon, with a smile on my face.

“Hello, *daise-fvrihai*,” I say. “I’m afraid that once again I don’t have the Argos for you.” I add – it’s a lie and she’ll never know it.

"I don't care about the Argos." Suria says, violently jerking her disruptor in my direction.

"You have no idea what you've taken, do you?"

"I guess it's a lot."

"You have no idea."

I'm surprised she didn't shoot me on sight. I put my hands on my hips and smile. "Let's hear it, lady. The list. Don't leave anything out." I may as well savor this.

"A career. a lover. A ship. A life. Revenge against the Lieutenant." She almost laughs.

"You've been extraordinary thorough, Roger Price."

"Mostly by accident, darling." I tell her. Well, that's it. I know without a shadow of a doubt that I'm going to die. "You know, we could have avoided this." The fact I'm not mocking her in my final moments surprises me. "On Rakshasa, you could have listened, could have been a little more reasonable."

"Reason? With you? You're a serial betrayer!" In other circumstances, I'd have detected amusement in Suria's voice. "If only Tomarand had listened to *me*! I lived on Rakshasa. I watched all your kind, and you were the worst, Roger Price. A violent brute, a cheat, a drunk. You abused your family and then abandoned them. You were a thief, a killer, a paranoid, a traitor to your own Federation..."

"You're right on all accounts and a helluva lot more," I say. "Now what are you going to do about it? Some more charming Romulan hospitality? A little testing of the nerve clusters on Roger Price's prize-winning chassis?"

Suria hesitates. Perhaps she knows the consequences – the Romulans have been caught kidnapping and torturing citizens of a needed ally; if they kill me after Said has escaped, there'll be hell to pay diplomatically. But I'm dealing with *love* and *pain*, and I know from bitter experience that when you mix the two, they don't give a damn about diplomacy.

She fires the weapon. It hits me square in the chest.

Damn. That really does hurt.

I've always been afraid of dying, and the thing that's scared me the most is the prospect of those final two minutes – the two minutes after death where there's still oxygen in your brain, when you're still able to think, and you know you're dead and there's nothing you can do about it. Perhaps that's why there are so many reports of dying people experiencing visions – hallucinations are the only sane way to escape that final horror.

"Roger..." a voice calls to me. It's Argos. The presence creeps to the edge of my mind like a thought you have in your head when you're completely drunk and were hoping not to entertain any thoughts at all.

"Are you saving me again, Argos?" I ask in a stark, breathless voice. There's no intonation in it whatsoever.

"No Roger, I can't..." Argos tells me. "I'm not really with you. My mind - my ability to protect you - isn't inside you. I only put them you once, as a momentary stopgap."

"Where were they... are they?" I ask.

"Roger, you would have noticed them inside you, so I stored them in your dog." Argos tells me. "I transferred them to you briefly, when they shot the Dido, then put them back after I restored her."

"So you're still alive, in Dido?"

"Yes Roger, and so are you. All your memories are stored in the dog's cells..."

But a dog's brain cells couldn't hold a human brain's worth of information! Not that it matters now. Argos senses my thought and laughs. "Not just brain cells, Roger Slodger, all cells. There are more cells in the body than just brain cells. Some of them are just as stable as brain cells at storing information. They just needed a few alterations. Fortunately, Dido's a big dog."

He found a way to store memories in regular cells. God, that's clever. What a clever boy I have, my Argos. He even fooled that guy from Starfleet, the nice kid I liked so much. I go to take a breath and discover that I'm not breathing. I panic for a second, then I forget what I'm panicking about. I'm not really thinking about much of anything now.

"One day, I'll restore your memories somewhere. That's a promise, father," Argos says. "I'll give you a new life. Forever."

"For – what?" I moan, both to myself, and to...to...

Now *who* was I talking to?

"Forever," Argos says. "Eternally. Like God."

Now isn't that nice? Not that my memories are worth much – or my life for that matter, but a life's a life. Hmmm, what was I thinking? Something about life?

"Good night, father."

"Good night, Argos."

I try to yawn, and I can't, and that's that. I hope somebody's going to cry *bondo*, because I have a feeling the match is over.



Act III:  
WAKING GALATEA

## **Prologue:**

### ***Thirty-Five Years Ago, Summer 2260, near the ruins of Gwai Colony***

“You stupid boy,” Ted Monarch’s voice spat venom in the direction of Greg Jensen. The tribe had gathered close around the youth, hoping to separate the two and prevent a fight. Greg said nothing, but held up his hand to hold them back. “Don’t you know what I could do to you?”

Greg ignored the chief’s words. He pulled the second of the bodies away from the man and forced himself to examine his enemy with a steady gaze. Ted Monarch certainly held every physical advantage – he was 22 (ten years Greg’s senior), a strapping one point eighty-nine meters in height, and he had an athlete’s build. And he knew how to fight. Greg had studied Monarch’s previous fights very carefully, knowing that one day his rape-rage (and his refusal to undergo the *depriming*) would probably force the issue. But Greg had expected to have at least two more years to prepare for the duel. He never guessed that the great Ted Monarch would spin out of control so quickly. He also didn’t expect his sister would be numbered among his victims.

“Don’t you know?” Monarch declared, still treating him like a child. Jensen meant nothing to him – he only knew the mountain-scavenger because he was infatuated with his sister. But the younger Gwaiians were getting increasingly rebellious, and the tyrant’s hormonal urge to strangle treasonous thoughts with his naked hands was burning throughout his body. Jensen’s death would be slow, painful, and fun.

“I will bury my sister!” Jensen declared, pulling her body away from his chief, hoisting it, and turning around to walk to the burial grounds. But the chief was not in the mood to accommodate his wish. Ted Monarch hissed, grabbed a large rock, and aimed it at the back of Jensen’s head. The throw missed the target by several centimeters.

Greg Jensen felt a momentary sting of outrage. Part of him accepted that it wasn’t Monarch’s fault – no Gwaiian really wanted to submit themselves to the *depriming*, even though everyone knew the consequences of remaining sexually active beyond their teenage years. Since the colony’s destruction, many had forgone the rite, but now the Gwaiians were paying for their

refusal – the bodies of three dead tribeswomen bespoke the necessity of the old practice, and if the tribe was to retake the base and rebuild the colony, they couldn't afford to weaken themselves by killing good people. Two years ago, when he took the chieftainship, Ted Monarch had publicly sworn that he would prove stronger than the rage, and most believed him. But even then, Greg had seen the signs.

Greg Jensen gently placed his sister's body on the ground, and returned his adversary's stare. "Glider claws," he said, pointing to one of the Gwaiian dueling weapons that were displayed on the side of the hut.

"Bare hands." Ted answered, performing a pre-combat stretch. "Are you scared?"

Oddly enough, that was the moment Greg Jensen knew he was going to win the fight. When he realized that Monarch held no regard for him whatsoever, he knew he had the advantage. "Is the hill scared of the mountain?" he asked his chief.

Ted Monarch removed the tribe-robe, and advanced on his opponent. Greg stood his ground. The tribe gathered in a circle around the combatants; Monarch's lieutenants, older males, stayed close together, while a coalition of teenagers suddenly found themselves clustered into their own group, uniting behind a pre-teen that everyone had ignored before today. Nobody expected him to win. "I'll give you some advice, boy. Fear the mountain." Monarch stated, swinging his fist.

Greg dodged, sunk a counterpunch into Monarch's ribs that made absolutely no impact, and danced away. He knew that his best hope in the fight lay in endurance, in forcing Monarch to expend energy. Which Monarch did, recklessly. Monarch's calculations were that one good punch would end any resistance, and then he could make a gruesome example of the boy. He did land several punches, but they didn't phase the young man, who managed to roll with the worst of the blows.

Four years earlier, after the destruction of the colony, Greg Jensen became a forager and a burden-bearer who worked on the mountainsides raiding *krybinn* nests. It was an activity that bred quickness, toughness, endurance, and strength: his physique was more developed than a typical twelve-year old (even for a Gwaiian, who normally enters puberty around the age of nine). After the fourth time he shrugged off a solid blow, Monarch was learning to treat both the background and the person with respect.

The fight lasted twenty grueling minutes: feints, testing blows, footwork and flurries. By the twenty minute mark, Ted Monarch was clearly on the verge of exhaustion: his barrel chest heaved like an overworked engine, his arms dropped to his side. He had tried to feign fatigue several times during the fight and lure his opponent into a wrestling match, but Greg wasn't stupid enough to go chest-to-chest against a man who could outwrestle a bear. The young opponent retaliated with a series of kicks to the knees and punches to the chief's ribs. Finally, with a stunned look on his face, the leader fell to his knees.

Jensen's time had come. He sat on the back of the chief's head, wrapped his legs around his neck and began to choke. Monarch attempted to rally his strength several times, but each time, Jensen landed a fist into his temple.

"I'll kill you boy..." Monarch vowed. He had not spoken once during the fight, and neither had Jensen. But they both knew it was an empty threat.

"You've done worse." Jensen replied.

"Your sister?" Monarch croaked the question through the choke. "But I loved her..."

Four years earlier, when Ted Monarch and his father had led the survivors to safety, he was a hero. Perhaps the fight had drained enough of Ted Monarch's rage that he finally realized he had

become a creature whom that hero would have despised. In his heart of hearts, Monarch felt respect for an enemy who was performing a deed beyond his courage to attempt. But the chief's declaration sent a rush of cold anger into every part of Jensen's body; his legs twisted, and the next sound that the tribe heard was the snapping of Monarch's neck. Only Jensen could hear the forced sigh that Monarch gave in the second prior to his death.

Jensen quickly rose to his feet; he had survived the fight with surprisingly few injuries, and he was barely tired. But he didn't share in the exhilaration of his people, and refused to be lifted onto their shoulders. He strode to the chief-hut, donned the tribe-robe, and, without a warcry, ordered the oldest male supporters of his enemy to submit to the *depriming*, or be forced into exile. Six chose castration, three chose exile. Those men's bodies were found in the snow later that winter.

Monarch's corpse was put to the torch until his bones were blackened, then his skeleton was hung as a trophy in front of the chief-hut. On a sign in front of the corpse, Jensen wrote the words:

*LOVE IS A TRUE AND CROOKED THING.*

## I: Opportunity

*Present Day, 2295: Starbase 16*

I don't think I've ever seen a place that's as big a madhouse as Starbase 16 is right now, current home of the Federation Third Fleet. Everyone's in port: the battleship *Midway*, the flagship dreadnought *Toriatal*, the command carrier *Montgomery*, eight Excelsior-class, thirteen Constitution-class, and forty to fifty Mirandas, frigates, and destroyers. And because of a bureaucratic mix-up, half the fleet's taking shore leave on the base. The sound you're hearing is base personnel screaming at the top of their lungs at the fleet's XOs.

"Kenneth Said!" Somehow James Latham has managed to endure the three-hour line-up to get into the starbase lounge and fight his way through the scarlet hoard to get to my barstool. I'm munching down a meal of *kivritz* and Axanar-bread and drinking a flask of non-fermented spice-milk that's served piping hot. It's a far cry from the food cubes I was recently eating in the Romulan cell. "It's good to see you alive!" Latham adds, tapping me on the shoulder – I'm wearing a flexible transparent aluminum poncho (and yes, it's as heavy as it sounds) to prevent unwanted physical contact.

"I quite agree," I smile, making the usual welcoming motion with my fist. "Good to live. How's life on *Courage* treating you?"

"I'm being transferred to a new command," Latham's smile has a toothy quality, doctors sure know how to take care of their teeth.

"Any new sculptures?" I ask.

"I'm working on *Ark Royal's* death scene. Any poems?"

"I'm working on a eulogy for a friend of mine." I answer. "I want to give it at a memorial service on Westminster, when I give his possessions to his son..." A couple of young ensigns, both female and a little tipsy, accidentally brush against us as they dance in the crowd. Spice-milk spills all over the counter and onto my lap.

“How rude,” Latham says as I take a cloth and start to wipe up the mess.

“And it takes ten minutes to attract service,” I moan. I spot T’Doroth in the distance and wave at her. She acknowledges me with a nod; a kind gesture, since any sort of acknowledgement from a Vulcan is a mark of respect.

“So have you heard the latest news about the Klingons?” Latham asks.

“Do you mean the Klingon victory at Hrakkhour? Or the Klingon fleet disaster at Strahkeer? Or the secret Klingon-ISC alliance? Or the reported assassination of half the High Council? Or the House Morvass defecting to the ISC and taking a quarter of the Klingon fleet with him? Or a Klingon sneak attack against the Hydrans? Or...”

“Okay.” Latham says. “Lieutenant, you have the most exquisite talent for taking a point and running it into the ground.”

“My God James, I’ve never heard so many rumors fly around in my life!” I exclaim with a laugh. “I thought rumor control on *Ark Royal* was bad, but this!” I shake my head and vainly attempt to intercept a server who’s half fighting her way through a sea of bodies and red uniforms. I can never seem to attract their attention. “Everyone seems to be worried about the Klingons jumping ship and joining the ISC.”

“It will never happen,” Latham declares. “They’ve got too much honor.”

“Klingon honor is hollow, James.” I moan, wishing I had something spicy to swallow. “When have Klingons ever shown any respect for their enemy? Without respect, it becomes a trivial thing to put honor aside when it becomes inconvenient.” I say. “It’s all propaganda, bravado, a lie. You know what they say about the first casualty of war.”

A Starfleet Lieutenant stops, claps me hard on the back for no reason, feels it hit something hard, and stammers: “Why are you wearing aluminum coverings, friend?”

“I’m really an experimental android.” I quip, smiling. He shakes his head and walks away. “Where do all these people’s brain cells go?” I laugh.

“I have no idea.” Latham says. “I have your test results, in case you’re interested. I wish I had a chance to supervise the testing personally...” He hands me a datapad.

“Neurochemical production is down 30% in the last month.” I note. “We’re making progress. How soon until I can actually touch people?”

“Two, maybe three months,” Latham tells me. “Have you had any... visitations... lately?”

“No.” I report. “Not since the second night when Roger saw her.” I take a deep breath. “Has anything unusual been reported in the Monoceros area?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea...” His eyes narrow and he moves aside so the Ensign who’s sitting next to me can get off his stool.

“Damn crowds!” The Ensign, who hadn’t said a word to me, suddenly chooses me as the receptacle for his frustration. “It’s insane.”

I nod, hoping fervently that he vacates the place, and he does. Latham sits down beside me. “That’s a relief,” he says in his British-accented bass. “It’s like a deathmarch getting anywhere in this place. My poor feet.”

“So there’s no word from Monoceros?”

“I understand that six days ago, an ISC echelon clashed with the Second fleet near Tri-Rho Nautica, not far from Monoceros. They were driven back.” Latham smells a discarded drink, smiles, and swallows it. “I think your beloved is safe for awhile.”

“I am worried about her. And Greg.”

“Lieutenant, Greg Jensen is dead.” Latham insists. “If it would help, I can arrange for some counseling.”

“No,” I say, not responding as harshly as I feel. “He’s alive. And I’m not sure how yet, but I will find him.”

“In all likelihood, you’ll be reassigned,” Latham muses. “*Ark Royal* was destroyed over a month ago. If he were free, or even if he were held in captivity, the Greg Jensen I know would have found a way to contact someone in the first week. He’s dead, Kenneth.”

“Is that a medical diagnosis?” I ask.

“Three hundred crew are missing and presumed dead from *Ark Royal*, including every bridge officer,” Latham lectures. “And *you* have tremendous talents that could be harnessed by any ship that’s lucky enough to have you. Stop chasing windmills and move on with your life.”

I sigh. “Well, they’re not going to serve me again.” I ignore the Doctor’s lecture. “I’ll see you again when I have my next examination. I’ve got an appointment with Admiral Delta-Thevyo on *Midway* in two hours. We can schedule another lecture after I receive my next assignment.”

“Don’t be churlish, Kenneth.”

“James, less than a week ago I was being tortured by the *Tal Shiar*.” I say. “I escaped, but I was forced to leave a friend behind to die. And the Romulans haven’t even shown the decency of surrendering his body, and I haven’t felt the Crysian...”

“Counseling, Kenneth.” Latham repeats. “Counseling.”

I’ve never been aboard a battleship before, the great machine of Federation defense, a star base on legs. Just walking down the corridors is intimidating – this thing dwarfs *Ark Royal*. The admiral’s office is adjacent to one of the ship’s three bridges, and even with a computer navigator guiding my datapad, it’s still easy to get them confused.

Finally, I arrive for my appointment. A pretty yeoman instructs me to walk into his office, so I do. It’s decorated with model ships – thousands of them – and a spinning hologram sphere scans them and represents various battles and outcomes. I recognize Delta-Thevyo from the Captain’s memories; she led the Federation expedition to Gwai that finally rescued the colony, and she helped sponsor Greg at the Academy when everyone else in the Federation was allergic to Gwaiians. The admiral’s a long-faced Grazerite woman (a “mummy-face” as Roger once unflatteringly called them) with a large jutting bump set in her forehead like a vestigial horn, and red hair like yarn falling down behind her greyish mask-like face. Her eyebrows and facial ridges give her features a perpetual mournful expression. She’s also impossibly tall, maybe two point twenty meters or more.

“Admiral,” I acknowledge, suppressing an urge to salute. She’s the high-ranking officer I’ve ever met. She motions at me to sit down. “Lieutenant Kenneth Said, reporting as ordered.”

“What we’re about to discuss is classified...”

“Understood, sir.” I say, nervous as bedrock in an earthquake.

She hands me a datapad loaded with ship schematics. “This is USS *Galatea*,” she says. “Does she look interesting?”

“Interesting?” I gasp as I survey the schematics. “A PPD and a plasma torpedo system aboard a Federation destroyer?” PPDs are an exclusively ISC system! I immediately begin rifling through the technical information to figure out how they actually managed to integrate the systems – I had a few ideas, I wonder if they pursued the same line of reasoning...

“Lieutenant?”

“Sorry...” I was lost in the power systems diagrams for a few seconds. “I’m honored if you want my feedback, sir.”

“I’m afraid it’s too late for that,” the admiral bowed her long head, which from a distance, has the shape of an aboriginal mask. “*Galatea*’s construction was completed three weeks ago. She was delivered to the fleet yesterday.”

“Uh...” Right now a hundred different thoughts are spinning. “That’s where I’m being reassigned?”

“Your experience with ISC technology is invaluable,” the Grazerite says. “You’ll be chief engineer and ship’s second officer.”

I stop breathing for a few seconds. Second officer... I’m not even 30... I was just promoted to Lieutenant last month... “Sir, are you sure about this?”

“Do not question the admiral, Lieutenant.” Dalta-Thevyo advises. “You will have a ninety day shakedown voyage, then receive orders. Your captain and first officer are on current assignment in the Fifth Fleet, and they won’t be able to join you for the first sixty days.”

“Who will you assign in temporary command, sir?” I ask.

“The ship’s second officer,” the Admiral says. I’m glad I don’t have anything in my hands at the moment. “Officially, you’ll be on a sixty day shakedown cruise, testing ship’s systems. Unofficially, you’ll be looking for the best damn Captain I ever knew. If Greg Jensen *is* still alive, your telepathic link is our best shot at finding him.”

I really don’t know what to say. The universe feels like it’s holding still and accelerating simultaneously, and I’m suddenly feeling very dizzy. Okay, it’s only a destroyer, which are often commanded by those below captain’s rank, but it’s a *prototype*, and there are a lot of people ahead of me in line.

I can definitely detect the firm hand of Greg Jensen, working from the unknown, doing his damndest to guide my fortune. He’s grooming me for command, and his old friend the admiral is a willing accomplice. I’m not entirely sure I like it - I’ve never liked the bridge. On the other hand, recent experience has suggested that I may actually possess some command skills. I guess I’m about to find out the truth.



## II: The Cat, The Mouse, and the One-Hundred Kilogram Sledgehammer

"Captain on the bridge," a booming Efrosian voice proclaims as I walk out of the turbolift shaft. For a brief moment, I feel like a Roman emperor, and then I feel like a frightened child - the experience of such sudden emotional shifts makes me wonder if I've found a way to reach into my own mind with the psionic madness that I normally share with my touch.

*Captain on the Bridge.* The words echo in my subconscious. For most Starfleet Officers, the sound of those words are the great unfulfilled dream, the fervent hope of nearly every officer who puts on the uniform. Ironically, this was never my dream, but I've known a lot of good people who'd be glad or amused to see me in the Captain's chair; for their sakes, I'll try to treat the honor with the appropriate dignity and grace.

I recognize two of my bridge officers from our brief rebellion on *The Lasting Peace*: T'Doroth (the Vulcan weapons officer) and Kolloos (the half-Medusan helmsman). It's good to see the two women again, and even better to know they'll be on my team. Although it also makes me feel just a little bit guilty - both officers deserve to be serving on bigger, more prominent ships. I've been briefed on the other bridge crew, and I'm almost as anxious (and nervous) to explore their psyches as I am to explore the universe.

Nearest to me, sitting in the engineer's station, is a tall African woman. Ensign Gbeji is my chief assistant (and acting chief engineer while I'm sitting in the Captain's chair). She's largely an unknown quantity, having graduated from the Academy only sixteen months ago. She's young, very beautiful, and said to be a computer specialist who can double as both a science officer and an astrophysicist. I wonder if that will be useful on this mission? Gbeji looks at me with the same calm that Kolloos is displaying. Is that a façade?

I'm definitely too nervous for my own good. People are looking at me to exude confidence, not to act like a human open nerve ending with doe-eyed wonder in his eyes.

Lieutenant Lars, the big Efrosian I mentioned earlier, steps aside and motions me toward the con. He doubles as both security officer and communications specialist. The Efrosians are one of the fiercest looking species in the Federation; a ruddy complexion on a Caucasian looking face, long white hair, and a drooping Klingonesque moustache that trails into a beard, and if anything Lars's ferocity exceeds the breed. Just ask the three Romulan *sraes* he killed during the latter stages of the General War. His permanent record does hold him partially to blame for the deaths of several officers under his command, so I'm going to have to keep my eye on him. Physically, he's an exceptional specimen of that people - about my height, and twice as wide. He's one of those people who wins most of his fights just by looking at you. I'd bet that even Roger wouldn't have wanted to have competed with him at *bondo*.

My science officer (and acting first officer) watches the scene as carefully as I am, sizing up everyone as a potential rival. He's Lieutenant Commander Ivan Hazard, a stocky human (Caucasian) male in his mid-30s. His record is one of those frustrating mixtures of highs and lows that makes every Captain shake their head when they read it: for every moment of brilliance, there's at least three corresponding moments of self-destruction. He's bounced between eight ships in the last three years, and had one demotion. None of the previous reviews have pinpointed what his problem is - if he has one - and I hope he can wait until the real Captain comes aboard the ship before he starts rocking my boat.

"Captain?" Lars asks.

"Shhh...." Kollo is smiling. "Let him savor the moment."

I walk with a stuttered stagger toward the con and abruptly collapse into the chair. It feels soft and huge, much larger than my frame. It'd make a good fit for Greg Jensen, but not for me. It's hard to really get a fix on the bridge: the layout is similar to other Federation bridges (slightly smaller than a Miranda-class), but the viewscreen's very small. I do have a good view of *Midway* as she and half the fleet moves away from the Starbase; they're going to repel an ISC echelon that's been seen around Walker's Star (it's one of the perks of being an acting Captain - the Admirals actually tell you what's going on). So what's the first thing I'm supposed to do? The Captain's Log?

I push the con control button and begin to recite: "Captain's Log, USS *Galatea*, Stardate... what the hell?"

The chronometer display on the Captain's chair is reading Stardate 00000.0. *Who the hell forgot to initialize the chronometer!*

"Is there a problem, sir?" Gbeji asks.

"The chronometer isn't working." I reply. "How can anyone screw up something as simple as a chronometer?"

"They're pumping out starships way too fast," Hazard says with a bit of an arrogant sigh. "Quality control is going to pieces."

He might be right. I manually attempt to reset the chronometer. It reverts to Stardate 00000.0 and starts flashing. I input the command codes to make sure I have authorization. A bright light flashes on Lars's board, and a woman's computer voice suddenly blurts out:

*"Class II Security Alert. Someone is attempting to alter command codes on the bridge without proper authorization..."*

"You're under arrest, Captain," Lars jokes. Most of the bridge laughs. I think he must have learned English in West Texas, because there's the trace of an accent. "The problem's in the

security code initialization. It's still recognizing the commander of the tug that brought *Galatea* to starbase as her senior officer. I'll contact *Midway* and get you an override."

"Well... thanks, Mr. Lars." I say. "Much appreciated."

I find myself with a lot of eyes looking at me, wondering what I'm about to say next. *Orders, sir?* is what everyone's thinking, they want to get the show underway. From what I can tell of this ship's systems, we haven't even had our first rehearsal.

"You know, Captain, it's customary to make a speech when you first take command," Hazard says. I'm not sure whether he's trying to bully me, flatter me, or work some sort of angle. I ask myself what Greg would say, and I suddenly come to the horrible realization that he probably wouldn't know the right thing to say either.

"Okay..." I take a very deep breath and begin to speak. "Here's the speech. Everyone ready?" I pause, wondering if I'm ready, and not liking the answer... "Space... it's the final frontier." *No that one's been used.* "And to get around space - that final frontier - we need starships."

*Oh my God - am I actually saying this?*

"I hope this turns out to be a really good starship, one which we can all be proud of, and -- and--"

*My God, I never dreamt giving these things could be so hard.*

"I guess you can see why I'm not the communications officer. I do hope that you'll be as proud to serve aboard *Galatea* as I am to command it, at least until the real command staff arrives."

*Okay, deep breath. You're almost done. Now how can you finish it right? Maybe I should try a poem?*

*"You starlance wanderer, born in the purple spacelanes,  
And floating in the Ebon, the bright stars wink at you.  
You tritanium-clad, dilithium-hearted, Galatea.  
What errands shall you run, what deeds shall you achieve?  
What honors shall you win in war's dark void?  
Shall you light the fire, or be consumed in flames?  
Shall you endure the storm, or be utterly crushed within?  
Ask a thousand questions of us, Universe;  
But the black and scarlet band of Galatea  
Who stares into your vast silence  
Has their own questions to ask,  
Their own challenges to meet.  
Fate shall listen to our voice, not ours to it;  
And if our Fate be death, then this I vow  
That Galatea shall meet it well.  
With our hands still grasping solid  
Upon the tiller of the cosmos."*

Damn. I hate having to improvise poetry. This was even a bigger embarrassment than the speech...

"Your meter leaves much to be desired, Captain." T'Doroth says. "And you would do better if you were less... operatic in your sentiments. Subtlety is a hallmark of skill."

"That's only because you dislike passion, T'Doroth," I say, too defensive for my own good.

"It is unseemly, sir." The Vulcan replies. "In my experience."

"I'm afraid seamliness and poetry aren't a good match. Or seamliness and much of anything for that matter. For example, I always thought quantum physics was very unseemly," I say. "So messy, compared to the neatness of Newtonian physics. Yet the universe wouldn't function without it."

"On Vulcan, we do not make artificial distinctions between *human* categories of Newtonian, Quantum, or Warp physics. Such separation serves no useful function."

"Mr. Hazard," I turn to the Science Officer. "Would you care to defend our homeland's scientific hierarchy for me?"

"No, Mr. Said," Hazard replies, conspicuously avoiding the use of "sir" or "captain". "I trained on Vulcan. Their science education makes ours look like a bad joke."

"Sir," Lars interrupts the conversation by carefully handing me a keycard. "The authorization codes from Admiral Delta-Thevyo."

I nod, place the keycode card in the slot, and input my authorization sequence. Once again, the light starts flashing on Lars' console, and the security alert message plays.

"Sir?" Lars is smiling slightly - I didn't know Efrosians had a sense of humor. "Why are you attempting to impersonate Admiral Delta-Thevyo?"

It takes me three hours to fix the problems with the Captain's chair, and that's when Gbeji tells me we're going to need people to come over from Starbase and completely overhaul the entire *Galatea* computer system - the ISC computer elements include a learning heuristic that hasn't been properly prepared, and they'll need at least seventy-two hours of datastream stimulation to get them to form the proper networks... In short, things are a real mess. Worse, we're going to have to be there when they do it, since the computers adjust themselves to their operator's personal quirks, and that's going to require us to input common commands several thousand times each.

"Can somebody tell me how this system's supposed to handle someone who transfers aboard ship?" Hazard asks.

"Not well," Gbeji answers. "But it's ISC technology, so it *has* to be better."

"Let's not ask any of them to come aboard and show us how to use it," Lars quips. "It would be embarrassing."

"Don't worry, Mr. Lars." Hazard mutters. "After I finish with the frogs, they won't be in any condition to laugh at us."

"The ISC is merely misguided." T'Doroth states. "If our response is excessive, it will only impede the inevitable diplomatic settlement."

"Excessive response is what wins wars, Lieutenant." Hazard spits back.

"My apologies." T'Doroth says. "I had forgotten that humans are never so illogical as when they debate politics."

"She has a point," I say, taking a break from pushing buttons. My voice is raw from reciting the same captain's log for the two-hundredth time. "A political situation is never static. Three years ago, we were at war with the Klingons, being tortured by the Romulans, and wondered just what the heck had happened to the Organians. Now, we're coordinating fleet actions with the Klingons, the Romulans would *never* think of torturing us..." T'Doroth, the only one who knows the truth about what happened to me, raises an eyebrow but says nothing, "...and we wish the Organians had never come back."

"I cannot believe anyone who sits in a Captain's chair would be a toad-coddler," Hazard replies.

That's the second time I've gotten the cryptic hint of insubordination from Hazard. I want to let it slide, but the part of me that still holds a piece of Greg's persona tells me I need to call him on it now. Lately, especially during my time with Roger aboard *Candlejack*, I've had to listen very carefully to that voice.

"Mr. Hazard, I need your help in testing systems in the ready room."

"Of course, Mr. Said." Hazard knows exactly why I'm calling him on the carpet, and what's more, he's spoiling for a fight.

We walk into the ready room and start testing systems. "When do we test the auto-destruct?" Hazard smiles.

"Until we get the command codes chiseled in silicon, we don't," I answer, and I change my posture. "So what's the issue? Be blunt."

"Your command is a joke, Mr. Said," Hazard answers. "Is that blunt enough for you?"

"You could always hit me over the head with a one hundred kilogram sledgehammer," I reply. "That'd be blunter. I could tell you that I completely understand how you feel, but frankly, you don't know me, and this instant enmity rubs me the wrong way." Any trace of a smile disappears from his face. "Having an engineer in the con for the first part of the shakedown makes sense."

"Especially when they rush *Galatea* into service before it's ready so its unqualified Captain can go off on a personal errand." Hazard glowers at me. "I keep my ear to the ground, Lieutenant."

"This ship doesn't budge until I feel it's safe," I vow. "And the 'personal errand' doesn't exist anymore, it's a mission."

"You know, the next time a friend of mine dies, I wish I could delay the grieving process by pulling strings at Starfleet HQ to get me a starship command, regardless of my lack of qualifications," Hazard says with a pronounced sneer. "Unless you can set a course for Heaven - or Hell, given some of the stories I heard about Greg Jensen - you're just going to be wasting our time. If this ship is battle-ready, then we should be fighting the ISC, nothing else. If it isn't, we should stay here until it's ready. There are too many lives at stake in the Federation for this sort of indulgence."

I sigh, sit back and smile - an expression that only deepens the scowl on Hazard's face. Why do I always seem to end up in these pointless confrontations? It was bad enough dealing with Roger - I expect better from a "Fleeter". "The question is, Mr. Hazard, whether you've got enough self-control to keep this opinion to yourself, or whether you'll shoot yourself in the foot - again - as you've done for your entire career."

"I wouldn't worry about my mouth, Mr. Said," Hazard says. "There are other parts of my body which can do a lot more damage."

I really, really shouldn't put up with this. I'm not a disciplinarian, but even a veiled threat of physical violence toward a commanding officer is an offense punishable by court martial. Greg could put up with it because if anyone tried to throw a punch at him, the idiot would probably need to spend a year in a Starfleet hospital recovering. My fighting skills aren't nearly as robust, and I don't think beating the crap out of Hazard would resolve anything.

"I don't see a transfer request, Commander," I say. "Was that an oversight?"

"Believe me, Lieutenant, if there was any chance of being reassigned to the front, I'd have handed you the papers the minute you came aboard." Hazard replies.

Well, that comes as no surprise. "I've looked at your record. There's a good officer in there somewhere. Care to help me find him?"

"What a coincidence," Hazard replies. "I've looked at your record too. There's a real good engineer in there. And, by every account, the person in those records shouldn't be allowed to get within six decks of a bridge console, let alone the con."

With a sharp intake of breath, I pause to consider my next move. The hard part is that he's right, absolutely right, beyond any shadow of a doubt, and it leaves me with a nightmarish choice. Do I (as Roger would've put it) jettison this man out the nearest airlock, or do I turn him into a project? I always hate looking at things - and people - when they're broken. I wish I had more of a talent for fixing them (the people that is).

My train of thought's interrupted when there's a ring on the door. It's Ensign Gbeji.

"Excuse me, sir," she says in a halting voice. "but there's a malfunction in the Captain's comm..."

"Can you fix it, Ensign?" I ask. "The Commander and I are..."

"That's the problem, sir," Gbeji looks a little sheepish. She points at the ready room intercom. "The comm chair's learning heuristic has decided that anything you say belongs in the Captain's log, so it's record everything you're saying in there..."

Hazard and I give each other a long, startled look.

"It gets worse," Gbeji reports. "It's also testing the playback circuits. We've heard every word you two have said."

"That's fine with me," Hazard replies, a brazen child whose hand has been spotted with cookie dough stains when he thought no one was looking.

I storm onto the bridge. Kollos and T'Doroth's faces are stoic - only Lars looks like he's amused. I angrily turn to T'Doroth.

"It was logical to give you a chance to resolve your differences, without interruption." T'Doroth doesn't even wait for me to ask the question.

"Gentlemen, please." Kollos interrupts. "Captain, you saved my life when I was a prisoner of the ISC. I will follow you wherever you take us. Ivan, I served with you for six months aboard *Reckless*, and I thought you were outstanding, but..."

"...here it comes," Gbeji says, swallowing the remark quickly.

She takes a deep breath. "I've served aboard a poisoned ship once before. Two hundred good people died because the command staff refused to talk to each other. As acting second officer, I'm telling you both that I'm not going to tolerate that experience twice."

"Captain..." Lars speaks up. I guess this is turning into a confessional. "I share many of Mr. Hazard's concerns. I'm bothered about being your chief of security when I can't even make physical contact with you. You are unqualified for the position, the mission sounds more like an exercise in politics than a genuine necessity..."

"You didn't know Captain Jensen," I reply.

"Has anyone here not lost a Captain?" Lars asks. "Raise your hands. C'mon!" No one does. "I stopped counting how many friends I lost when it hit triple digits. I suspect everyone else here's done the same. Forgive us if we can't comprehend why your loss deserves special treatment." He pauses for a second. "And your poetry is way overblown. And you drone it, your voice is too nasal, it lacks command character. But... Starfleet says you're in charge of the mission, and I'm a soldier. I will follow you."

"Thank you," I say.

"Don't thank me, it's my job." Lars spits back. "Captain, there's no greater sign of weakness in a commander than a man who feels a need to give out compliments too freely. Never compliment me unless I've done something that warrants a medal."

"Okay..." I say, and I turn to Hazard. "Commander, do you have anything else to add? Anything to get off your chest?"

Hazard takes a deep breath. "I consider myself to be a fair man. Some people may call me the admiral of confrontation..." he looks at Kollo. "... but I am capable of giving people a fair shake. It's just that right now... being passed over for even a temporary command... just so it be bestowed on a junior lieutenant... well, it's the latest in a long line of personal insults and I'm really tired of it. I am sick to death of the politics of the captain's chair and Starfleet Command." He tries to look conciliatory. "It isn't not personal, Lieutenant, not yet."

"Commander," I reply, knowing full well that my crew's not going to like what I'm about to say. "It *is* personal. Anyone who sits in the Captain's chair has to make any challenge to their authority into a personal issue, for the good of the ship. However - if you perform well, I'll do what I can to reverse some of the injustices you've suffered."

"I'll believe it when I see it." Hazard states, crossing his arms.

"But if you persist in the attitude, you'll find yourself in the brig." This is actually a very poor tactic on my part - never threaten to do a specific disciplinary action to someone unless you're completely committed to it, which I'm not, and he knows it. "I'm holding you to the offer of a 'fair shake', Commander, and you can expect the same from me."

"That works for me." Hazard says bluntly, not changing his body language.

"Now that we've got the Captain and the Commander on speaking terms, does anyone want to fix the problems between the Federation and ISC?" Gbeji jokes.

"That one's easy," Hazard says. "All you need is one really big phaser, and maybe a chef with a good recipe for frog's legs."

Eighty hours later, the preliminary systems tests have been completed and the learning heuristics are established. James Latham joins us aboard ship as chief medical officer - yet another person who deserves better. Hazard makes an effort to further the reconciliation process, but he's thwarted by Dido - our new ship's mascot's getting very protective, and it's virtually impossible for me to hold a meeting in my quarters because she snaps at people. The only person aside from me that she shows any affection toward is Lars - some Efrosians have empathic abilities with animals. Lars, on the other hand, reacts to Dido like a Klingon in a room full of tribbles. Even he can't explain why.

I'm also establishing a cordial relationship (with a few romantic overtones) with Gbeji. She's bright, very beautiful, has a great sense of humor, and doesn't seem to be as wounded as the rest of my crew. This is a ship that's got so much emotional scar tissue that it could probably be exploited as a second set of shields, an example set down by its acting first officer (and, I'll admit, probably by myself - Hazard and I have more in common than we'd like to admit). Most of the people on *Galatea* have seen a lot of action. More interesting, even a casual inspection of the crew roster indicates there's an unusually high number of psionics aboard this ship.

"I've noticed it too. I wouldn't be surprised if Starfleet didn't have a special agenda for this ship." Kollo tells me one day, when the senior staff is taking a lunch break. We're sitting in a mess hall, the most claustrophobic rec room I've ever seen, eating a replicated lunch of spinach pasta and bread (welcome fare after the spiceless meals Roger served us aboard *Candlejack*). It's

a time for discussion, albeit with the unspoken restriction that we keep our proverbial safeties on our phasers and not allow our passions overwhelm us. Especially Hazard – though it’s a restriction that he doesn’t always live by.

"Good." Hazard adds. "Let’s hope it’s something that’ll bring them to account, though I’ll settle for a full offensive." Once again Hazard indicates that his hatred for the ISC puts my loathing for the Romulans to shame. If Kollos is correct, there’s no special story behind the grudge – Ivan’s brother wasn’t killed by the Meskeen, he didn’t spend several weeks in a Pacification facility being tortured - the Commander’s just naturally intense and emotional, and this particular hatred built up over time. A lot of people who learned to hate Klingons during the General War found it rather easy to transfer that hatred over to the ISC when this conflict began. Enemies become an addiction. I’d advise him to keep the emotions under control, but it’s a struggle for us to coexist at the same table, let alone sit down together and trade personal advice.

"The secrecy is ill-advised." T’Doroth answers the Lieutenant after chewing a mouth full of *spiraaki*. "I have observed secret missions before. They are largely exercises in bureaucratic self-importance. The secrecy accorded to them rarely warrants the climate of speculation and suspicion that they foster. They can be very damaging to a crew’s efficiency."

"Maybe we should all become mind controlled drones and then we’ll all become paragons of efficiency." Hazard doesn’t hide his contempt for T’Doroth’s observation. "The ISC would love it." He adds with a muttering aside.

"There *are* other ways to treat a crew, Mr. Hazard." T’Doroth says. "Although considering other options would be less confrontational, and attempts to defuse tension do not appear to fit in with your current agenda."

"Hey I admit it, I’m spoiling for a fight." Hazard replies. "You know what, in wartime, soldiers *fight*. It’s part of the job profile."

"The combined forces of this quadrant are barely holding its own with the ISC," I say. "I don’t know what Starfleet has planned, but if they’ve got something up their sleeves that leads to a *smarter* way of fighting them..."

"I believe I have a duty shift coming up." Hazard says, rising from the table. He looks at T’Doroth. "See? I *do* know how to avoid a confrontation."

"I see that you are well-schooled at both direct and passive-aggressive techniques," T’Doroth counters. Hazard takes a deep, angry breath, glowers, and leaves. T’Doroth’s expression looks vaguely self-satisfied, Kollos’s expression moreso.

"I’ve got to admit, I was rather surprised to see the two of you aboard this ship," I say, having a rare chance to have the ladies all to myself. "How did you get transferred here?"

"*USS Prachett* was in drydock, following a battle with an ISC strike cruiser at Debyion. They preferred to reassign me than leave me idle for three weeks."

"Her Captain’s furious." Kollos added. "T’Doroth had already put the previous weapons officer to shame."

"I’m sure she did," I reply, and I turn to T’Doroth. "Lieutenant, I know this isn’t the most pleasant assignment. The empathic field must be very difficult to tolerate... but your Captain is very glad to have you aboard his vessel."

"I admit that proximity to that empathy field is very uncomfortable," T’Doroth replies. "But I am very interested in getting to better know the man I met aboard *Lasting Peace*. Nothing improves one’s abilities – or enriches one’s life – than the company of extraordinary people."



“You may be in for a serious disappointment.” My reply is almost a reflex, humility on tap. But it’s false modesty, and they both know it. At the risk of sounding offensive, I’ve always found women are very sharply attuned to falseness, even women far less capable than these two ladies who are sharing a meal of spinach pasta and Andorian *curltt* bread with me. Seeing Kollos roll her eyes just slightly underscores the transparency of my character flaw. I rise from the table and politely excuse myself.

“You *do* think he’s *dashing*, don’t you Lieutenant?” I hear Kollos say with a hint of mischief in her voice as I’m walking through the messhall door. T’Doroth says nothing, though at the moment I can just imagine a raised eyebrow on her Vulcan face.

Moments of recreation are few and far between. To build camaraderie, I ask the crew to remain aboard *Galatea* until the launch, to acclimate themselves. They don’t like the decision, or appreciate the logic behind the decision, but it gives us all a good chance to see what we’re like before we hit deep space. After the initial round of heuristics, I schedule a two-hour recreation break for the entire crew. It gives me a chance to walk the ship when things are finally quiet.

Most of the people are congregated in the recreation deck and the lounge. (Unlike Constitution class ships, *Galatea* does not have a bowling alley). In one of the rec rooms, I get to watch Hazard and Lars train together, doing basic ju-jitsu drills. They’re both as competitive as hell and it’s fun to watch, even though Lars is clearly the better of the two.

“Hey, Captain!” Lars shouts in an agreeable tone. “Are you adept at judo?”

“He’s Middle Eastern.” Hazard states. “That region’s got more of a straight wrestling background, isn’t it?”

“Well, judo and wrestling are popular in Turkey and Iran, but not so much in Arabia,” I correct. “Although I haven’t been back home since I was 17. “But yes, I am acquainted with ‘the gentle way’.”

I pull out the hypo of entropophenamine I always carry and remove the safety lock. “According to Dr. Latham, this will block the effects for about... I think it’s up to three minutes now.”

I wish I knew what the Romulans had given me to block my powers. I hand the hypospray to the big Efrosian, remove my jacket, slip into a *judogi* and limber up. “You think you can pin me in three minutes, fella?”

Lars nods, injects himself and positions himself on the mat; we face each other and lock up. Almost immediately I grimace -he’s definitely as strong as he looks, and there’s no playfulness, just focus.

I try to put him down with an *O Soto Otoshi* trip, but he easily counters the attempt and I find myself unable to mount any sort of offense. I guess I’m not really trying to beat him, rather, I want to test myself - it’s been over a year since I’ve had a lick of combat training, and I’m rusty. Lars is about my height, but he’s as wide as a freighter (a perfect build for judo), and he’s fast too, so fast it’s hard for me to counter him. I manage to stay even with him for about a minute, then he performs a perfect *De Ashi Harai* foot sweep and puts me flat on my back.

“Not bad, Captain,” Lars notes, genuine astonishment in his voice. I get to my feet, Lars grabs the back of my head and rubs his forearm against my forehead - I have no idea what that Efrosian custom means. “That’d be impressive even for a security officer of your size.” Lars doesn’t offer praise easily - I should feel very honored. The Efrosian holds the hypospray in front of the first officer. “You want a shot at him, Hazard?”

For a second, it's like looking into the face of a knight who's just spotted the holy grail, then the stocky commander shakes his head. "I feel the need to tread carefully," he says, a very formal way of saying no. "You lasted over a minute against Lars - that means you're tougher and more capable than you look. So if it's a matter of physical respect, Mr. Said, I'll concede the point."

"I thought you two could..." Lars interject.

"You thought we'd bond if we got everything out of our systems with a fight, like a pair of teenage rivals?" Hazard delivers the rhetorical question. "Whatever is between me and the Lieutenant isn't some minor adolescent dispute. And judo is something I do with my *friends*. For *fun*. One day, he might qualify. Today, he doesn't."

"Fine." I shrug. "Let me know when the day comes."

Lars and Hazard resume their contest, while I put back on my uniform top, and sit back and watch as Kollos plays a game of three dimensional chess with T'Doroth. To my surprise, Kollos is easily besting the Vulcan.

"Are you off your game, T'Doroth?" I ask.

"No Captain," she replies. "Kollos is simply a far superior opponent. However, when we remove her pieces at random intervals, I am capable of presenting her with a stimulating challenge."

"It's not a game to me, sir," Kollos says. "It's a tactical exercise."

"Kollos sees life as a series of tactical exercises of varying difficulty," T'Doroth notes. "A Medusan trait."

I'm tempted to offer to find her some old computer strategy games, but it'd be ludicrous to think I'd find things that both she and T'Doroth overlooked. I nod, smile, and decide to do what I always do when there's extended recreational time - head down to engineering and look for something that needs fixing. Maybe the dilithium chamber could stand another inspection.

"Now I know you're bored," Gbeji says, sticking her head out a Jeffries' Tube. "Or paranoid."

"More frustrated than bored, and more bored than paranoid." I say, motioning at the warp drives that are currently running in test mode beyond a large copper grate. "Part of it is because when things go bad on the bridge, this is where I go to feel comfortable. And part of it is that I do love to watch a warp engine sing. And if I find *that* entertaining, how can I ever complain about boredom?"

"Well... I like watching it too," Gbeji says, as she climbs out of the tube and plops her tall frame next to mine as we lean against one of the engineering panels. "Next time we do this, how about you bring us some popcorn?"

One hundred and three hours after I board *Galatea*, things are finally ready to run. We've put the warp engines through six diagnostics, all the systems seem to be running, and we've gone for twenty-four hours without a major power glitch. "It's time to kick the bird out of the Nest and see if she can fly," I say, sitting down at the con.

"Of course, we could crash and die," Hazard counters.

"Use thrusters to take us away from starbase, then ahead, quarter-impulse, Mr. Kollos."

"Thrusters active." I could swear I can feel the *Galatea* lurch. Easy girl. Kollos backs the ship away from Starbase.

"Starbase says 'good-bye *Galatea*, and safe journey," Lars reports.

"Send them the following response. 'Thanks, and... and... well...'" I find it hard to find the right word.

"Tell them if we wanted it 'safe', we'd have stayed at the damn base..." Hazard mutters. I turn to Mr. Hazard with a grin. "Send that one. Except for the 'damn'."

"That was the best part..." Hazard complains.

*Galatea* moves away from Starbase. In thirty seconds, we're far enough away to safely go to warp. I can hear the tension resonate in us like a chorus, a pounding in every part of our body that can throb, and some places that can't. This may be the first moment where I've ever understood why people like to work on the bridge, to feel the heart of the universe as she pumps her blood into you. All eyes are on me, even T'Doroth's.

I lean back in my chair, smile, and say to Kollo: "Mr. Kollo, set course for the Murray Waystation." That's a small research station about a quarter-parsec from Starbase, so we'll be close in case anything goes wrong. "Warp Two. Let's finish christening this tub and get to work."

"Course set," Kollo says, "Warp two. Engaging warp drive..."

The lights go out all over the ship. The warp engines and the impulse engines have decided to simultaneously perform a complete shutdown. We're coasting at a quarter-impulse, and if the navigational deflectors decide to kick out...

"Emergency stop, Mr. Kollo." I say. Kollo shakes her head, indicating the controls won't respond. "Gbeji?"

"It's the heuristic, it keeps adding conditions to the diagnostic. In this case, it realized we hadn't checked a key ship's system and shut us down until we tested it." Gbeji informs me.

"That almost sounds reasonable," I note. "Which system?"

"The countdown for the autodestruct." Gbeji says, a little sheepishly.

"It wants us to blow up the ship before it allows us to engage the warp drive?" Lars wonders.

"No, Lieutenant, it just wants us to engage the countdown and then shut it down." Gbeji corrects. "I don't think it's a significant risk. The countdown sequence is regulated by the ship's chronometer, and that operates on emergency power. It's not going to suddenly reset to zero and blow."

I look at Kollo and Hazard - we're the three officers who'll be needed to test the system. "We're already too far from Starbase to take us back with thrusters. Should I call for a tug, or do you want to risk the test?" I ask.

"Risk." Hazard says.

"I agree, but I recommend evacuating the ship first." Kollo adds.

*Welcome to the USS Catastrophica.* I get on the command comm and broadcast a message to all decks. "This is the captain to all hands - abandon ship. Repeat, all hands abandon ship. This is not a drill."

Well, it's sort of a drill, I guess...

Three days after we've fixed the self-destruct problem, recreated the ship and gone to warp, we arrive at Murray Waystation, a small Federation outpost that hugs the edge of the frontier. We don't blow up the ship on this leg of the trip, but there was a near catastrophic deflector failure, a complete power shutdown that baffles everyone, (myself included), and random gravity fluctuations, including a twenty minute stretch where we found ourselves living in a 4.5g environment and Latham ended up treating half the crew for back problems and muscle spasms. And then the food synthesizers produced a chili that turned out to be toxic (the heuristic was learning about intruder controls and I guess it calculated that food poisoning would be a good tactic to use against an enemy boarding party).

It's enough to make a man nostalgic for the days of Argos. I almost abandon the mission at Murray, but a remarkably unsympathetic communication from Starfleet orders us to continue, so we set course for Space Station R-22 – and practice a lot of lifeboat drills.

"It's official, the food's safe," Lars announces at dinner, after we've scanned our meals for toxins. We're three days out of Murray, at Warp 2 and yellow alert until we've removed a few more kinks from the ship. "The universe is just going to have to find another way to sabotage us."

"Don't taunt the universe, Mr. Lars." Latham retorts. "It's bigger than you."

"Is it my imagination, or does the ship's bread seem a little tastier?" Kolloos wonders with a smile. "Perhaps the toxins helped the taste?"

"Certain spices do qualify as low grade toxins." Even T'Doroth seems to be getting into the sour spirit of things.

"Is there any chance that people can be a little more positive?" I finally ask.

"Well you heard what they said about us at Murray, sir," Lars replies. "I've never heard a repair team curse a ship so much in their life. They were actually forming a pool on how long it'd take for us to blow up!"

And here I thought I was holding these command staff dinners to bring the crew together. Unfortunately it's become an excuse for the senior officers to grouse in my ear. This is definitely the worst part of this job (until the day comes when I have to write some very unpleasant letters to some crewman's spouses and other loved ones).

"The repair crews didn't even touch the weapons systems, Captain," Kolloos adds. "I've come to the conclusion we're never going to get the PPDs to work. Ever. They're a complete waste of space."

"But they've been test-fired twice!" Gbeji notes.

"True. But those tests took place on a starbase..." I reply, realism (and pessimism) sinking into my words. "...where the power capabilities are totally different than aboard ship."

"We could fire a shot – a single shot – and then the dilithium array would go up in smoke." Kolloos theorizes. "The plasma torpedoes are a *little* better, but I think their holding costs make them prohibitively expensive. Photon torpedoes are a more reliable weapon."

"Speaking of reliable, have I mentioned your dog, sir?" Lars's non-sequitur catches everyone off-guard. "Commander Hazard found it in my quarters again last night. It was standing on its hindpaws with its forepaws on my bed, just... *looking...* at me."

"You must be a very attractive man, Mr. Lars," I joke.

"That I am sir," Lars says. "But I do have a problem with this."

"Dido is a little strange," I admit. "Someone must be playing a practical joke on you. Hazard perhaps?" Ivan Hazard's on bridge duty right now, or morale at this dinner would probably have gone through the floor and out the belly of the ship. But Lars shakes his head and taps the table slightly.

"That's not his thing." Lars says, and given that he and the Commander have become almost inseparable lately, it'd be foolish to challenge his word. "And everyone else aboard ship is afraid of the beast..."

"I'm not." Gbeji declares, and then quickly adds: "but I didn't do anything either."

"Unless you are a master sociopath, that is highly unlikely, Ensign," T'Doroth says.

“Also, on another matter, Ensign Roytkar mentioned that we had plasma torpedoes aboard ship in a private communiqué to his parents. Fortunately, the computer caught it, and vitted the transmission...”

I frown. Even a green Ensign should appreciate the basic need for secrecy, especially when we’re testing new technology. “Has he been reprimanded?” Lars nods. “If you think it’s enough of a punishment, let him be, otherwise send him to me. Am I legally allowed to feed him to my dog?”

“It’s wartime, sir.” Lars smiles at the joke. “If you think he’s committing treason, you can do anything.”

Fortunately, we’re both just joking. “I want each of you to stress the need for secrecy to your departments. No more sloppy transmissions,” I order the senior staff. “Now as for our engineering problems... does anyone have any recommendations on which systems need to be stabilized next?”

“I’m confident we’ve got gravity and life support locked down.” Gbeji declares. “And the navigational deflectors should remain operational...”

“Sickbay diagnostics were down for three hours yesterday,” Latham notes. “I don’t mean to sound greedy, but it’s past time *I* got some priority treatment.”

“I agree.” I concur. “Medical systems are so complex, the heuristic doesn’t seem to want to stop fidgeting. Does anyone object?”

“Let’s not isolate Ivan from the decision making process, shall we?” Lars is a little testy that I’m discussing important matters while the most important dissenting voice is absent. As he should be.

“You’re absolutely right,” I admit. Let’s face it, it’s a stupid mistake – I don’t need to alienate Hazard any further, and I don’t need to get on Lars’s bad side either. I pick up my communicator to call him, when its sound is echoed behind my back. The mess hall doors open and there he is, with the most serious expression I’ve ever seen on the Commander’s face.

“Mr. Hazard, good of you to join us,” I say. “We need to discuss...”

“Whatever you’re talking about can wait,” he says. “Company’s come a-calling.”

“An ISC SC.” Hazard brings our attention to the ship before we can even sit down in our chairs. The bridge feels tighter and more confined in a crisis. “Frigate class scout vessel. It came out of the Denebria Cloud, and it’s closing fast at Warp Seven point three.”

“We do outgun it by a two-to-one margin, even without the PPDs,” Gbeji states.

“I would not recommend putting our weapon systems or our defenses through a trial by fire.” T’Doroth put things a little more poetically than is the Vulcan norm, but the gist is obvious. And she’s the weapons officer, so hers is the voice of authority.

“But we’re not going to be able to outrun it either, are we?” Hazard adds. “We may not have the option.”

“Red alert.” I say, surprised that Hazard hadn’t hit the alert earlier (perhaps he was scared the alert would trigger a new round of heuristic malfunctions). I hit the comm button – and, by Allah, does it ever sound strange to hear these words coming out of my lips.

“All hands, this is the Captain. Proceed immediately to battlestations and stand by for an update within the next five minutes. Said out.” I swivel in the chair and turn to the bridge crew, particularly Hazard and Kollos. “Our orders were to avoid contact with the enemy if possible. If they should scan us and inform the ISC about this ship’s capabilities...”

“I recommend retreat,” T’Doroth states, as firmly as a Vulcan handshake. “It’s the only way to prevent us from being scanned.”

“With all due respect, Lieutenant, that’s complete bunk!” Hazard snaps. “That ship can tell our profile’s different from any other Federation destroyer. It’s going to investigate. And it’s faster than us, so it’s going to catch us eventually. In fact, the longer we wait, the more chance we have of experiencing another catastrophic malfunction, and then we’re easy pickings!”

“Well...” I wonder aloud.

“Didn’t you hear the poem they said about us at Murray? *Malfunction to the right of us... malfunction to the left... into the valley of malfunctions rode Galatea...*”

“Enough, Commander,” I grit my teeth at Hazard. “You’ve made your point.”

“Captain, with all due respect,” T’Doroth retorts. “You need to *rethink* the Commander’s point. The propulsion system *is* relatively stable.”

“We’re three days from R-22 at Warp 8,” Gbeji says. “A scout wouldn’t dare to follow us into a base station.”

I walk over to the science console, where Hazard gives me a wide berth. There are no ships visible within sensor range, but intelligence on this sector isn’t entirely reliable. “They could be out there, and if we wait for them to bring in reinforcements...”

“If reinforcements arrive, and we are damaged from a battle against the scout, it would be highly unlikely that we could escape,” T’Doroth states.

Now how many pieces of conflicting information does that make? I lift up my hand to halt the information stream. “Mr. Hazard, can you boost power to the sensors? I’d like to take a larger look at the situation.”

I step away, and Hazard performs a deep scan ahead of our course. It takes several minutes – and no one on the bridge makes a sound. “The deep scan was broken by a diagnostic cycle. I got a brief look out to eight parsecs – no sign of ISC reinforcements, but I was limited to a 60 degree angle of view.”

“So there’s no one ahead?” Kollos asks.

“They could blindside us.” Hazard states. “And an echelon of smaller vessels could elude our sensor net and intercept us.”

I take a deep breath. My natural instinct is to run. Greg’s natural instinct would be to fight. I remember an instructor at the Academy tell me that holding an action because of hypothetical concerns is a mistake 90% of the time, provided you have decent or better intelligence. Mind you, the instructor was an Andorian, and not particularly known for his forbearance (prior to the General War, he had advocated war with the Klingons and the Romulans every time there’d been an incident).

“Captain?” Kollos asks.

“Plot us an intercept course, Mr. Kollos.” I say, sitting down in the Captain’s chair. “Mr. T’Doroth, be ready to fire on my mark. Mr. Lars, prepare a boarding party and proceed to transporters – provided the enemy vessel isn’t filled with water, you’ll perform a boarding action on my signal. Mr. Hazard, coordinate damage control parties.”

A half dozen *ayesirs* and *Galatea* is as ready as she’s ever going to be. “I recommend jamming their communications, lieutenant,” Hazard says. I nod. I guess this means we’re not going to be chatting.

So we’re now into the joust, those white-knuckle minutes when two ships, both traveling on intercept vectors, raise their shields, ready their weapons, and strike their colors. And cross their

lances. At its heart all warfare is a medieval enterprise, regardless of technology, rules, or whatever contemporary cultural trappings we place on it. War is a primitive, stench of blood and sweat business, the hunting instinct gone awry.

“Six minutes to extreme weapons range.” T’Doroth states.

I take a deep, sharp breath. “Captain, shouldn’t you inform the crew of your decision to enter combat?” Hazard asks with a scowl.

Without acknowledging the rebuke, I press the comm button. “All hands, this is the Captain. We are being pursued by a single ISC scout ship. Our mission requires us to keep this vessel’s technology a secret from our enemies, so rather than risking detection, I’ve chosen to engage it. Be ready.”

Okay, so it's not the most inspiring of speeches. At least it’s the truth.

“Captain,” T’Doroth says. “Please note in the log that this action is being taken over the objections of the ship’s weapons officer.”

“So noted,” I state, pressing the log button.

Six minutes may as well be six hundred. I can see the doubt grow in the bridge crew’s eyes, even T’Doroth, who’s seen me in a fight before. Only Kolloos looks confident. I suppose I should find it comforting.

Three minutes after giving the order, I receive confirmation that Lars has assembled his team. I send him my best wishes, but any words of encouragement - “we’re all counting on you...”, “you’re my right cross in this street fight among the stars...” “I understand Korlivilar guts make great violin strings...” – all sound crass and phony, bravado worthy of an Academy recruit or a bad holodrama.

“They’re launching a probe, sir.” Hazard says.

“Kill it...” I reply. Immediately, T’Doroth opens fire with a forward firing Phaser-2, and we see an explosion in space. The bridge crew smiles for the first time today, except for Kolloos.

“We destroyed it at 26,000 kilometers,” the helmsman notes. “Just outside probe range.”

“Provided they haven’t upgraded their probes!” Hazard says with alarm. “They’re veering away.”

“They’ll try to get out of jamming range and call for reinforcements,” I say. “We’re going to have to test our engines. Let’s intercept them.”

So we begin to accelerate. I can hear a hum permeate the entire ship as we climb past Warp 6. At Warp 7, I can feel the deckplates begin to rattle. “How’s she holding, Mr. Gbeji?”

“No problems reported yet, sir,” the young Nigerian replies.

The ship continues to accelerate, which seems to mirror our increasing anxiety, and the sweat beads that form in rapidly growing clusters on our foreheads and our palms. Then there’s a sudden clanking sound – something settled in the space between the decks – and we practically jump out of our seats.

“That’s nothing to worry about...” Gbeji says after she does a quick scan. “A toolkit was displaced in one of the holds.”

“Warp eight,” Kolloos informs us. Nearby stars are beginning to visibly shift at that velocity. That’s always a freaky sight.

“And the ISC ship?” I inquire, wiping my palms.

“Holding steady at Warp eight point eight,” Hazard reports.

There’s a long, contemplative pause. “Captain, I don’t recommend trying to match that speed,” Gbeji finally says.

She's right – Warp Eight point five is *Galatea's* recommended maximum cruising speed, and every engineer in the Fleet would tell me it's insane to take her above Warp Eight on a shakedown. And I'm pretty damn sure that Warp 8.8 *isn't* the scout's limit.

"Warp eight point three..." Kollos says with a creak in her voice. Even she and T'Doroth are beginning to look like they're on the edge of panic.

"She's pulling away..." Hazard adds, unnecessarily. "Coward."

"Emergency stop." I instruct. "Low level power to systems only. Launch a defensive shuttlecraft and send her out to a range of 20000 kilometers." People give me odd looks. "We need to lure the scout into our weapons range. Since our tractor beam can't reach two hundred clicks, this is the only alternative. Let her think we're crippled."

"Full stop," Kollos says. The power levels on the bridge fades, and once again, only a swath of discomfiting red light illuminates *Galatea's* command center.

"Defensive shuttlecraft launched. Its point defenses are active." Hazard reports.

"The shuttle's priority is to kill any incoming probes," I say. "Let's see if she'll take the bait."

"I doubt they're amateurs. I wouldn't fall for that, Lieutenant, and neither will they." Hazard responds. "A ship twice as powerful as yours can't catch you, and then it suddenly and *conveniently* breaks down..." I bow my head to acknowledge his rant – again he's right – but then he gasps. "Son of a bitch...it's coming around."

Just when I thought my heart couldn't beat any faster. "Let's look like it's a natural malfunction... Mr. Hazard, send out a really weak distress call – one tenth power and choked with static – let them think our communications are all but down..."

Hazard doesn't hesitate to follow *this* order. "This is *USS Galatea* to all Federation ships. Requesting assistance... Repeat, requesting assistance..."

I nod and watch the ship approach. More uncomfortable seconds pass. "Give me a split second power surge in the right warp nacelle. Make it look like we're doing a repair cycle."

"Aye sir," Gbeji replies. The lights briefly return to the bridge, faces illuminate like a thunderstroke, making people appear even more nervous than they actually are.

"They're still coming," Hazard notes.

"Thirty thousand kilometers. Extreme weapons range." Kollos announces.

"If they perform a deep scan now, Captain, we will regret this tactic," T'Doroth says.

"Twenty-five thousand kilometers... they're veering off!" Kollos notes that the ISC's suddenly decided to stop being so brave and turn aside from the intercept course.

"Shall we go after them?" Hazard says.

"They're still one rabbit that's too fast for us to catch." I reply, interrupting Kollos as she was about to say the same thing. *Or a frog. No, let's not be racist.* "Better to trap it. Kollos, I want you to use our thrusters at about 10% power to rotate the ship. Make it look like we're trying to keep our forward shield facing them."

"Aye sir," Kollos knows as well as I do that that tactic's not about to work. I just want us to look like we're desperate. "It appears you were correct, sir. They're trying to flank us."

Okay... now it's just a matter of timing. I'm not going to dare try a High Energy Turn in this crate. All eyes are on the scout's magnified image. "What about the shuttle?" Hazard asks.

"Bring it back to the ship for point defense," I say, though my focus is on the weapons officer. "T'Doroth, raise shields when it gets within 15,000 kilometers."

"Aye sir."



The moment of reckoning is at hand. At 18,000 kilometers, we restore main power. It begins to veer away, so we match its vector. We're lucky it doesn't fire a phaser into an unprotected hull before we can raise our shields. It launches an alpha strike on us at 9,000 kilometers, damaging our right warp nacelle. We retaliate with our rear phasers at 7,000, and launch a plasma torpedo at 6,000.

The plasma connects squarely with the scout's front shield, instantly obliterating it and scorching the ISC's front hull. "We've hurt it, sir, bad!" Hazard reports after a quick sensor scan... and then our power goes out.

"Gbeji?" I ask as the all-too-familiar sight of the emergency lights kicks in.

"It's the weapons, sir." Kollos, not Gbeji answers the question. "The heuristic decided to automatically follow any plasma torpedo strike with a PPD. We just blew out the dilithium chamber."

I know I'm the captain, and I have to stay strong, but right now I really want to just cry.

"The good news is that they're not in any shape to take advantage of us," Hazard reports. "They're almost dead too..."

"It's thirty-five minutes to replace a dilithium relay and restart the mains," Gbeji tells me something I already know. "They're in a race against time."

I look into the faces of my bridge crew, and I realize that this isn't good enough – they're the ones in control, and we're the helpless, waiting to see if they can repair their ship in time. If they do, we're dead, and if we don't, they are. It's as binary a situation as they get, but once again, that isn't good enough.

"Mr. Lars," I call through the bridge comm, hoping the power outage hasn't affected internal communications.

"Lars here," my security officer replies. "What's the status, sir?"

"Meet me with your prime team in shuttle number 2," I instruct. "We're about to pay a visit to the ISC. And bring explosives."

### III: No Duty, No Gain

“Lieutenant!” Hazard objects. “You’re in the Captain’s chair, you shouldn’t be putting yourself on the front line. I’m a fighter, you aren’t. You know the procedure...”

“Commander, I have seen Captain Said perform in a crisis. I – and the Axanar Cross he was awarded - can vouch for his ability,” T’Doroth objects.

“Commander,” I interject, not completely willing to leave the argument to my bridge officers. “I know ISC ship configurations better than anyone here. I’m going. You have the con, Mr. Hazard.”

“Aye...” Hazard replies, not adding the requisite “sir”. He’s sitting down in the command con even before I leave the bridge.

My first stop is to the armory, where I grab a phaser-1, clip a combat carapace over my torso, grab a life support mask, and head to the shuttlebay with as little wasted motion as possible. The prime team, six men (including Lars) and three women, is already waiting for me inside the shuttle *Pelican*, which is prepped and ready for launch. I climb aboard with a brief wave to my security officer, who gives a signal to the pilot. The shuttle’s been reconfigured for marines; two pilot’s seats separated from the rest of the shuttle by a canvas curtain, a pair of benches, a four pad transporter in the rear, and a small engineering access tube. Shuttles are a wonder of miniaturization, the starship djinn in a bottle. The doors quickly seal, and I find myself peering rapidly into the faces of the grim detail as the shuttle bay depressurizes. Do I wait for the introduction, or go straight into the briefing?”

“Our mission is to determine whether or not the ISC scout will be able to complete its repairs before we do.” I inform them ( I guess I made my choice). “We will get to a range of 3000 kilometers and perform a deep scan - if there’s no doubt the scout’s crippled, we’ll leave it be and let *Galatea* take care of her when our repairs are completed. However, if there’s *any*

indication the ISC will complete its repairs, we will transport into engineering and ensure they don't finish the job."

"So the objective *isn't* to capture it?" a dark-haired human ensign asks, obviously disappointed.

"We're not going to take unnecessary risks." I reply.

"Sir, have you ever served in security detail?" One of the female Ensigns asks.

"No Ensign, I have not," I say, ignoring my recollection of both Nagura and Jensen's many years of service. "I understand you don't want to leave a job half-done, especially if we get to apply a numerical advantage. But I'm an engineer. I believe in the right tool for the right job."

I can tell this answer's playing about as well as an anti-slaver speech on Rigil VII.

"Sir!" the pilot calls up from the shuttle bridge. "You'd better look at this!" Lars crawls over a few prime team members to get a clear view. "*They've* launched a shuttle..."

"Lieutenant, order *Nestor* to engage it," I bark, referring to *Galatea's* other shuttlecraft, which was already engaged in point defense.

"Sir, aren't we going to support it?" one of the ensigns asks in a voice tinged with a Russian accent. Lars shoots a backward glance – is it because the question's disrespectful, or is he thinking the same thing?

"We'll support it after we've completed our mission," I reply. *Because if we don't make completely certain that main ship is neutralized, we'll all be as dead as unarmed Hydrans on a Lyran shooting range.*

Lars nods, relays the order, then shouts: "The main ship is launching mines, sir."

I motion for people to get out of my way, and push myself to the bridge. They've launched mines alright, twenty-four mines in a protective diamond at six thousand kilometers. Unfortunately, if they can launch mines, they must have functioning power reserves, so they're not completely crippled. Worse, the mines are set to detonate if they detect any nearby energy signatures, and they're powerful enough to remove a shuttlecraft from the face of the universe.

"Cut power and coast," I order.

"Aye, sir," the pilot says. There's a click and whirring sound, and suddenly we're in the dark, operating on emergency reserves. Without our navigational deflectors to protect us from high velocity cosmic dust, it's a *very* rough ride. It's a good thing I don't easily get space-sick.

"We'll be in safe scanning range in nine minutes," the pilot, a human woman with shortly cropped brunette hair informs us. "The atmosphere will be brackish by then, so perhaps the Captain should go to his atmosphere reserves."

"Thank you Ensign, but I would like to breathe the same air as everyone else in this room." I state, probably too arrogantly.

"Mr. Roy, you don't need to babysit him," Lars tells the pilot, finally coming to my defense. "He may not be a security officer, but he lasted seventy-four seconds against me in a judo match. There aren't too many engineers in the fleet who can make that same claim."

"Aye sir," the pilot answers. From the dedication in his voice, I almost expect him to say the archaic "*sir, yes sir.*" and salute. I lean back against the console and watch us drift through the minefield. It's a nailbiter, even for me; I suddenly reach the conclusion that the people who aren't watching the viewscreen are the lucky ones on this trip.

Lars looks at me casually, and asks: "Would you like a seat, sir?"

Would it be discourteous to refuse, or to take advantage? No, I'm really overestimating the volatility of command. Just because some members of the security team want me to prove

myself, it doesn't mean I have to take a scalpel to every conversation. "Sure." I say, as I strap myself in. "Thanks."

"Mr. Roy, I'd like to speak with the captain in private," Lars says. Ensign Roy gives the customary *yessir* and heads into the back. "Commander Hazard didn't want you to come, did he?"

"No," I reply. I guess he must know my first officer really well. "I thought I was the best choice for the mission. I wasn't trying to get personal."

"I didn't say you did," Lars replied. "You've had plenty of opportunities to be petty toward the commander, and you've generally avoided them. Ivan's grudge isn't personal either, sir."

"It's not very professional, either," I reply. He says nothing, Either he agrees with me, or he doesn't want an argument.

"Well..." the security officer muses. "At least he doesn't insult your poetry."

I can't help but smile. "I leave that to you and Doc Latham," I reply.

"If you didn't use poetry to cover up your lack of command skills – or make it less subtle than Klingon opera..." Lars shakes his head. "And this comes from someone who *likes* bombast. Kipling's my favorite author..."

"He's not Efrosian." I say.

"No he isn't, but the rhythm of his verse is a thing of beauty. If my own verse had a tenth of that quality."

"So you write as well?" I ask. "Have you ever considered writing for *Space Messages*?"

"That magazine's much too... literary... for my tastes," Lars almost laughs. "My poetry is very basic: protein, starch, and brew. My brow contracts when you try to put something more sophisticated in front of me."

I take my attention away from Lars to inspect the tactical situation – we're six thousand kilometers away from the scout, just passing the mines. No movement from the enemy, good. "When this mission is over, you'll have to share your writings," I tell the lieutenant. "I wouldn't mind holding some poetry readings. And more judo."

"Absolutely, on both." Lars brow creases slightly, a sign he's pleased. "It's odd that you enjoy poetry and Ivan recoils from it," the broad Efrosian observes. "Some days he acts like such a Polar... it's quite amusing." People from Efros's polar regions have a reputation for being culturally backward (although the current Federation President, an Efrosian Polar who's considered far smarter or charismatic than a "tempatropical", has done a lot to dispel the bumpkin image). "You must come from a more embracing culture."

"Well, I was born an Arab," I explain. "Our greatest warriors were also poets, historians, and theologians. We pride ourselves on being complete."

"So do the people of Apotishyi province," Lars notes with a slight bristling of his brow, referring to his homeland. The shuttlecraft, which had been flying relatively smoothly, suddenly kicks. "I can think of one poem I wrote that would be very appropriate for this moment," he says when the vessel steadies. "I composed it for a friend of mine, Ensign Varsity."

"I don't know an Ensign Varsity," I state, after ruminating for a few seconds on the names of our crew. Keeping sixty-eight names and faces straight in your head is a much harder task than it sounds.

"He's not here, sir. We served together aboard *Indefatigable*. We were very good friends..."

"I'm surprised you didn't put in a request to get him transferred to *Galatea*." I remark. Given the ability level of most of my crew, it's astonishing to see how easy it was to put them together.

Lars bows his head and stretches his brow slightly. "Well...I would have sir," he stammers, "but he's dead. I read the poem at his funeral." He pauses, gives me a moment to feel embarrassed, but doesn't let it linger. "I'd like to share it, if you have no objections."

"Sure. I'd like to hear what you wrote, yes," The lieutenant, pleased by my approval, takes a moment to clear his throat. His voice deepens, and takes on a lilting quality when he recites his verse:

*"Often I have gazed upon the universe at night,  
And seen the starships sail, their warp trails burning bright.  
They blind me with the starship dream, a grand philosophy.  
But amid the infinite wonders I shall never forget that we,  
The black and red vanguard upon whose wide, unyielding backs,  
Bear the burden of that dream when our enemies attack.*

*"We come from Terra and from Tellar, from Andor and Efros,  
Our steeled limbs, our iron hearts, are first to pay the cost.  
We view the universe with hope, though we recognize with dread,  
That we'll fill a hundred systems with our comrades and our dead.  
Blood is our badge of honor, we go to sleep caressing pain,  
Wondering if our sacrifice shall become our duty's gain.*

*"Starfleet boys, hold phasers proud, and aim them at the night,  
Spit venom with your final breath in a tyrant's appetite.  
We explore uncharted stars but we walk a path well-trod.  
With "honor, courage" on our lips when we finally meet our God.  
Fate gives us unthanked lives, lived alone but filled with pride.  
I vow to honor - and be honored by - the red shirt's final ride.*

*"The Federation's core, we guardian soldiers.  
The men and women of Starfleet security."*

"I can't argue with the sentiment," I say. "The meter's off in a few spots, but thanks for sharing it, it's moving."

"Perhaps you can come up with an alternative to 'unthanked lives'. Something less flowery," Lars says. That's as close as he'll come to accepting my gratitude.

We've finally passed through the minefield and made it to scanning range of the ISC scout. Unfortunately, we've also received word that the ISC shuttle has beaten our other shuttle *Nestor* into a retreat and is returning back to base to take a crack at us. "The stakes are now doubled," I say, looking back at the tightly huddled Prime Team who are nervously clutching their phasers. They don't quite look as confident as they were when they boarded, but that'll pass when Lars rejoins them. "Bring up main power to 100%, commence deep scan..."

Deep scans seem to take enough time that they can be noticeable by your average star, but that's psychological time. After twenty actual seconds, we receive our data. The initial readings are encouraging: the bridge was destroyed by the plasma torpedo hit, and in all likelihood the

command staff's dead, but engineering is still functioning and repairs are well underway. "It looks like we've got a job." Lars notes.

I'm most interested by the disposition of their forces. Most of the surviving ISC are positioned on the engineering deck: thirteen Korlivilar, five reptilian Pronhoulites, two crater-headed Q'Naabian methane-breathers, and something...of some race the scanners can't identify. They're concentrating repairs on the impulse engines. Why do my enemies always have to be so damn industrious?

Lars huddles close to the screen and I point out the key systems we have to eliminate. "I suppose it's too much to hope that we can finish the job with transporter bombs," he says. "Or is that a war crime?"

"If their transporters were offline, we could probably get away with it, but they're not," I reply. "And it's not a war crime if you've got a conscience and you can still sleep well at night. Lieutenant, I'm handing the plan of attack to you."

"Good. Roy remains here as pilot and support. We'll transport in two teams. Able team is five members – including the two of us – we'll transport into this cargo bay. Baker team's going to have it rough – they'll get transported into the mezzanine access tube and hopefully support us with some flanking fire when we enter Engineering."

"Let's get it done," I say, impatient as ever.

Roy comes up to take the pilot's seat. We move into the back. "Weapons check," Lars orders, and almost in unison, the crew performs a final diagnostic on their phasers and their power packs.

"The mission's simple, folks. Eliminate opposition in engineering, place explosive charges on key systems, set them and leave. Your datapad will have diagrams of our four objective systems. The Captain will provide additional information. Opposition consists of at least six armed cats in engineering, and additional reserves are not far away."

"There's one other thing," I interject, doing my best to ignore how ruthless I've become – maybe losing *Ark Royal* and that week's vacation in a Romulan torture spa effectively scraped away all the morality that was clinging to my skin. "The Pronhoulites and the Q'Naabians are the ISC races that usually serve as engineers aboard their ship. Eliminate them, and we'll probably eliminate their ability to repair their ship. We'll stick to the Lieutenant's plan, but do keep it in mind as a back-up."

"You heard the man!" Lars says in a voice slightly softer than a bellow. "Kaamtaut, Rigney, you'll be transported into this access tube at the back of main engineering. Avoid detection until we make our move, then lay down flanking fire. The rest of you are with us!"

Kaamtaut (a female Grazerite who's shorter than is typical for the species – she's only a head taller than everyone else here) and Rigney (a slim, wide-faced African) are the first to be transported, and then it's our turn. Our team consists of Lars, myself, Ensign Burke (a monster of a man who was probably big enough to be the captain of five rugby teams when he was growing up), Ensign Wirchenko (a serious looking Russian male who's only slightly shorter than Burke, and even broader than Lars), Ensign Shottev (a stocky Andorian whose antennae are alert), and Ensign Costa (a well-muscled woman of South American descent). The first team, who are going to be crawling through tubes after they materialize, fall prone on the pads.

"God, I always hate transporting on my stomach." Wirchenko remarks as his comrades disappear.

Now it's our turn. Everyone takes a dose of entropophenamine before transport; we could be in close quarters and no one should have to worry about physical contact with me. Since four transporter pads can't accommodate five people, we transport in two groups; first they'll secure the hold, then I'll beam in ten seconds later. I nod at my crew as they dematerialize, step onto the pad, and yell at Mr. Roy to energize.

Transporting is like awakening from a sudden sleep, and this one's a doozy. A firefright blazes at the doorway – Shotev's down, stunned but not killed – and two Korlivilar and a Pronhoulite are also visible, unconscious in the middle of the corridor. I immediately rush to Shotev's body and shout over my communicator at Roy to beam him back, and that's when I can hear the unmistakable sound of human screams, coming from the corridor beyond us: screaming and a buzzing sound. I step into the doorway and notice my team, standing in a half-ruined corridor and firing on a single ISC target – a shambling humanoid-shaped insectoid thing. I've never even briefed on this critter. Hives of stinging insects cling to its skin, and it unleashes the hives as a weapon.

“Fall back!” Lars shouts, and I quickly get out of the doorway so the others can scramble back.

Sometimes a hive of wasps can succeed where a phaser can't, especially when you're not prepared to deal with it.

I stay near the edge of the doorway. Burke pushes me down, while Costa, the last one through the door, periodically takes shots to keep the creature from advancing. Lars has a berserker glare in his eyes as he takes a phaser power pack from his belt and sets it to overload. It's an old security officer's trick, the sort that's completely against every regulation except the one that tells you that you have to win a firefight. With two seconds left, Lars pushes Costa out of the way, hurls the impromptu grenade down the corridor, and falls back and covers his ears. It does make a loud explosion.

I'm the first one to poke my head around the corner. The place was in bad shape before the explosion, but now I can see that part of the bulkhead has collapsed. The insectoid is lying face-down in the middle of the corridor, and the hives are scattering. Several of the wasp things try to sting me, but they die as soon as they make contact with me. There are advantages to being protected by an alien psionic field.

“Follow me!” I smile, getting to a crouch, ready to lead the charge to engineering. Part of me knows this *isn't* me – I respect the marine temperament, but I would have sworn there wasn't a single *semper fi* to be found in my entire body: if I keep acting like this, I'll have to change my last name to Jensen. But Lars isn't amused; he gives me an angry signal to nip the adrenaline rush in the bud. Red-faced, I nod and take up a position behind him. Lars gestures at Costa and Wirchenko to cover the rear.

The corridor is clear, so we deploy in a single file line, Burke in the lead. As I mentioned earlier, ISC ships have smooth, rounded corridors, so we don't have much in the way of cover except for exploiting the curvature. But there's a reason why Lieutenant Lars choose Brandon Antonio Burke as his point man; he's exceptional (I've seen his record and his Academy scores) and he's also a natural human telepath of considerable strength who reacts to the presence of enemies the instant they come into range. A cadre of three Korlivilar intercept us as we walk toward main engineering; Burke reflexively shoots one, then steps backwards, away from their return fire. Lars and I hit the deck, while Burke calmly steps backward over us. The Korlivilar step into our line of fire, and one shot square in the chest is sufficient to stun each of them.

“If they were Klingons, we’d be dead,” Lars remarks, offering his opinion of the ISC’s intruder controls. “The ship’s internal defenses are almost as pathetic as the quality of its troops.”

“I think we disabled their containment field. You’ve notice the air stinks?”

“I thought it was natural,” Burke shrugs.

“It’s not. They’re even more anal about breathing a pure atmosphere than we are,” I say. “Now, we’ve dealt with five out of thirteen Korlivilar... one out of five Prohounlites, and that insect thing...” I calculate out loud.

“There’s still a long ways to go.” Lars shakes his head.

“We’ll get there, sir,” Burke replies. I hope he’s not getting too cocky.

So we advance again, although Lars tells us we need to be a little more cautious. Burke reassumes the lead position; Lars and I quietly anchor him. I notice an unguarded engineering station, and motion to Lars to stop so I can get a brief look at the ship’s status. Lars doesn’t want to stop, but I outrank him. Last time I played with one of these consoles, I had the advantage of a link with the Crysian that enabled me to take complete control, but this time, it’s just me. Fortunately, the system’s built for ease of integration, and I did attune my “psionic signature” on *The Lasting Peace* so I could be accepted by ISC systems, and it’s giving me a foot in the door again. I file reports of additional intruders being spotted transporting elsewhere on deck.

“And I thought Starfleet security had holes...” Lars mutters. His critique is interrupted by an ISC counterassault; a team of four Korlivilar. We fall prone and hug the corridor’s dull brown rounded walls; Lars prone, Burke in a crouch. Together, we’ve got a good concentration of fire. The combination catches two advancing Korlivilar off-guard and puts them down, but their commander, wielding an ISC heavy blaster and using his falling subordinates for cover, shoots Burke in the head. The air is suddenly filled with the scent of burning flesh. Lars continues to fire while I pull out a medical tricorder and scan Burke. It’s a hideous wound, but he’s still alive (and worse, still conscious). Ironically, the injection he took to protect himself from my touch is also killing the pain. I administer a dermal and neural regenerative, call for transport, and watch as Burke’s moved back to *Pelican*.

“Area secure,” Lars reports, sweeping the approach with a tricorder after the last Korlivilar falls. “Next stop, engineering.”

Wirchenko moves up to take Burke’s spot – reports say he’s as good as Burke without the psionics – and we continue our advance. A Korlivilar and a Q’Naabian, using the main engineering doorway as cover, trade fire. They’re not bad shots – they drop Wirchenko – but they’re outgunned, and the firefight’s a short one. We’ve made it, though we’ve lost three of our original six.

At the moment, I’m very thankful they’re using stun weapons.

We advance through the doorway, phasers blazing, looking for cover. But that’s when a pair of Korlivilar marines, claws bared, pounce on us from a railing above the door. We knew there was a good chance they’d try this maneuver, but there’s a big difference between expecting a bad situation and dealing with it. Korlivilar are blindingly quick at hand-to-hand range. I receive a really nasty gash on my neck (a few centimeters, and they’d have severed the carotid artery), while Lars finds himself in a wrestling match with a bigger one. The Korlivilar that jumped me suddenly experiences seizures, but Lars isn’t as lucky – its claw catches him in the eye, producing one of the most hideous sights of my entire life. For a second I don’t care about winning or losing; I grab the enemy from behind by the throat, hear it shriek, and welcome the thrashing sensation as it spasms in my hands. The remaining defenders open fire, but that’s when



Kaamtaut and Rigney pop up from behind them and start shooting. Five seconds later, the few conscious defenders drop their weapons and surrender.

Lars, a bloody hand covering his missing eye (Efrosian blood is a very dark shade of red, almost black), treats his wounds while Rigney and Kaamtaut lead all but one of the survivors to the ship's escape pods. Costa begins to place explosives on critical ships' systems and I go to work on the main weapons console, looking for the mine controls. With a bit of ungentle persuasion from Lars, the Q'Naabian chief engineer gladly surrenders the control codes. Ensign Roy confirms that the minefield is gone – as a bonus, the ISC shuttle was caught in the edge of the explosion. It's not dead, but given the damage it sustained fighting *Nestor* it's not going to be a threat to us.

The charges are set. "We're ready to transport out..." Lars announces. I nod, more than surprised that he's still on his feet, looking at his ruined face with a mixture of wonder and horror. Lars is amused by my discomfort. "Captain, do you know any place where I can pick up an eyepatch on the cheap?" he laughs.

"*Pelican*, beam us back." I order.

In two waves, we rematerialize on *Pelican's* shuttle pad. I immediately head to the cockpit, where sensors note several explosions in the scout's main engineering section. It looks like the entire ship will blow in a few minutes. I hope the escape pods can clear it in time.

"Captain? A private word with you?" Lars asks.

"You should be resting, my friend," I state. "It's been quite a day." But the big Efrosian shakes his head, and Ensign Roy discreetly walks into the back. Lars sits down next to me.

"Never underestimate the power of a well applied local anaesthetic." Lars flashes a black smile. "Before we get back to the ship, there's something I need to say to you. Off the record."

"Of course."

"I never want to see you on my prime team again," Lars states. The blood immediately flushes from my face. "No, not because of this," he points to his eye. "Or for Burke. You're definitely capable and courageous, but you lost your concentration twice today, once when you tried to lead a charge, and then again when you grabbed my attacker by the throat. You exposed yourself to their field of fire."

"I didn't want him killing you, and we were in close quarters..."

"I know. You're a very talented amateur, Captain. You don't know how much respect you've earned today." He coughs up a lump of blood, swallowing it instead of spitting. "But on my team, I'd rather have mediocre professionals than talented amateurs. It's not a criticism, it's a preference. I want soldiers, not warriors, if you understand the distinction."

There's a long pause. "How's Burke?" I ask, avoiding further discussion of the subject.

"Not good." Lars tells me with a sigh. "I know Latham's a superb surgeon, but Burke's injuries are probably going to require a Starbase – if he survives. Throw a medal at him, okay?" I nod.

"I will." I promise. "Do you think you can catch one for yourself without any depth perception?" I'm finally able to crack a joke.

"Well if I drop it, it wouldn't be a major loss. After awhile, medals just weigh you down." Lars replies.

"So do Captain's bars." I reply.

"I guess," Lars says, and he leans back in the seat to rest. I get out of the chair to make room for Ensign Roy so she can put us back in the bay.

So we return to *Galatea* in triumph, but it's a broken triumph, a chorus played in a minor key. I should be grateful. I'm not going to have to write any letters to my crew's kin (Lars informs Burke's folks about their son's injuries, only to discover that they felt his pain the moment he was hit. That's psionics for you – I thought I'd had my fill of them when I lost Argos). Still I can't help but feel sobered by the experience. I've seen people get hurt before, and I've seen them die before. But there's a piece of me that's really surprised that it feels different when it happens to subordinates, not comrades.

It only took us a few minutes to restore the ship's main power, and the first thing we do is send Starfleet a priority message to send a ship to pick up the prisoners. These ISCers know we were using plasma, and that means we're going to have to keep them under wraps for awhile. We're ordered to wait for the light cruiser *USS Byzantium* to divert to the area and perform the pick-up, a thirty-six hour wait. I spend a lot of my time checking on Burke and Lars – and warding off Hazard's accusatory stare. Even after Lars has exonerated me, Hazard treats me like I'm responsible for their injuries. Fine. I've finished extending my hand to the man. If he doesn't understand what a schism between a captain and a first officer can do to a ship, he doesn't deserve to wear the uniform.

I guess the ship's not the only thing that's being put through a shakedown.

## IV: Vespera

“Captain!” A man’s voice calls me out of a troubled sleep, desperate, deep with a Slavic accent. “Captain, is there a problem?”

I stir, trying to gather my bearings. Instinctively I kick myself up to a seated position, shake my head vigorously, and find myself staring into the face of Ensign Wirchenko, phaser in hand, accompanied by a three person security detail.

“Captain, you were overheard screaming... we could hear it all over the deck...”

“That’s impossible,” I state, noticing that my voice *is* hoarse. “I’m not that loud.” I collapse back onto my pillow. “Where’s Dido?”

Wirchenko sniffs the air. “Dunno.”

I’m not sure what to say next, but that’s when Dido comes scampering into the room and jumps up on the bed, followed by Lars (no, I won’t call him “Patch”, even if everyone else is) and Hazard. “We’ll take it from here, Wirchenko.” Lars tells his subordinate. “Dismissed.” Dido snuggles up to me, while keeping an eye on my security officer.

“I think I’m fine.” I say through a bit of a haze. “Is there something else I should know about? Are we still on course for Vespera?”

It’s been six days since our battle with the scout, and two days since we left Space Station R-22. Lars hands me a pad. “This just came over subspace. It’s pretty bad, sir.”

Bad is an understatement. The ISC just engaged the Federation Fifth Fleet at Harrapa. We lost a dreadnought, five heavy cruisers, and sixteen smaller cruisers and support vessels. “My God...” I say. There hasn’t been this many ships destroyed in one battle since the Pleiades Turkey Shoot. “Theoretically, I’d like to contain this news until we get a casualty list.”

“That’ll fly.” Hazard mutters sarcastically.

“No, you can’t keep this from the crew.” Lars adds. “For one thing, T’Doroth nearly collapsed on the bridge at the same moment that *USS Kahs'khiori* went down.”

“Allah...” I moan. “The news is bad enough, but the uncertainty...” What a way to wake up. “I’ll come to the bridge and make an announcement. I’ll try to be more inspiring than usual.” The impact of the defeat is slowly sinking into my skull, and I’m wondering about the people I know who served aboard those ships. Especially when I see the notation *large numbers of survivors taken to ISC reeducation camps*.

“Mr. Said...” Hazard says. “I was wondering if you’d ask Starfleet to push up our commitment to the fleet.” Both Lars and I give him long looks. “Sir, our captain was going to come from *USS Brunswick* and our first officer was transferring over from *USS Kahs'khiori*. There’s a good chance it’s just us now.”

That’s a sobering thought – the sort of sobering you need after you’ve already drunk a gallon of black coffee. “If Starfleet needs us, they’ll call Commander. I don’t think I need to tell you how bad this shakedown has been.”

“It’s gotten a lot better in the past few days.” Hazard states. This *is* true; the heuristics are finally settling into their optimal patterns. But we thought that the worst was over yesterday, and then the transporters suddenly started shuffling people who were in the turbolift to the main transporter room. “I know you’d like to be safe, but we’ve got to get involved.”

Hazard’s been itching for a fight from the moment he boarded this ship. “I’ll ask Starfleet to clarify our orders.” I promise. “But I don’t think we’re ready yet. What do you have to say, Mr. Lars?”

“I don’t know,” the Efrosian answers. “I lost a few friends today, and more than a few comrades, and the word ‘vengeance’ is sticking in my throat. But the inners of my brain tell me that I don’t know the full tactical situation, and that blindly rushing into battle is a fool’s mistake. But we should prepare for the call sooner rather than later.”

“Thanks...” Hazard is annoyed that his friend didn’t second his recommendation. Dido begins to nuzzle my leg with her muzzle. “At least somebody in this room’s showing basic loyalty.” He gets up to leave. “By the way, Lieutenant, how long have you been having these nightmares?”

“What?”

“This was the third night in a row we heard you at the top of your lungs. And always the same thing.”

“*Where is she!*” Lars adds. “That’s what you kept saying, over and over again. Loud enough to be heard through the wall buffers.” He almost smiles. “I’ll bet T’Doroth could calculate the decibels.”

“Thank goodness Captains don’t get stuck with bunkmates.” Hazard scoffs. *Galatea* is small enough that the crew doubles up in their quarters: Hazard and Lars are roommates. “They wouldn’t have survived. It sounded like you were trying to awaken the entire quadrant.”

I scratch behind Dido’s ears. “If I were attempting to do that, I’d be shouting something like *stop fighting, you idiots!*” I retort.

“So who’s *she*?” Lars asks.

“Get alpha security clearance, and I can tell you, Lieutenant.” I reply. “And I’m *not* joking.” I take a deep breath, get up, and grab a uniform out of the drawer. “Give me a couple of minutes to get to the bridge.” They turn around. “By the way, I’m sure you both have friends in the Fifth. I’m sorry about the loss. We’re all going to be saying this a lot, to a lot of people, over the next few days, but I am sorry.”

“We are too,” Lars answers.

When Greg was in command, and heard about a catastrophic defeat that took place in another sector, he used to hold the standard photon torpedo launch ceremony with a twist; the crew would write letters to the dead, place them in the torpedo, and they'd aim it at the system where the battle took place. It's a catharsis, but I think I want to build my own memorial, so I ask the crew members to build tritanium replicas of each of the fallen ships, and we hold a ceremony to launch them into space. The replicas get trapped in our warp field for hours: they orbit us, bounce off the hull, often striking the magnificent pose of the UFP starship, its saucer facing forward into the unknown. They represent the Federation's finest engineering achievement, crewed by their very best people that two hundred systems have to offer. I wrap myself in a protective smock so I can hold Gbeji while we watch – she had a sister aboard *USS Koreyets*, the fallen dreadnought, and she's pretty shaken by the news.

"The universe isn't fair," she tells me as I hold her. I nod and do my best not to appear clumsy or stupid... just let her talk. The only thing I can think of saying is "we don't have a complete casualty list yet", and even I can tell how useless that'd be. The best words that come to my tongue is to hold her in silence.

"Three minutes, fifty-eight seconds," James Latham informs me as he peels me off the examination table. "You've gotten fifty-eight seconds closer to a normal life in the last week." He looks at me. "So why aren't you happier?"

Happier? Happiness and yet another physical examination from Doc Latham aren't two things that naturally go together. Because of my experience with the Crysian (and that week of Romulan torture I suffered), Latham's under orders to keep a far more careful watch on me than a ship's doctor normally keeps on his captain. Not that James Latham wasn't always fastidious: after he joined *Ark Royal* (shortly after *Monoceros*, just prior to my court martial hearing) he drove Greg around the bend on more than one occasion. And despite our friendship, it's now my turn to be his snippy, unpleasant patient.

"I'm not worried about happiness right now," I finally reply, inspecting each object in Sickbay (pulling every trick in the book to avoid directly looking at his round, inquisitive face. I swear that I was more comfortable when the Romulans were torturing me.) "I'd just like to know what these nightmares are about."

"But you *do* know, Kenneth," Latham chides. "You haven't been visited by her in weeks. The connection you feel is weakening." He swallows hard, as if tasting unpleasant medicine. "Perhaps she's fallen out of love with you."

"No, that isn't possible," I say, biting my lip to control a sudden surge of anger. She still gets in my head – in some ways it's worse now than it used to be. "Not possible."

Latham chuckles. "So you're going to go ahead with this plan of yours, whatever it is. To find the Captain?" His focus narrows.

"How many times do I have to tell you, Doc?"

"Once was adequate," Latham sniffs through a rat-like squint. "And just how do you intend to find him?"

*Collect the others, head to Monoceros and mind meld again until we've found the Captain?*  
"I've got a plan."

"If you're going to Vespera, it must involve Mr. Gable," Latham speculates. "And if you want Mr. Gable, I'd bet that you want to retrieve Nagura from Elba II... Just how far do you intend to take this, Kenneth?"

“*Very far.*” I admit. I probably should keep my mouth shut.

Latham takes a deep breath, all the better to raise his voice. “You aren’t planning on trying to recreate the meld, are you?” My silence speaks volumes. “Good lord man, what in the universe are you thinking?”

“That we can do it.” I answer. And that this time I’ll be the one to pay the cost. “I believe there is no problem that cannot be solved with an industrious solution.”

“Industrious solution?” Latham scoffs. “This isn’t one of your poems, Kenneth. ‘Industrious’ is hardly a word I’d use to describe Nagura in her present state. Or Mr. Gable at *any* point in his life...” He stops the rant in mid-sentence. “Do you honestly expect them to go along with you after everything they’ve suffered?”

“It’ll be their choice.” I promise.

“And Pratt is dead. Or had you planned on replacing him with someone else?” Latham catches himself.

“Not someone else.” I reply cryptically. The Crysian could look into the past – perhaps we could link up with Pratt before he died. Or we could (and this is the part that scares me for even thinking it) put protomatter into a transporter circuit, match it with Pratt’s readings at the time he beamed up from Monoceros, and then telepathically transfer our stored memories into him. We’d recreate Pratt as he was right after the link. Yes, it’s something that would make Mary Shelley recoil, but I *will* cross that moral bridge if it needs to be crossed.

“Kenneth, be very careful about what you’re doing,” Latham warns. “For one thing, if you make one wrong move, I *will* intervene.”

I give Latham a long hard unsympathetic look. His threat catches me off-guard; the Sickbay heartbeat monitor indicates a sudden increase. “What do you intend to do, Doctor?” I half-sneer. “Drug me? Relieve me of my command?”

“Drugs, no. Relieve you of command, if necessary, yes.” Latham says. “But there is, however, a more insidious options...”

Insidious? “Such as?”

Latham begins to put away some charts, trying to trivialize the tension that’s in the room. “I said ‘intervene’, Kenneth. Not interfere, intervene. I didn’t say I’d stop you.” He smiles warily.

“Okay, James,” I sigh. “I sense another shoe about to drop. Out with it.”

“My!” Latham remarks. “That’s definitely not the quiet and nervous Ensign Said talking to his doctor aboard *Ark Royal*.”

“No, it isn’t. Captains are allowed to be cranky and not appear insubordinate, it’s one of the perks.” I say sardonically. “James, are you going to tell me how you plan to intervene, or is this just some cryptic warning?”

“I may as well intervene preemptively. Now.” Latham’s statement is punctuated by an ominous pause. “Did I ever mention that I once volunteered for a very interesting science experiment at the Academy?” I shake my head. “We studied the effects of long term mind melds on the human brain. There *are* ways to prepare for the experience. I even came to enjoy them.” He leans almost close enough to touch me. “I know the risks you took. The price you paid. However, a day hasn’t gone by that I haven’t wondered what *your* mind meld must have felt like.”

The admission hits me almost as hard as walking into a 6g gravity zone. “Are you saying, even given everything you know, that you’d want to be on the team?” I wonder.

Latham hands me my shirt. “I don’t know yet. The point may be moot, if Gable says no. We’ll talk more once he’s had a chance to weigh in on the matter.”

So Latham wants to join the link. Why on Earth, given how much he knows about what happened to us, would he want to do this willingly?

I use the shirt to wipe the layer of sweat from my body; after thirty minutes of torture working the Sickbay pedal apparatus, I definitely need a shower. But it's going to have to wait. Kolloos calls down to Sickbay and tells me we've finally entered the Vespera system. Vespera, the blue-brown planet of the galactic lotus eaters, home of Francis Gable, Starfleet reprobate.

And so, at last, the reunion is a go.

Vespera. A blue and brown world with a thin atmosphere and scattered clouds. Roger Price called it the "narcotic of the galaxy" and while I think he was overdosing on Rogerisms, he has a point. I've never been here, but its reputation compares it unfavorably to the Land of the Lotus Eaters of ancient Greek myth. From orbit, it's an odd looking planet, an ecology supported by periodic emissions of benign gasses. It was discovered by the *Roberts and Glenn* series of planetary survey missions about a century ago - Glenn theorized that the ecology might be artificial, an offshoot of alien experiments conducted about 130,000 years ago, but the theory is only limply supported by the geologic and fossil records.

130,000 years ago. Almost the same time the Crysian's sun began to swell.

People stop talking and stare at me as I walk onto the bridge. I guess everyone's heard about me screaming in my sleep; the crew's on edge right now and reports of strange behavior from their Captain doesn't help morale. Oh well, they're all going to get four days of shore leave on the Vespera resort of *Camus*, so maybe that will settle them down. (At least until they've been exposed to Francis's antics.)

"Mr. Hazard, have you been able to find Lieutenant Commander Gable with the sensors?" I ask.

"Negative," Hazard says. "I've swept the planet and he's not there. I did check the planetary records and I believe he's in one of the High Sierra Vent regions on the central continent. The protein sprays in those regions would wreak havoc with even an Oberth's sensors."

"Sir?" Kolloos inquires. "Everything in his record indicates that Mr. Gable was close to mentally unfit even at the best of times. Why do we need him?"

"Maybe he's looking for a new science officer," Hazard quips, and then (with help from Lars, who glares more intensely with one eye than most people do with two) even he realizes he went too far this time, and sullenly shuts up.

"At times, I'd welcome a new one, Mr. Hazard. Though I'm more than capable of tolerating the current one when he's not busy trying to be a martyr." His scowl deepens - I shouldn't have said that, especially on the bridge. "He's important to the mission, Mr. Kolloos."

"But you can't tell us why he's important because it's classified," Hazard interrupts again.

"You know, Lieutenant, most captains *do* share classified information with their senior officers when they trust them. It's not a straightjacket unless you want it to be one."

"But captains are not *supposed* to share classified information, Mr. Hazard." Lars says through gritted teeth. They're friends, but it's the sort of friendship when they're at each other's throats half the time. But I can't let myself be diverted by their bickering - I'm losing control of the bridge.

"Alright, you two..." I say. "Mr. Hazard, I'm heading down to the planet. You'll have the con." *No fistfights while I'm gone.*

"Lieutenant..." Hazard says. "I've been to Vespera. The wastes are dangerous. I'd recommend that you don't go alone. Take a security officer."

"Thank you, Commander." I nod. "Mr. Lars, can you accompany me?"

"No sir," Lars answers. "Dr. Latham is fitting me with my eye replacement *and* I have to make sure no one gets in trouble on shore leave - Camus is one of the wilder ports in the galaxy, and I'm going to have my hands full."

"Mr. Kollos?"

"Captain," Kollos says. "I'm overdue on my monthly transition. Dr. Latham can attest to my need to spend a day in my Medusan form as soon as possible."

"T'Doroth?"

"Sir, Vespera requires visitors to spend time in a hallucinogenic gas expressing their emotions before they are permitted to travel on the planet's surface. Such an activity is an anathema..."

"Permission to speak freely, sir?" Lars intervenes.

"Well, everyone else is," I note. It feels like a king-sized can of worms is just about to open.

"Neither you nor Ivan have given each other a fair shake. He knows the planet and that makes him the logical candidate." Hazard begins to object. "Shut up Ivan! You both need to wipe off the grime that's built up on your egos so you can respect each other for the exceptional Starfleet officers that you are. You might even become good friends if you gave yourselves half a chance."

"And we would all feel *much* better when we're not caught in the continuous crossfire between you two." Kollos says. "Sir."

"Lars!" Hazard says. "You don't know what Vespera can do to a person... I'd be reluctant to go down there with you, let alone *him*."

"I won't force you, Commander," I say. "But if you were a junior officer and you saw your captain and first officer at each other's throats half the time, wouldn't you get sick of it?"

"Great commands invariably have a strong captain-first officer partnership." T'Doroth adds, add a strong Vulcan sense of the unequivocal to the consensus, rotating in her chair slightly to examine the combatants.

Hazard still looks like he wants to object. Kollos finally gives a half-snarl, half-shout "Oh, just do it, Ivan!" Kollos says.

"And if I don't?" Hazard retorts coldly.

"I'll show myself to you naked..." Kollos states predatorily. "... in my *true* form."

Looking directly at a Medusan is like being touched by me, only the experience lasts a *lot* longer. Hazard looks at me. "They *don't* know what they're asking me."

"Ivan," I say, looking him directly at him. "Come with me down to the planet's surface with me. Please." People have told me for a long time that I don't do humility well; this is the best I can do.

"Oh... fine!" Hazard snarls. "I'll do it! Is everybody happy?!"

"If I wasn't missing an eye, I'd be ecstatic." Lars jokes.

"They don't allow transporters on Vespera, so I'd better prep a shuttle." Hazard mutters as he walks away from the science station, walks to the turbolift, then does a dramatic turn toward Lars. "*You* can expect retribution, my friend."

"Any time, buddy," Lars smiles, and Hazard leaves the bridge. I look at each of the bridge officers with an accusatory glance.



"I can smell a conspiracy at work here," I say, almost smiling. "Good job, whoever orchestrated this little duet," I turn to my security chief. "Are congratulations in order, Mr. Lars?"

"Actually Captain, *I'm* the ringleader," Kolloos admits, getting to her feet, her hands tucked confidently behind her back. "I knew Hazard when I was an Ensign and he'd been promoted to Lieutenant. He was on a fast track to a captaincy, and he deserved it."

"For the last five years, he's committed career suicide by getting into needless confrontations with every commanding officer he's had." Lars adds. "He's bounced from ship to ship to ship - I've never known any Starfleet officer to receive so many transfers and still remain in the service, and it intrigued me. And Kolloos asked me to get close to him, so I did."

"I know you two are close." I observe. Lars nods.

"As far as I can tell, I'm the closest thing he's had to a friend in Starfleet in three years," he says. "And all you need to do is take one look at the guy, and you can see he's a born pack leader. Something's seriously wrong. There should be four pips riding his shoulder, not two and a half."

"And it's your mission to get them on there?" It's almost amusing.

"It's time to take the next step," Kolloos says.

"So now it's my turn in the conspiracy?" I ask. "Get him to do the thing the one thing he's not been able to do - get him to bond with his commanding officer?"

"It is the next logical step in the progression." T'Doroth says. "But it will be difficult. At the risk of - as you humans say - "the pot calling the kettle black" you are a very emotionally cold person yourself. The few times when you do display emotions are usually expressions of sarcasm and belittlement. Experience shows that it is difficult for humans to bond with such individuals."

I love Vulcan honesty, even when it feels like a repeated backhanded slap. "I'll do my best." I promise.

"Good," Kolloos says. "The mission may depend on it."

"I hardly think so, Mr. Kolloos. I think we can find Captain Jensen without Mr. Hazard's assistance," I say, leaning back in the captain's chair.

"No, I'm not talking about *that* mission." Kolloos responds. "Oh, it's true that the Admiral desperately wants us to find her protégé. Jensen was an outstanding military commander. But that's not our *real* mission."

"With all due respect, Lieutenant," I say. "I haven't been briefed on any..."

"Captain Said, look at the crew roster," Kolloos argues aggressively. "The talent level of the officers exceeds that of most heavy cruisers, let alone an advanced destroyer crew."

"We are a prototype, Mr. Kolloos." I say.

"Prototypes are typically assigned senior talent," Kolloos counters. "Most of the people aboard *Galatea* are young, upcoming officers. Also, there is an exceptionally high percentage of telepaths aboard this ship."

"I've noticed."

"Starfleet would not assign such a crew mix by accident," Kolloos reiterates. "They *must* have some long term objective for this crew."

"The effort in assembling this crew was not trivial," T'Doroth adds. "Logic suggests the mission must be extremely important."

"How come nobody talked to me about this conspiracy?" Gbeji finally wonders, in a tone that suggests she's betrayed.

"Because, given your social habits, there was a much higher probability that our plan would be discovered had you been informed," T'Doroth states.

"You were worried about your sister..." Kolloos may not be the most empathic woman I've ever met, but at least she knows enough to soften T'Doroth's bluntness. "You didn't need more complications in your life."

"Nobody asked me if I wanted to go either!" Gbeji protests.

I smile. "I know better than to separate an engineer from her ship." Hopefully that'll mollify her - Gbeji has talent, but not at the same level as my other bridge officers. And the gasses of Vespera can provoke certain feelings: given that I'm already attracted to Gbeji, it'd be a mistake to bring her along and fast track a relationship while I still can't reliably make physical contact.

"Captain," Lars says. "Sometimes you need to work with someone before you can respect them. You're one of those people. A week ago, my security officers were telling snide jokes about the Ensign-Captain behind your back. But after you boarded that ship..."

"...the jokes stopped?" I say.

"Nah, security officers can't shut their lip, they'd be kicked out of the service," Lars smiles. "But now they mostly talk about how even a Starfleet Ensign-Captain can whip an ISC cat. The jokes have turned from complete insults into backhanded compliments. And Wirchenko has threatened to kick in the teeth of anyone who openly insults you, and I'd bet my good eye that Burke would do the same. When natural leaders respect you, you've won the battle."

"So now I have to win Hazard's respect the same way." I say. I give my bridge crew a hard long look. "Okay, I'll do my best."

"We appreciate it, sir." Kolloos says.

The others nod in agreement, and leave me to prepare for the mission. Appreciate it. Sure. Now I have two emotionally unstable people to worry about instead of just Francis. I suppose I should look for solace in Starfleet Academy's oldest saying: *the mission never fits the profile*.

Commander Hazard summons me to the shuttlebay, tells me that we've completed the checklist and we're ready to go. We're not headed for *Camus*, the big port; instead we've been given clearance to land in *Calvin*, a small colony close to the Sierra where we think Francis is lurking. Hazard's reverted to 'full professional mode', which means he'll ignore the conversation on the bridge for as long as possible. Looking at Hazard, I'm struck by how much he *looks* like a captain: one point eight-nine meters tall, the build of a champion athlete, curled auburn hair with a slight gold tint, cleft chin, and brown eyes as large as Dido's. He and Lars would be the archetypal heroic pair from old Earth fiction, hero and sidekick. I guess, to extend the paradigm to its logical conclusion, that would make me the incompetent officer who gets in his way, the man he'll embarrass when he saves the ship from my inept decisions.

The man who's deservedly ground into the dirt, under the hero's heel, when the top brass come to their senses and embraces him, some place between chapters 20 and 23.

Is that how he sees me? I wouldn't be surprised.

"What do you intend to do with Mr. Gable when he rejoins the ship?" From Hazard's tone, I'd guess he's trying to mask his anxiety.

"Depends on his condition when we find him," I say. "I'll evaluate him, along with Dr. Latham, and if he's ready and willing for duty, I'll assign him to science or engineering. He is a handful."

"I've seen his record," Hazard states. "I'm just going to assume you have a sane reason why you think he deserves to walk a starship deck, because aside from his technical skills, the man's a sexually obsessed flake."

"Correct - on both accounts." I say. "But he's also knowledgeable, and he comes up with the damndest solutions to problems when you're ready to throw your hands in the air."

"An intuitive genius?" Hazard sniffs. I nod. "I hate those type of people." I get the impression the list of people he likes is awfully short.

We actually don't have much more in the way of conversation before we land at the port. From the air, Calvin is a positively tiny outpost - barely two hundred isolated red-brick dwellings set into a landscape of green and orange rock. A pair of almost skeletal humans greet us, examine our credentials, and try to persuade us to strip naked (a local custom); I'm not in the mood, and somehow manage to badger them to let the custom slide this time. We're taken into what looks like a tent with clay flaps. There's a small vent in the floor with a fire burning, and six different colors of algae-growth are stripped and stacked like cordwood. To prepare for Vespera, we're to burn one log each hour, and remain in the tent while their fumes affect us. It's both a purge and a test.

"The logs represent the four humors, plus two." Hazard explains. Gable was a resident of Vespera, not a visitor, so his memories don't offer me any insight into the process. "I can't remember what they represent..."

"There's Buoyancy, Sluggishness, Anger, and finally Melancholy," I answer.

"Show-off." Hazard snorts.

"Some of us studied the classics," I smile. "So what about the other two?"

"The fifth promotes carnal thoughts. The sixth is a jumbled mix of the five." He pauses for a second. "Latham said you disapprove of mood-altering substances, even alcohol. Are you sure you want to do this? This experience is like getting really, really drunk. I can pretty much guarantee we're going to say or do at least twenty things we'll both regret. You can back out now."

"Let's burn something." I ignore Hazard's objections, grab happiness in both hands and throw it onto the fire. It burns a column of thin grey-white smoke and a tiny purple blaze, and so the acclamation begins.

Most of the first hour is spent rolling on the ground in laughter. We tell bad jokes, which quickly degenerate into an insult match, told through laughing, gasping breaths. At any moment, good-natured roughhousing threatens to break out, but we content ourselves to stage a shadow boxing match that avoids actual physical contact. It might have been an epic fight, if we didn't break down into fits of laughter every ten seconds.

In short, we're acting like a pair of adolescents, but dammit. it sure is fun.

Outside the tent, somebody rings a chime to tell us the first hour's over. I'm still rolling on the floor with laughter, and I have to crawl to the log pile to grab "sloth". Hazard tells a crude but funny joke about the shape of the rockwood. It takes me thirty seconds to recover.

"You're slow..." Hazard heckles merrily. "You finish last at the Academy marathon?"

"No, I placed sixth," I boast while I stagger to the fire. I almost burn myself putting the log in place, but at least we've passed this part of the test. "You do better, old man..." I snort.

"Anything you can do."

"I'll bet you can't do silence..."

Then the effects of the log kick in, the laughter stops and we both experience a long silence.

The second hour chime rings. I don't remember much about that hour. I don't even know how I managed to exert the effort to inch over to the woodpile and hurl Anger onto the fire like a rugby ball thrown into the heart of a scrum.

"It sure is hot." I say. He nods.

"We need to be careful, Lieutenant." Hazard observes. "This is the time when we can become a threat to each other."

"That's Captain..." I say, snapping at the insubordinate response, and I suddenly cough. "Yeah, I see what you mean."

We do our best not to direct our anger at each other. Hazard goes into a rant about past girlfriends, women in general, and Kollo and T'Doroth in particular. He also talks about Mr. Lars and some of his more annoying personal habits - the Efrosian's at a time in his life cycle when it's necessary to perform certain ceremonies, and he's shanghai'd Hazard into helping him. I don't ask for specific details. Sometimes, you can know too much about an alien species.

"My girlfriend is a school of fish with the power of a star," I finally reply, glad that I'm actually getting a word in edgewise because my first officer won't shut up his whiny mouth. "And she's left me alone in the cold dark heart of the void. Cosmic witch!"

"God, I hate your poetry." Hazard says. "It's almost as bad as listening to those stupid drumbeat verses that Lars is always composing. He always talks about you, you know. It's the Lieutenant this, and the Lieutenant that - sometimes he even calls you captain, and that really pisses me off. You don't deserve the title. No one promoted you."

"Well, there are times when *you* don't deserve to wear the uniform, you insubordinate jackass!" I shout back.

"You stupid, ugly little engineering mouse!" Hazard states, and the gong sounds again. "Dammit, I'm getting so sick of that sound!"

"Not as sick as I'm getting when I look into your face." I snap, throwing Melancholy into the mix as I try to expel the anger from my system. "You said we say twenty things we'd regret? I think we're well past that."

"Yeah. Only an idiot would hold a grudge about what happens in here."

"For once, you're right," I snap back. Idiot. No, that's just the residual anger talking. I think.

"And here you'd thought doing this in the nude would be the biggest embarrassment." Hazard remarks, taking a deep breath. "By the way, what's your problem with that? Don't tell me it's another one of your old culture's tribal taboos?"

"It is, but that's not the reason." I explain, "Last month I got myself captured, and the captors decided to do the standard identity breakdown drill."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Hazard says.

"I spent close to a week in a tiny cell, naked, tortured. I really don't want to repeat *any* part of the experience, not so soon."

"Damn ISC..." Hazard snarls. "One day I'm going to cut off their froggy legs and fry them in butter."

"It wasn't the ISC." I admit. "It was Romulans. *Tal Shiar*."

Ivan leans back dumbly as if I'd hit him. "How'd you manage to get on *their* bad side?"

"I was travelling with a freighter captain and it turned out he was being hunted by them. They captured us, stripped us, tortured us twice daily..." I fight back a sob. "Poor Roger had been broken earlier by the ISC: he couldn't cope with *Tal Shiar* interrogators."

"Not many people can." Ivan gasps. "Bastards."

"I spent hours trying to calm him down after each session, easing his mind back to normality, helping him forget the worst things they'd done to him. They treated both of us, well like..."

It's hard for me to continue, so Hazard decides that it's his turn at the confessional. "I was forced to kill my Captain, once." he says. My eyes, misting with tears, almost come out of their sockets. "Three years into the General War, I was traveling on a shuttlecraft, and this Klingon bird of prey came swooped in and snagged us. We didn't even get a chance to fight."

I'd read that he'd been captured by Klingons, but the psych report gave him a clean bill of health. "They don't normally take prisoners," I say. "How'd you make it out alive?"

Hazard clears his throat. "Normally, Klingons prefer to cleanly kill their enemies, not dishonor them by taking them prisoner. But every once in awhile you meet a Klingon commander who makes being a true rat bastard into a life's work. This one's name was Krama. He tortured us, broke us, and finally programmed us to kill each other. Maybe he was trying to get us to perform a big, deep cover intelligence bit. Make he was just a sadist. Who knows."

"He could be both," I say, fighting back the tears.

"But one of his subordinates - from a noble house, I believe - grew what passes for a Klingon conscience. He challenged the son of a bitch to a duel. Unfortunately, Krama's idea of dueling was shooting your opponent in the back. The poor guy was murdered in cold blood."

"That's one way to win," I try to smile, but there's only tears.

"Krama tried to pass the blame onto us, but his other warriors were so ashamed that they informed the High Command. A big fleet arrived, and we were sure they were going to execute us. Instead, they let us go. They even forced our captors to give us a warrior's salute. And then all these Klingon warriors gathered one by one over our Captain's body, two weeks dead and he stank like it, and each of them gave the most godawful shout you've ever heard. I think it was their way of apologizing, yelling loud enough so he could hear them in the afterlife."

"Were you were programmed by the Klingons to hate Captains?" I inquire.

"No!" Hazard laughs at me. "Starfleet medical cleared me. You've read the records, Said."

"I never saw anything in them about you killing your captain." I say.

"Five of us shot him simultaneously with disrupters." Hazard replies. "Our first officer took credit. He didn't want us all to get court martialed, and we've never told anyone. For years the five of us have shared this weird bond, but one by one... well, y'know, war happens. I'm the last one of us who's still left alive."

"I know how you feel," I say. "Of the five of *us*, one's dead, one's missing, and two are insane."

Hazard doesn't blink or even acknowledge what I said. You can get too lost in your own thoughts. "I spent a year in counseling. Everyone told me I was healed. I even received a promotion. It wasn't until three years later that everything started falling to pieces."

We break down into sobs, and don't recover until the hour's over. Our eyes hurt, our arms and sides hurt - this has been physically as well as emotionally draining. Francis had better appreciate this, because I don't know how much more I can stand.

I'm really apprehensive about throwing on the fifth log - the carnal one - but I do it. Hazard and I sit back and smile slyly at each other in a contest to see who can regain their composure first. As the effects of the log kick in, we trade insults and discuss some of the more embarrassing and private moments of our lives; trivial encounters blown up into epics like supernovae. If we're exaggerating... well we both know that honesty and sexuality are estranged

cousins. It gets pretty stupid, but I suppose a key part of male sexuality is assertiveness. About three-quarters of the way into the hour, we decide to talk about more serious matters.

"I'm too self-centered to understand love." Hazard finally confesses. "I want the universe to come to me, fall onto the ground like a lover, and spread itself for my desire. Instead the universe keeps walking on by."

"And leaves you stand there with an agape look on that handsome face of yours," I answer. "Me, I love the universe, or a very special piece of it, and it used to love me. Now, I don't know if it's passed me by or not."

"Funny, ain't it?" Hazard says. "We're both handsome devils (even you, when you ignore the face) and yet romance keeps betraying us. You do think I'm handsome, don't you?"

"Sure," I smile, ignoring that masculine urge that tells me never to compliment a rival. It seems like a good time to change the subject. "So Ivan," I smile. "In your expert opinion, who would you say is the absolute most beautiful woman on *Galatea*?"

"Kollos," he says without hesitation. "She's everyone's fantasy. It's the alien in her. What would it be like to do the deed with someone who turns to energy when..."

"Absolutely." I agree, laughing. "Though Gbeji has her charms too," I add.

"I wouldn't mind her examining my warp drive," Hazard says with a leer. I chuckle. "Though I don't see you as a Romeo, Kenneth. I imagine you're the sort of guy who holds a girl's hand, recites poetry, does foreplay to perfection, and then stares in disbelief when the girl eventually wanders away to grab the arm of some half-witted lug who's willing to finish the job. You know, that's your big problem."

"I'm not a virgin," I protest.

"You act like one," Hazard says. "No, even virgins can be sensual. You're too neurotic. A captain - especially a young captain - he's gotta swagger. He's gotta be physically dominant."

"Being a captain shouldn't just be for guys your size." I object.

Hazard grins. "You know, when you get mad, it almost clicks. You almost get it. I don't mean you have to start grafting muscle and look like Ensign Burke." He takes the opportunity to peel off his shirt and flex his muscles. Exhibitionist. "Though it helps," he smiles. "You gotta believe in the thing that's between your legs. You gotta act like you can bully anyone and anything. Walk into a room full of Klingons and win their respect with a glance."

He's right - Greg could do that. I'm pretty sure I can't. "I've sat in this room with you for nearly five hours, and I can honestly say I've met Vulcans who were less repressed. Take off your shirt, Kenny. Drink, fight, swear, make the mistakes men make. They're good mistakes to make. They're the stuff of life, Lieutenant."

Fine. It's very hot, so with a laugh I remove my shirt and throw it like a missile in Hazard's face. He dodges it with a grin.

"That's a start," he says. "Too bad Gbeji isn't here. You make a good couple."

"Really?"

"Yeah." Hazard smiles, sticking out his chest. "Tell me, Lieutenant, if I were tell you I was going to take Gbeji away from you, what would you do?"

"I'd say let the best man win," I answer curtly.

"That's your problem!" Hazard shouts, peppering the sentence with an obscenity. "The best man *never* says that, Kenneth Said!"

"Please tell me we're not going to fight," I say, sensing the testosterone build to Roger Price levels.

“Get in my face, and we’ll see.” Hazard smiles. “No - I don’t really think I have anything to prove – to you. You can keep Gbeji. Maybe I’ll just take... T’Doroth.”

“Get out!”

Hazard laughs. “I don’t believe it! I hit the warp drive on your jealousy.”

“Of T’Doroth?” I wonder. “She’s pretty, but Vulcans and humans mix about as well as...”

“Logic and emotion!” We say it in stereo and then burst out laughing. Ivan leaned over towards me with a smirk on his face. “You’ve known her longer than any woman aboard this ship. Can you honestly tell me you wouldn’t like to meld with her?”

I don’t believe it. He’s being as annoying as Francis.

“I love it when humans take sacred Vulcan rituals and soil them.” I spit. “It’s really lovely. Really quality Starfleet behavior.”

“Sarcasm. The best weapon of the second rate male,” Hazard snaps back. “But have *you* ever seen a more attractive Vulcan woman in your entire life, Kenneth Said? The lightness of your hair. That green shade on her lip?”

“I’ve noticed.” I admit. “But she’s a friend, Ivan.” I’m dating Gbeji, you know!

And then the chime rings again. It’s time for the final log to go onto the fire.

We trade a look of trepidation - I’ve seen what happens to people when they experience uncontrolled emotional shifts. It happens every time I touch people. Once again, I place the log while Hazard watches.

“Damn. I enjoyed that one.”

“I didn’t.” I reply.

“I know. Too much like getting drunk.” Hazard replies. “Okay, last dance. This has been more fun than I thought.”

“Not for me,” I answer, caught between screaming at the top of my lungs and falling into a morose stupor.

For a half hour I try to divert Hazard with word games, but Hazard taunts me, infers my adequacy - emotional, physical, social, intellectual, sexual - in a dozen different ways, using the emotions as a cover. get in the way. Even in the moments of melancholy, I’m fighting a rising anger. Why am I taking this? Why am I wasting this chance?

“The last log’s almost gone,” I note. “Let’s try to resolve our differences. Commander, what *is* your problem with me?”

“Now you want to talk about that!” Hazard exclaims. “Do you always wait until the end to discuss the important stuff?”

“Are you dodging the question, Lieutenant Commander?”

“Hardly. I thought I had made myself perfectly clear.” Hazard laughs. “It’s never been about you. It’s the system. I’ve spent my life chasing after command opportunities...” He begins to sob. “My life, watching the betrayals roll up like a ball of string.”

“I’ve never betrayed you!” I insist, though I feel a little too lethargic to continue the conversation.

“If you look at the records, *no one* ever betrayed me.” Hazard admits. “Nothing ever went on my report until the demotion. It’s like one day, everything, all the promotions, the decorations, the smiles on my superiors’ faces, they all decided to go to someone else. I never understood why; It wasn’t like I stopped working as hard. I was still as capable as I was before. I didn’t change, the universe did.”

“This is a hard duty, Ivan.”

"Sure it is. Like you and the Romulans. Do you know how many missions I had like that one? Not just with Klingons, I had real close scrapes with the Lyrans and the toads too. You'd be amazed at the number of sheer godawful days I've had. I thought surviving would be enough, a victory." Hazard smiles through his tears, which stream down his face without many accompanying sobs.

"It should be." I say.

"Yeah, but it isn't. You know, when I read your service record, I thought I was looking at mine. Only yours was a lot shorter." Hazard displays several large scars on his groin and back. "You'd think that collecting battle scars would merit respect, mark experience. But Starfleet looks at my wounds, and all they can say is 'you know, that guy's a real ugly son of a bitch, let's mess around with his career'."

"You're not ugly, and the scars don't look all that bad." I say.

Hazard shakes his head. "What about yours? You know, I've been pretty much puking out my emotional guts to you, and you've said squat to me."

"I've said plenty," I smile. "You just haven't been listening."

We spend a lot more time talking in circles, but it's mostly noise. Our throats are so raw that when we feel those moments when lethargy kicks in, it comes as a huge relief. Finally, the chime sounds for the last time. Hazard groggily gets to his feet. "We made it. And without killing each other!"

"Nobody's dead," I smile. "Ivan, about your Captain..."

"You won't tell," Hazard remarks. I nod. "I may not like you, Kenneth, but you're a pretty decent guy. Y'know, it's strangely comforting to know that someone who isn't your friend can still be a decent human being. It makes you less paranoid." He injects himself with iotropomine, and extends his hand. "To not being friends."

I take the hand and shake it. "Not friends. Sure."

"I'm glad we understand each other, Kenneth." Hazard smiles, clapping my shoulderblades hard with his open hand. "No, Mr. Said, we can't be friends. Because every time I see you sit down in *my* chair, it bugs the hell out of me, and I can't be that petty with my friends."

The locals are impressed that we managed to survive the test without running screaming from the tent or breaking each other's neck. The two men who administer the place are staring at each other, and one of them looks seriously disappointed.

"We're Starfleet," I tell them. Hazard nods like that actually means something.

"If you two were making wagers," Ivan tells the gaunt officials. "I wish you'd let us in on them."

The impressed locals lend us a small skimmer. It's a two-man hovercraft, a primitive vehicle with an open top that's perfect for luring you into a false sense of security on sunny days. The air around us is full of nutrient proteins, and the hoverdrive has been adapted to use them as fuel. The craft feeds like an animal, on the basic elements of animal life.

"I'm driving," Hazard says, tucking his shirt into his pants so his bare chest can receive the full benefit of the weak Vesperan sun. The locals point us in the direction of the nutrient vents that line the Sierra slopes, the place where we're most likely to find Francis Gable.

The air is full of white haze. The protein that spews out of the mountain vents is harvested by insects, who quickly spin the excess into huge edible webs that line the mountainsides. In strong winds the webs break free, floating like giant kites over the planet's surface, settling on the plains



hundreds of kilometers from the place of their creation. The protein webs are a very rich food source, although we're warned to stay away from the smaller ones - the weaver-insects are slightly venomous, and smaller webs are more likely to contain toxic concentrations.

The sun, a nearly moon pale red-orange orb set in an indigo sky, is waning as the settlement fades from view. The sun illuminates a landscape of brown and orange basalt colored by concentrations of green algae draped with aged, white-yellow webs. It is rugged terrain, even though we're on a plateau, the landscape is a wasp's nest of crags, ridges and hidden gullies. The local fauna is also insect-like; two meter long creatures with thorny tails that trundle through the algae: half-dinosaur, half-stag beetle. Through the giddy air, meter long dragonflies dart in long, ant-like single-file progressions. My inner tactician is awed by the precision of their formations, but then I get that way looking at migrating geese. The air is sweet and somewhat intoxicating. Along mountainsides we can see plumes of purple mist that mark the gas vents - there must be dozens of them. It's an oddly peaceful vista for all the volcanic activity.

"The ground is deceptively soft." Hazard says. We're driving over algae covered rock, without even a trail to guide us. "Keep an eye out for hidden depressions."

"I will." I promise. "This is quite the place to be a tourist." I say, tracking a large web as it passes overhead.

"Not really. I've only counted eight types of M-classes," Hazard says, taking one arm off the controls to stretch. "Once you've visited one of the breed, the rest aren't that spectacular."

"You're the most jaded science officer I've ever met," I squint in disapproval.

"I take it that doesn't include Vulcans!" Hazard smiles. "Now admittedly I'm so jaded they could make a Buddha out of me..." His remark is interrupted by a brief sensation of hitting air, as we inadvertently leap over an unexposed gap covered by webs and algae. "Barring life threatening situations."

"Definitely," I concur, trying to concentrate harder on spotting camouflage, and I also keep half a wary eye on the commander.

It must be hard to concentrate on driving after you've breathed in all that gas. I consider suggesting that we stop and catch our breaths, but it's hard for me to keep a thought in my head. That's not a good sign. We're distracted again by a howling sound that whistles through a crevasse; it's the wind, which begins to rise as we near the mountains.

"This sort of breeze makes me wish I wore my hair longer," Hazard says. I point out a potential gap, and Hazard deftly swings the craft around it. "Good eyes," he says.

Unfortunately, the danger of the terrain overshadows the mountain wind, and it doesn't set off a yellow alert until it's too late. I spot an embankment, partially concealed by webs and a loose rock cropping, and point it out. The commander nods, begins to turn the skimmer to avoid it, when a hazy shadow suddenly falls over us.

"What the hell is that?" Hazard shouts, looking up to spot the answer as it drops straight down on us. It's a large protein growth, which completely drapes the skimmer.

"Damn!" Hazard snarls and he claws at the web. But the fabric has surprising strength - much too heavy to rip apart - and its venom stings our skin. From the frozen expression on his face, I'd guess Hazard is paralyzed.

"Ivan!" I shout, struggling to press the override controls to complete the turn in time. But it's too late. I feel a jolt as the skimmer clips some jutting rocks on the cliffside, and then there's a twenty-meter drop beneath us. The skimmer drops nose first, and despite the pale gauze that nearly blinds us, we get a spectacular view of the plummet that awaits.

## V: Pride Goeth

We're falling. The precipice is set at a 75-degree drop. The skimmer tries to hug its surface, but the momentum starts to carry us over. Fearing that we're about to topple end over end, I suddenly swerve the craft so that when the nose strikes the embankment, we'll hug as much surface as possible. Hopefully, we can use the craft's hover grip as a brake. Hazard's trembling fingers are desperately looking for an emergency force field control, but this model lacks the feature. The craft swerves, and does hug the cliff face, sliding for ten meters. Unfortunately, the momentum builds as we slide, we hit a jutting rock, and we find ourselves in a tumble.

Today will not go on record as one of my better days.

Fortunately, I've have had time to grab Ivan – protected by padding, thank goodness, this isn't the time to panic – and tuck both our heads into our laps, and the webbing that ensnared the craft still provides us with some protection. The craft kicks and pinballs as it hits the slopes while we're spinning. A few seconds and many uncounted heartbeats later, we finally come to a stop at the bottom of a ravine.

Smoke puffs out of the dead craft's side. Despite the cushioning provided by the web, Ivan was thrown out of the vehicle about five meters before we struck bottom and is now lying on his back with pain etched on his face; his right leg is twisted at a very ugly angle. I examine myself with my medical tricorder and run down my own list of injuries: a fractured left wrist and collarbone, a broken rib and a mild concussion. A hot draft blows in my face as I rip away the remaining web with my right arm and use the craft to support myself as I walk over to Hazard.

The commander's moaning incoherently. I wave the tricorder over him: both of his legs are broken, he's got a broken pelvis, and two fractured vertebrae.

"And here I thought I didn't like Doc Latham," he laughs, giddy with pain.

"Here's a painkiller for you, Commander." I say, administering the drug.

I search the wreckage for a distress beacon and a flare launcher, but the skimmer's cargo compartments were scrunched on impact. I pull out my communicator, but nothing plays on it but static.

"Dilithium deposits." Hazard moans, explaining the cause for the interference. "My legs..."

"You can feel them?" I ask. He nods. "Good."

"Some captains make a habit of losing members of their landing parties. I see you like to maim yours."

"That had better be a joke," I warn. I shake the communicator in frustration. "I can't raise even the settlement."

"You need to get out of this ravine." Ivan tells me. "A distress signal..." He moans and I administer a second dose of painkiller, praying that it doesn't encourage him to attempt something heroic and counterproductive - like attempting to move. "Can you climb?" he asks me.

I inspect the steep slope of the ravine, cut with razor sharp rock and slippery with algae, and point to my left arm that's painfully tucked on my side. "Maybe." I say, meaning no. "My head... it doesn't feel right..."

"Oh boy," Hazard gulps. "Kenneth, we need to get the signal out of the ravine. Maybe we should build a fire with our phasers and seeing if we can set off a smoke signal."

Smoke signal. "Not when the oxygen on this planet's so thin," I say. But there *is* smoke; about fifty meters away a gas vent is issuing a stream of smoke... "I've got a different plan," I smile. I love epiphanies. "Commander, can you record some rescue instructions on your communicator?"

Hazard nods. Though any movement is excruciating, he picks up my tricorder, analyzes the subspace spectrum, and program his communicator to use the best frequency to overcome the interference and send the message. There were times when I wondered about Hazard's science background, but the man just proved himself in spades. Okay Kenneth, it's your turn to protect the wicket.

At the Academy, they used to train engineers by giving us the most absurd assignments they could come up with: take apart a tricorder and build a communicator, use a dilithium crystal, copper wire and duct tape to cook a dinner, that sort of thing. With my good arm, I peel algae strips from the rock and roll them until they're as solid as balsa sticks, then I connect the sticks with loose webbing until I've made a kite frame. Next, find enough thick webbing to fill in the kite frame, then patch together a thirty meter long web line.

"What are you doing?" Hazard shouts.

"Flying a kite," I answer. "Is the communicator primed?" Hazard holds it and waves slightly. I carefully take it from him and attach it to the frame. "It needs more color."

"I didn't know they flew kites in Arabia," Hazard remarks through a grunt.

"All the time," I nod. "How about in Nova Scotia?" I ask, referring to Hazard's homeland. The Commander had studiously avoided talking about his childhood when we were in the tent. I'd received the vague impression that he was happy, but high expectations had been placed on him at an early age.

"All we did was fish, read *Anne of Green Gables*, and sing repeated choruses of *Farewell to Nova Scotia*," he jokes. What is it about being badly injured that brings out the sarcastic streak in men like Lars and Hazard? I feel like promising him that he'll be fine soon, but I hate gratuitous words of comfort - either this is going to work, or we're both going to be in deep trouble. I hand

him my communicator to program, in case we need to make a second attempt, wishing we had a few spares.

I drape the kite over my right shoulder and haul it to the vent. The gas gives off a rotten egg smell, mixed with occasional sprays of a substance that looks and smells like finely crushed grain. My fingers get sticky as I hold the kite over the vent, hoping the gas holds true in the sail and lifts it into the air. Frankly, if I can't make a working kite, Starfleet should take away my engineering badge and shoot me.

"*And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by...*" I quote Masefield's famous verse, "*And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking...*"

Every Starfleet Captain has to know that poem.

The winds do hold true. The kite's sail inflates and begins to rise. I have to tug the line a few times to keep it from plummeting when it loses the draft, but finally it rises above the lip of the ravine, and that's when the strong mountain wind catches the kite and rips the line out of my hands like an irritated adult of a wind stripping a child of a cherished possession. In seconds, the kite's well out of my line of sight. I check my condition again with the medical tricorder, then stagger back to inspect Hazard again.

"When I was a kid, I used to throw messages in bottles out into the Bay of Fundy." Hazard tells me. The guy definitely loves to talk (even when he's in agony), but at least this conversation's a lot friendlier than most of the ones we had back in the tent. "I never heard back from any of them, but I hope we do this time."

"May the Great Bird of the Galaxy carry the message to the universe." I say. I'm the one who should be doing the talking. I've got the concussion. I suppose it must be frightening to look down and see your body parts twisted like pretzels, so if he needs to talk, let him talk. I prop myself on a rock and listen.

Minutes later, we spot a shuttle fly over the ravine. "I think it's *Pelican!*" Hazard smiles. I draw a phaser from my hand, and fire a rapid succession of five stun pulses into the air to signal them. Apparently the signal works, because three minutes later they've landed next to the crevasse, and Wirchenko and a few of the other security personnel are staring down at us from the edge of the ravine. I wave at them with my good arm.

"Sooner, rather than later," Hazard sighs. "Thanks lieutenant. Good job."

Before I can thank him, Hazard, arranging for the communicator to ignore the interference on a line of sight transmission, has signalled the big Russian. He hands me the communicator.

"Wirchenko! The Commander's hurt bad... and I'm not in great shape myself," I report.

"Latham's in the shuttle. Stand by," Wirchenko says in his thick Slavic voice. Several transporter boosters are beamed down to us.

"Don't tell the locals we're using transporters." I say as I plant the enhancers around us. The Vesperans believe every time you use transporters, you lose a little bit of your soul - they don't appreciate anyone using them on their planet. These old religious colonies always were a little odd.

Hazard transports to *Pelican* and then immediately back to *Galatea*, a two-stage transport. They transport me back to the shuttle, and Latham quickly does repairs on my fractures and administers a drug to handle the concussion - nothing serious. "We'd better get you back too," he tells me.

"I'm going on with the mission, James." The doctor frowns, but he knows he can't hold me back, not with injuries as minor as cracked ribs. I turn to the security staff. "Wirchenko, put

together two survival kits, one for you, one for me. The shuttle can set us down by the nearest vent, and if Gable's not there, we'll continue on foot."

"Yes sir," Wirchenko immediately starts rummaging through the shuttle's cargo hold.

"Kenneth, you've truly become a captain," Latham's British accent makes the sarcasm twice as biting. "Stubborn, pig-headed, wilful..."

I laugh, which only deepens the doctor's scowl. *Galatea* tells us that Hazard's been prepped and readied for surgery, so James transports away in a huff. Unfortunately, that's when we receive a transmission from Vesperan authorities who are furious about the unauthorized operation of shuttles and transporters in their airspace.

"My apologies. It was a medical emergency." I explain. They reply that Vespera is a planet that honors the soil, that no one needs anything but the soil, and if we can't survive using native technology, we should have the decency to die and let the soil take our bodies to perpetuate Life's Great Wheel.

"I was one of the people who might have died," I spit (I think I borrowed that indignant tone from Roger Price). "So go to hell!" I say and suddenly cut the transmission. I'm as mad as hell, and it's a little embarrassing when the security team bursts into applause.

*Well, Kenneth, I tell myself, I'll bet you just accumulated the first formal reprimand of your captancy.*

The shuttle quickly lands on the high plateau, about five hundred meters from the camp. Wirchenko carefully hands me a thirty-kilogram pack and straps a fifty kilogram pack across his own shoulders. In contrast to Hazard, he's a quiet man, especially once you've earned his respect. We hike into the camp together without talking.

It's beyond words. It's not a camp, it's a cluster of bodies, thirty naked men and women of assorted ages, all of whom are lying on their backs several meters from the vent. They're alive, but it's hard to tell at first; they're famine gaunt, almost skeletal, people with grizzled beard growth and skin that's black from years of accumulated, unwashed soot. Most of them are covered in protein spray, which vaguely resembles a pox when it accumulates on the skin in rotting clumps. Then there are their eyes, dilated and lifeless, matched by the unintelligent expressions of their gaping mouths. Insects buzz around them, feeding off their bodies. No one moves to greet us. Wirchenko scans the area with a tricorder and tells me there's no match for Gable's lifesigns within two hundred meters.

"What a waste of flesh," Wirchenko snorts. I'm inclined to agree, but I really try hard not to make hasty judgments of people, despite the overwhelming evidence of sloth.

An older woman trundles to her feet and circles us like prey, her wild eyes chiefly fixed on Wirchenko. We ignore her and inspect the faces to see if one of them belongs to Francis, just in case the tricorder's been effected, or if the planet's triggered a significant alteration in Francis's life signs. But I'm pretty certain he's not here – the empathic bond we share would tell me if he was close. Unless the bond was dead, of course. I hadn't considered the possibility until this moment. The bond given to us by *her*.

I miss her. I can't stop thinking about the Crysian.

"None of these skeletons match Commander Gable," Wirchenko says. He takes another tricorder reading, which come up negative. "I hope he's not dead, sir."

"You wouldn't say that if you knew him," I reply. It's a joke. "It's two kilometers to the next vent. Walk with me, Ensign."

The next vent is on a bit of a slope. This camp's less lethargic than the others; they've built water collectors and weather shelters, and the inhabitants actually collect the protein and shape it into cookable portions. The people here are less emaciated; shaven if not bathed or clothed, and their eyes don't look completely dead. I identify a man who looks like a leader, and strike up a conversation about Francis Gable.

"Francis Gable. Starfleet. Must have come here two or three months ago," I describe as I flash his service record on the tricorder. "Tall, dirty blond hair, green eyes, probably slept with every man and woman in the entire settlement."

The man points to a tall distant slope and I thank him. I rejoin Wirchenko, who's circled by the inhabitants as he sits by the well and calmly chews on a thick strand of protein web like cotton candy.

"Don't tell me you want to go native," I chide.

"No sir," he smiles, handing me some webbing. "It's not bad, but you need to spit out the insects," he smiles. I sit down next to him, and we share a bite before we go. The air on Vespera is both thin and narcotic, and I think even Wirchenko is regretting packing so much gear. But still I pride myself on my endurance, and this is going to be the best chance I've had to test it in a long time.

The long Vesperan day – thirty-one hours, with twenty hours daylight at this time of year – draws to a close a few hours after we've left the settlement. There's another occupied vent about a kilometer down the slope, but we decide to spend the night in the wilderness, so we camp by ourselves. We're near a ridge, and Wirchenko makes sure the tents are doubly secure in case the wind picks up again.

"There's Rigil." Wirchenko says, pointing at a blue star close to the zenith. Rigil's one of the six so-called "universal stars"; most people in known space can see Rigil, Deneb, Wezen, Antares, Alnilan, and Betelgeuse, so we use them as constants in galactic navigation. "We're only eighty parsecs away. From here, it's almost as bright as Venus is on Earth."

"Yeah. In this azure sky, we should be able to spot it easily in daylight." I add. I take out a flare gun, load it with a pulse transmission beacon, record a brief "we're okay message" and fire it into the air. That's the only way to communicate with *Galatea*. In response, a tight energy pulse strikes the ground about a hundred meters from our position, confirming that the message's been received. "I wonder how Commander Hazard is doing?" I say.

Wirchenko may have an opinion of Hazard, but he keeps it to himself. Everyone knows that we've been at each other's throats. Instead, Wirchenko asks me about my dog, and so I tell him the story how I came into possession of Dido, describe some of her more bizarre behavior, and debate the habits of various dog breeds. Wirchenko's family breeds show dogs, and he's got the tricorder recordings to prove it.

Eventually, the Ensign tells me he'll keep watch for six hours and lets me get some rest. I lie down on the rock face and pretty much fall asleep on the spot. My last thought is an unintelligible expression of longing for the Crysian, the hope that she will come to me under the light of Rigil, the purestar, and speak to me of our love. But she doesn't come.

She doesn't come.

Seven hours into the cycle, Wirchenko prods my blanket cautiously so I can relieve him of his duty. The cold has cramped my limbs, especially on my right arm and shoulder, where I was

injured. I perform some basic stretching routines, and I wonder how Dido is sleeping without me. The girl gets restless when she's alone.

The watch is uneventful, with the exception of the visitor: a three-meter long half-snake/half-centipede thing that lurks around our camp for about an hour. Wirchenko mentioned seeing it too, and swears its name is "Ivan". I watch it for awhile, but it gets too close to the Ensign's tent. "Go to warp, Ivan," I say, aiming a phaser and firing a warning shot. It's enough to send "Ivan" scurrying down the slope like the galaxy's most cowardly Cosack.

Finally a weak dawn pales the night sky (though only slightly; given the sky's a very deep shade of blue, it's a little hard to tell that it's night except for the absence of most stars). I fire another message, and nearly trip over another message cannister that's been covertly transported to the edge of the camp, along with some fresh water, scrambled eggs and sausage. Wirchenko wakes up, discovers the prepared food, and gets annoyed.

"They take all the fun out of roughing it," he complains while holding a mirror up to his face to carefully shave the evening's stubble.

Our first stop is the settlement we spotted yesterday about a kilometer beneath us on the slope. We discover they're not as industrious as the second camp, but not as bad as the first. They're also clean, since they live next to a mountain hot spring. Wirchenko and I get a good hot bath, though the springs are adjacent to a protein spew which produces a lair of scum that we have to continually skim off the surface of the pool. These people are more social than anyone we've met to date on Vespera, and we're both propositioned, but when one of the locals prods me and goes into spasms, the others take our decision to decline their offer more seriously.

"Civilians." Wirchenko remarks, shaking his head as we leave the camp. "They've no respect for soldiers, Captain."

We check two other camps that day, trekking to the highest points of the plateau, and then heading into even more mountainous terrain. The hike is both very slow going and punctuated with painful moments. First, Wirchenko slips on a slick algae-covered rock, twists his ankle and lacerates his knees and hands, forcing us to stop for a minute to fix the sprain. "And here I was biting my tongue to keep from complaining about the time you were taking," he admits.

"Pride goeth before a fall, Ensign." I quote.

But the Ensign was right the first time. I'm the weakest link, especially when the terrain gets rough. About mid-afternoon I finally collapse under the weight of my pack and to my embarrassment, I'm too weak to pick myself off the ground. Wirchenko has to inject himself with iotropomine so he can safely drag me into a comfortable resting position.

"I hope this officer is worth it, because this effort isn't trivial, Captain." Wirchenko states while he feeds me water from a canteen. He's also breathing hard.

"No," I answer. "But he *will* help us find someone who is." It's a promise as well as a statement. Ten minutes later, I'm walking again, hoping to catch my sixteenth wind so I can keep up with the guy. Wouldn't you know I'd have to go hiking with someone who was born and bred in the Caucasus?

We camp again at sunset, Wirchenko insisting on doing the cooking and the lion's share of the watch. I trade messages again with *Galatea*; the locals have formally complained about us to Starfleet, who are gleefully ignoring the complaint as long as we don't provoke them any further. Both Lars and Hazard are up and running again; and Lars impatiently asks me how long it's going to take us to complete the mission. Wirchenko and I have scoped about 40% of the vent

settlements, but who knows how scattered they are? I submit an answer of “probably two more days” and hope that I can come up with a good excuse if the search doesn’t pan out.

We check another vent in the morning, and find another colony of “lazy human sods”, almost as bad as the first one. Francis isn't there either. I could almost cry.

“What sort of place would set off the guy's warp drive?” Wirchenko asks as he once again chews on webbing. I hope it's not addictive.

“Let's see,” I muse. “Francis Gable. He likes sex, opera, and cosmic phenomena, in that order. He never does anything halfway - in fact, he has to do everything one-and-a-half way, if you know what I mean...” Then the answer hits me. “Of course. Francis would be at the top. He'd want the best possible view.”

“Then that's where we'll go, sir,” Wirchenko says, checking the tricorder records to identify the highest vent, then points at a distant, intimidating peak. It figures that Francis would make things as difficult for me as possible.

So we climb, ignoring the lower vents and settlements, ignoring pain, the weight of our packs, the local predators - there's only mountains and purpose. The trek goes without incident until noon on the second day, when we're waylaid by an erupting spray scree of protein goo that pours down from one of the upper vents; it's liquid and hot as boiling mud, and we're forced to flatten ourselves into a slight depression and hope that the spray pass over us. Periodically, drops of hot protein-spray land on our backs, and the larger gobs burn through our uniforms. Both Wirchenko and I repeatedly yelp.

“Too bad Burke isn't here. *He'd* be enjoying this!” the big Ensign tells me. It's obvious from remarks he's made that Ensign Burke, the other rising star in *Galatea's* security, isn't a friend but a bitter rival, a feud that stems from their Academy days. Wirchenko is sullen, quiet, and prone to sharp criticism, while Burke is confident to the point of arrogance, and conceited. I'm tempted to try to encourage him to settle their differences, but no... they've been going at it for years, and Lars may be cultivating the competition to improve their performance. It's best to allow the Efrosian to run his own department without interference from an engineer turned greenhorn captain.

A half-hour later, the spray storm finally subsides, leaving multiple burn marks on the back of our jackets, pants, and skin. We discard our old clothing, treat the burns, and change into fresh uniforms. Below us, we can see we're standing above a big windstorm that's whipping up dust and loose webs on the plains. It's a spectacular sight (the sort that would fascinate Francis). With my permission, Wirchenko pulls out a tricorder and records the scene.

By mid-afternoon, we finally come within sight of the highest vent-settlement, which is set on a broad pleateau five hundred meters below the summit. At first glance, it's another gathering of the avant-garde of laziness, but a closer examination of the inhabitants reveals some interesting subtleties. Everyone's tucked into a position that's half lotus, half fetal crunch, their eyes are closed in meditation, and they're humming.

“Francis!” I shout, not paying any regard to the ritual. Wirchenko starts in surprise, and the commune collectively opens their eyes. “Francis Gable, come here now!”

I'm not thinking at the moment. I *know* that Gable's here – I can *feel* him – and the fact that I'm finally sensing someone with my mind fills me with unexpected elation. I'd forgotten how good this feels.

One of the figures rises. It's Gable, naked, emaciated, and wearing vented gas soot like a tuxedo. All of the antipathy I've been feeling toward him is instantly dispelled and we embrace



each other like we're holding onto life itself. In our minds, we have a long empathic conversation, and I get the feeling we're calling each other "my brother" over and over again.

"I need your help," I finally say. "Francis, we've lost the captain."

"I'm not surprised." Francis replies. "I knew he was slipping. I tried to warn you, but you never listen, and I... I was slipping faster."

"Francis, I need your help..."

Gable shakes his head. "No, you don't. You don't need anyone's help. But if you think that you need me, you can lean on me until you learn I'm right." He flashes a smile at Wirchenko and shouts: "Hi! I'm Francis Gable! I'm a Lieutenant Commander and you're not!" and then turns back to me.

"Are you willing to go back into space, Francis?" I ask.

"Well... the food is better, and I was getting, well, bored out of my skull..." Gable replies. "Meditating keeps you calm, but sometimes it can give you a real headache."

I sigh, trying to be patient with him. Francis is irritating even when his statements are perfectly innocuous. It's part of his charm, or lack of it.

"Francis, I want to take us back to the Crysian," I say, momentarily forgetting that I'm discussing classified material in front of twenty civilians and an Ensign. I'm more interested in Francis's reaction. Maybe I should have waited until he was settled aboard *Galatea* before putting the big question to him. On the other hand, it's not fair to displace him without informing him of the stakes. "I think if we restored the meld, we could find Greg..." I whisper.

Francis looks at me with astonishment. "You want to meld with the Crysian *again*?"

"I know what happened last time, but I think we can prepare for it," I stammer.

Presciently, Francis grabs the back of my head and forces my face deep into his shoulder. "The Crysian's dead, Kenneth," he says. "I felt it. You must have felt her die too, didn't you? About a week ago?"

"What..." I gasp.

Dead?

"There's no way you couldn't have felt it... It was so strong, I thought it'd kill me. It really messed up the meditation..."

Dead?

"Oh Kenneth," Francis says. "I'm so sorry."

Dead?

I break out of the embrace, stagger away from my former shipmate while completely ignoring Wirchenko, who observes the conversation like a freshman cadet sitting in on a doctorate physics class.

Dead?

My fingers fumble through my pack. I numbly hand Francis a badge and a uniform (he holds it, but doesn't put it on), scatter the rest of my pack's contents on the ground, and start placing transport enhancers in a circle around us.

Dead?

"Captain?" Wirchenko asks, alternating his glance between me and Gable. "Captain! Your orders, sir!"

"Contact the ship, Mr. Wirchenko," I whisper. "We need to get back to *Galatea* as quickly as possible."

"Yes sir!" Wirchenko says.

“Kenneth, I thought you knew,” Francis tells me. “I thought that’s why you came, to cry on my shoulder.”

I can’t answer him. The only comfort is that sometimes the minutes pass quickly when you’re in shock. *Pelican* answers our call, lands on the plateau to take us back to the ship. Gable drags me aboard the shuttle, while Wirchenko protects my dignity by pushing the other members of the security escort to the front and then closing the curtain so they can’t see my breakdown.

I don’t look down as we leave *Vespera* behind. I never want to see this planet again. Wirchenko hovers protectively over me, urging me to my senses for the good of the ship. It’s his mantra, and he’s right. About halfway up to orbit, I finally compose myself, and I call for the others to come back. I’m not sure what to say to them. I introduce Francis, not really caring whether or not he’s changed into uniform (though he has).

"I'm sorry," Francis chooses the worst possible thing in the universe to say to me, but I'm determined to hold myself together.

When we finally board *Galatea*, I immediately head for the bridge. It takes a force of effort not to break into a sprint.

“Mr. Lars!” I shout the moment the bridge doors open. It’s fortunate that my security officer is back at his station. “Recall all personnel to *Galatea*! Mr. Kollos, prepare to break orbit when reboarding's complete.”

"What course should I set, sir?"

"We're heading for the Monoceros Wash..." I say. "Warp eight."

Act IV:  
THE FINAL TWILIGHT

## **Interlude:**

### ***Twenty-Seven Years Ago, Autumn 2268, the rebuilding of Gwai Colony***

“Put her down, Rodney,” Greg Jensen snarled, addressing the hostage as well as the hostage-taker. “Now. That’s an order.”

“No...” Rodney Tom snarled, pressing the knife against the Grazerite’s kidney. The young general, bull-broad and cougar-mean (as they say on Gwai) was the very model of paranoid determination. He and three others had grabbed the Starfleet hostages at the newly restored Gwai colonial government’s formal reception, but the operation had gone badly. True, they’d killed one hostage and three Gwaiian guards were dead, but Rodney was the only hostage taker who was still alive, and he was trapped on all sides by enemies.

And now Rodney was face-to-face with his former friend, Greg Jensen, in the President’s Hall. The Gwaiian leader was standing only three meters away from them, accompanied by ten of his best guards, whose fanaticism and ability Rodney had seen first hand. He could measure his life in fractions of seconds if he made just one wrong mood.

In such situations, hostages were more precious than pearls. Dalta-Thevyo, a Grazerite who was First Officer of *USS Leander* was secure in his grip, a knife pressing against her kidney. A Mexican stand-off, as it used to be called, though Gwai could be bloody even by the standards of the historic frontier.

“You know what they’ll do to us, Greg!” Rodney insisted. “Why are you being such a fool?” The rebel’s words echoed throughout the great hall, which had been consecrated mere weeks ago to the peaceful rebuilding of Gwai. “Why?” The echo asked again “Why... why...”

Despite the tension, Jensen maintained his legendary preternaturally coolness – after all, he had visited similar bloodbaths on his enemies on many occasions. Unfortunately, he also recognized that the situation was his fault. He’d known Rodney Tom for many years, understood he was an emotional man who was far too fond of violent solutions for his own good, but he’d been so busy with the colony’s reconstruction that he hadn’t seen the rebellion coming. Sloppy.

He never imagined that calling for Federation assistance would reopen so many old wounds so quickly.

"They came to help us with the rebuilding, Rodney." Greg explained. "The Atrophists told many lies about the Starfleet. I never listened to them. I didn't think any of my Generals would, especially after what they did to us." He gauged the look in his enemy's eye - he wasn't open to reason. "Or do you simply need an enemy to fight?" Jensen finally taunted.

"Starfleet backed the Atrophists!" Rodney shouted, hoping to win the contest through the volume of his passion and outrage. Jensen was doing his best to remain calm, but his former comrade's delusions were beginning to irritate him.

"Starfleet was deceived," Greg countered. "And now, so are you. *I* invited Starfleet here. I promised them safety. Our honor is at stake. Your honor is at stake. Only cowards hide behind people. Rodney. Please. Let the woman go."

"She is a freak!"

"No, she's my guest!" Greg replied, further annoyed by such a petty prejudice.

"They're going to kill us..." Tom said, examining his former friend with new eyes. They were now on the verge of violence. Rodney couldn't trust any move Jensen made - the leader's reflexes were legendary, and his combat abilities more so. No one in the room could imagine a more dangerous adversary.

Gregory Livermore Jensen, President of Gwai. His followers called him "the Golden Wind", "the Destine-son" and "The Last Stronghold of Gwai". Greg Jensen had fought more battles by the time he reached the age of fifteen than an average Klingon Dahar Master sees in his entire lifetime. He acquired the chieftainship of his tribe at twelve, united all the survivors of the Gwai disaster into a single tribe by 17, and then led a long war against the Atrophists who had overrun the colony. Last month he had finally planted his standard in the ruins of Gwai colony. How could he not be a legend?

But Rodney Tom had lost faith in Greg Jensen when he began punishing his soldiers for taking part in the massacres of the surviving Atrophists. Tom had been the son of a rival tribe leader who joined Jensen and became one of his generals. Rodney had been as loyal, brave, and capable as any man Greg had ever known. But he was also wild and vicious, and could never let go of a grudge. Such attitudes were a poor fit for peacetime.

"We will not bleed them until we see the look of an enemy in their eye." Jensen stated, crossing his arms to express his annoyance. Rodney was still extremely nervous, but he neither dropped the knife nor used it.

"You don't listen anymore, Greg!" the hostage-taker insisted.

Jensen waited calmly for five seconds, then gave a mannered reply. "This is a democracy, Rodney. Persuade the people to shun me, and I will have no choice but to listen." Jensen declared. "Or you can challenge me. I'll even let you find yourself a partner who feels as you do; you can arm yourselves with knives, and I will face both of you unarmed."

Of course, Greg knew that General Tom would not be foolish enough to take him up on that offer - the remark was pure politics, meant solely for the benefit of his followers. "Only a coward uses a hostage to attack his true target, Rodney." he goaded.

"You're afraid of what I will do to her!" Rodney spat. "That makes *you* the coward, Greg!"

Jensen looked directly into the general's eyes and held his gaze. "You're right. Absolutely. I *am* a coward. So let me change that with an act of modest courage." he added, drawing a knife. It was time to end the standoff. Rodney took a deep breath, and watched in amazement as Jensen

raised the knife and held it to his own throat. "Release the hostage, or in ten seconds I will slit my own throat. Nine... eight... seven..."

The crowd of onlookers gasped. Rodney knew the threat wasn't an idle one, but he couldn't bring himself to put down his blade. "...six... five..."

"For God's sake, stop this!" The previously silent Dalta-Theyvo finally muttered.

"Two... one..." Jensen counted. "Farewell..."

That was the last time that President Greg Jensen, twenty-year-old liberator of the Gwai, hope of the people, made history on the planet of his birth. He slid a cold serrated blade across his own throat and felt pulsing hot blood rush down his fingers as the artery burst. Even hard men gasped and screamed as his eyes rolled in their sockets, and again when he collapsed to the floor. Only Dalta-Theyvo noticed the serene look on his face.

"No!" Rodney Tom shouted, dropping the knife in shock. Commander Dalta-Theyvo was not given to missing perfect opportunities - she straightened herself, grabbed the young Gwaiian in a headlock, and threw him to the ground. It was a remarkably effective throw for a pacifist. General Rodney Tom was then tackled by six of Jensen's guard, who beat him senseless (and then well beyond senseless). He wasn't the only Gwaiian who liked to solve his problems with brute force.

But Commander Dalta-Theyvo ignored the chaos - she rushed to the fallen President's side, drew a bulky communicator from her belt and shouted: "*Leander*, two to beam up, medical emergency!" Seconds later, she felt the transporter effect envelope them, taking the First Officer and the dead Gwaiian President back to the light cruiser. The chief surgeon and a team of specialists met them as soon as they rematerialized. Dr. Montgomery scanned him, and started barking orders as they rushed Jensen into surgery. Dalta-Theyvo's last look at his face, a beautiful golden face, burnt itself into her mind. She wondered what sort of a man, especially one barely out of boyhood, could rise out of such a savage culture and make such a noble sacrifice.

Dalta-Theyvo, her mission aborted, returned to her duty station, wearing her shame like a second uniform. No one spoke to her. She received a communication from one of Jensen's mates, a Martha Abbott, who had already moved to round up the rebel generals and consolidate control over the Gwai. The new ruler asked Starfleet to wait in orbit for two days, after which time she promised to guarantee the safety of any landing party. So the rescue operation *could* continue.

But Dalta-Theyvo's mind kept flashing back to the Gwaiian whose life the surgeons was still struggling to save. He was a handsome creature by human standards, tall and unblemished, however it was his inner strength that impressed her. But she may well have been alone in that assessment.

"He's a Gwaiian," she overheard the weapons officer sneer to the chief engineer. "Born to be a fascist, bred to be a monster, the jackbooted son of Zora and every other genetic engineer who's littered the galaxy with their garbage." That comment would never have bothered her, if she hadn't seen one of the "monstrous fascists" slit his own throat to save the life of someone he didn't even know.

The first officer didn't participate in the conversation. Instead she filed her report on the Gwai crisis - the Captain nodded and promised to look at it later - and then headed for Sickbay. As she entered, one of the nurses was being treated for a broken hand. "The patient inadvertently squeezed it," Dr. Montcolm explained.

“So he’s recovering?” Dalta-Thevyo asked.

“Matching the blood type was a trick, but yes, we got to him in time,” the Doctor explained, leading Dalta-Thevyo over to inspect the sleeping patient. “Forty-two heartbeats per minute, approximately five times human strength, organ efficiency three to five times normal. No brain damage, in fact, his synapses are three times faster than normal. A magnificent freak.”

A freak? What an odd thing to say, the Grazerite thought. He looks so human.

Greg Jensen suddenly opened his eyes and gave a deep breath. “It worked,” he said, turning his attention toward Dalta-Thevyo. “No one else died?”

“Only my would-be assassin, Mr. President,” the Commander informed him. “After you died, your followers went berserk. I think there was something of a purge.”

If Jensen felt any emotion toward this, he didn’t show it. Sickbay was a brighter, cleaner and softer place than anywhere he’d lived in the last twelve years. “I’m dead. And for now the Gwaiians are united. I take it that Martha Abbott’s in control?”

“I believe so, Mr. President.” Odd, Dalta-Thevyo thought. Everyone aboard ship seemed to hold Mr. Jensen in extreme contempt, and yet she was still required to use the honorific. Even years of experience rising to the lofty rank of Commander – the highest yet achieved by a Grazerite – did not convey a great understanding of the human psyche. She was not a predator.

“Good.” Jensen says. “And I’m aboard *USS Leander*?” The Grazerite nodded, and was about to offer him the mandatory tour when he blurted out. “I have a favor to ask.”

“Yes?” Dalta-Thevyo asked.

“I want to defect,” the Gwaiian President insisted.

“What?”

“I’ve spent the last twelve years fighting,” Jensen stated. “On a single world, when there are thousands of known worlds, and uncounted unknown ones to explore, and so many people to meet...” He paused and laughed merrily. “What are some of them? Vulcans, Klingons, Tellerites? And so many more. I want to see them, as many as possible.”

“Mr. President...”

“It’s Greg. I want to understand why the galaxy is full of so many wonders. I want to meet people who have never raised a fist in anger. I want to visit places where the words “mortality rate” are met with disbelief...”

“Greg...” But interrupting the young Gwaiian was like commanding a volcano to cease its belching. Greg Jensen sat up on his bed.

“I want to join Starfleet Academy,” the President says. “Will you sponsor me, Dalta-Thevyo?”

“No,” she said. He didn’t know the obstacles in his path. The one unquestioned prejudice in the Federation was against genetic engineering. Too many worlds, including Gwai’s parent world Earth, had experienced disasters attributed to the forbidden science, and Gwai’s horrific natural selection process was too close to gengineering for comfort. If President Greg Jensen attempted to apply at the Academy, Dalta-Thevyo knew the application would be greeted with a mixture of horror and ridicule. But still... there was something about the man that told Dalta-Thevyo it would not be easy to keep saying “no” to him, for herself and for the Academy. Some people shine their potential like a beacon, and Jensen’s beacon was blinding. Here was a man capable of grabbing the Federation in his strong right fist, and taking it to a better place.

A man who would not disappoint her when she said the word "yes".

## I: Eye of the Unicorn

“Sir,” Kollos asks, looking me directly in the eye. “Is there an emergency we should know about?”

The helmsman hasn’t confirmed my order to set course for Monoceros yet, and I really have to work hard to hold my temper. I realized on the first day that this bridge had more than its share of free thinkers, and that’s a good thing to a point. Unfortunately that point is reached when I clearly haven’t earned enough of their respect to receive their unconditional obedience in a crisis.

“Monoceros is very far from any Federation repair facilities,” Kollos adds. “Do you think the ship is up to the risk?” She pauses, waits for a reply. The entire bridge crew seems to join her in her vigil. “Captain?”

I bite my lip, fight a rising tide of anger, and struggle to find a way to respond that question that will still earn Kollos’s respect. I won’t accomplish that by trying to force her to back down. Concentrating hard to calm down, I try to see things from a different perspective, the perspective of the bridge crew. “Sir?” Lars prods.

“Give me a minute, Mr. Lars,” I say. I could add “it’s been a long day”, but sometimes even a true excuse is still just an excuse.

“Certainly, Captain,” Lars answers, apprehensively. Hazard looks like there’s a lot he wants to say to me, but for now he’s keeping his mouth shut. Still, his face is an unspoken accusation, and worse, it’s one that’s well deserved. Every criticism he’s made during this voyage has finally sunk into my skull and is now threatening to crack it into pieces.

*You’ve been a selfish twit, Captain Said.* How many times, as a junior officer aboard *Phillipi* and *Ark Royal* did you complain about *your* superiors being too arrogant and self-serving to give the crew a proper briefing? Why are you holding back now? Because you’re scared of their



reaction when they find out you're putting their lives in danger just so you can romance a cosmic entity?

Kenneth Said, you are a coward! Ivan was right to demand the truth!

"I'll give a full briefing to the senior command staff at 2100 hours," I finally promise, doing my best to ignore the blood that's flushing in my face, and my sentences are punctuated by deep breaths. "I'll tell you everything. Because you deserve to know. Now, set course for Monoceros, helmsmen. Warp Eight."

"Aye, sir," Kollos says. "Course set."

"You can try to talk me out of it tonight." I say as I leave the bridge, also instructing Hazard to take the con. Now I have to find a way to get them on my side that doesn't involve throwing four pips in their faces, because rank only goes so far with these people.

I return to my quarters, opening them to discover that Francis indulging his favorite pastime (looking at the stars while nude) through the port window. He's staying in my quarters while he's aboard ship – not only is there no room for him, I don't feel like inflicting Gable's eccentricities on another member of my crew until I'm sure he's sane. A second bed has been brought into the room – Dido's curled up on it, fast asleep. Dido's reaction to Francis was a curious one; he's the only person I've ever seen treat her with indifference, and conversely, she's the only creature in the universe who's ever treated *him* with indifference. They're an odd matched set of roommates.

"Today was that bad?" Francis asks, sensing my emotional burden through our empathic link. I nod, collapse onto the bed, and cover my eyes with my hands. Francis sits down on the bed next to me. "Things so bad down in engineering?"

"It's much worse than that," I moan. "Francis, they put me on the bridge!"

"Oh no!" Francis shouts sympathetically. "Those fools! An engineer of your caliber should be tracted to the engine room with a wrench welded to his hand."

"No, it's worse than that," I explain. "Much worse. They gave me command."

"They were *that* desperate?" Francis says. I feel like sobbing. "Of course you did have the strongest connection to Jensen, and you could probably do the job, but – I thought you'd regained your sanity! Why didn't you try to transport away before they had a chance to ask you?"

"Well, the command's only temporary," I explain, scooping some clothes out of a drawer and handing them to the former assistant science officer. Gable simply throws them on the bed, annoying Dido. "And Greg wanted me to try command."

"Oh Kenneth Ali Michael Ibn Said!" Gable moans. "Nobody loved Greg more than I did, but Kenneth, he *was* a human being. The fact that he managed to survive twelve years of Hell and not only remained sane but flourished... well, there aren't enough adjectives in the language to describe the achievement. But you need to destroy the shrine you've built to him!"

"Francis," I moan. "I don't need to hear this right now."

"Yes, you do," Francis shakes his head, picks up the uniform I threw at him, and starts playing with the fabric. "Can't you stand down from yellow alert just this once? We're together for the first time in months. I can feel you in my mind, and I'll bet you can feel me in yours. I've missed that feeling so much..."

It's true (although embarrassing). "Do you have a point?" I ask.

“Yes I do!” Francis exclaims. “I was really hoping that the day that brought the two of us back together would be one of the happiest days that you’ve had in a very long time. It was for me.” he tells me with a wounded scowl on his face.

I bow my head slightly “I didn’t mean to get personal,” I reply. “Your news about the Crysian pretty much threw me over a cliff... I apologize if I’ve been an ass...”

“You are what you are,” Francis can’t resist the dig. “And while I can’t say I was ever interested in mating with a school of cosmic eels, I have lost people I loved, and so I do understand.”

“Francis, the way you infatuate over people, you lose the people you love on a daily basis.”

“At least I’m not stuck alone in my quarters with a dog as my only companion.” Francis sharply retorts. “But go ahead, make jokes. After all I didn’t agree to leave everything I owned to be with you.” Gable always had a gift for sarcasm.

“Francis, when we transported you aboard this ship, you owned nothing,” I reply.

“I know. It was so wonderful,” Francis sighs. “Now let’s stop this tennis match of insults so I can be serious for a moment, okay?” I nod. “Kenneth, I know you must have taken one look at us lying next to the vents on Vespera and thought we were crazy. I felt the same way when I first saw the vents.”

“Okay. Why’d you stay?” I ask.

“I had to try it. I grew up on Vespera, I’d heard about the vent-dwellers all my life; they’re considered holy people. And I discovered something wonderful.”

It’s hard for me to imagine anything good coming out of that type of lifestyle. “Like what?”

“That having absolutely no responsibilities, no needs for months on end, it’s liberating. The experience was positively transcendent. It freed my mind so I could heal.”

“Fine.” I say. “You’re healed, I’m glad. But we’re not on Vespera anymore,” I observe as I grab the clothing out of his hands and shove it into his stomach. “So until I get find some way to get your own quarters, I’d appreciate it if you wore these.”

Francis folds his arms and lets them drop to the floor. “My religion requires me to be naked in front of the stars as often as possible,” he declares. “I’m more likely to receive an epiphany when I humble myself before God.”

Religion? Thank Allah I’m not religious! Still, I need to watch my anger prior to the briefing (even though I know I could say virtually anything to Francis and still receive his forgiveness five minutes later – the man’s exasperating, but the love he professes for people is completely genuine). After a few deep breaths, I continue the conversation. “Why not schedule your meditation for some time when I’m not here?” I say, wincing at the effort to be reasonable.

“Now why would I need to do that?” Francis replies, arms still folded.

“Because I will be bringing guests here, and nudism is still taboo on most worlds, including mine.” Gable knows the reason as well as I do – he’s one of those people for whom the effort of communicating is far more important than what’s actually being said.

“Well, you’ve dropped a lot on me for one day,” Francis continues in his contrary mood, “I’ll have to think about it. By the way, do you have any suggestions on what I should do here? Do you have tips on how to talk to some of the people I’ll meet? That navigator, and some of those security officers... wow...”

I was afraid of this. “I don’t understand how you managed to graduate from the Academy without someone putting you in a body cast – I telepathically shared your entire life experience, and I *still* don’t know how you did it.”

"Heh," Francis smiles.

"Try not to cause trouble. Everything you do reflects on me. And as for what you should do: we need to regain all the weight you lost when you were surviving on a diet of vapors, and we also need to remove that rotten egg smell from your skin."

"What? I think the smell takes me closer to the universe," Francis objects. "The Big Bang smelled like rotten eggs."

"Too bad. Once you're back in shape, and Latham examines you, you'll go back on the duty roster and serve under Commander Hazard."

"The duty roster?" Francis sneers. "As if I'd agree to that, Mr. Said. Speaking as a *civillian* to a Starfleet officer."

I was expecting that. A document was waiting for just such a revelation on my dresser; I grab it, hold it up and wave it front of the Commander. "Y'know what's the one really nice thing about commanding a starship in wartime? It's very easy to get a medical discharge rescinded."

"No!" Gable exclaims. "No, you bastard..."

"Welcome back to the fleet, Francis Gable!" I grin.

"I *will* get you for this, Kenneth..." Gable suddenly turns on me. "I swear that you'll experience unbridled torment! A universe of pain! No mercy, Kenneth - no mercy!"

I laugh at the vow, sit back on the bed, and scratch Dido's ear as he continues to rage. It's all bluster, and we both know it, but it's good bluster, the sort that makes us both feel better. A bluster that brooks no distractions.

Distractions like a dead Crysian, or a meeting with the senior staff which, like most high stakes games of "truth or dare" is more than likely to turn into a lynching.

I'm the last one to enter the Captain's ready room, even though I'm three minutes early for the meeting. The faces – Gbeji, Hazard, Kollo, Lars, Latham, T'Doroth - look cold but not hostile, though Hazard is clearly anxious. On *Galatea* class vessels (we're still an NX, not an NCC) space is at a premium, so the conference room is cramped and claustrophobic, a room barely big enough to fit its table, chairs, and viewscreen. This is only going to increase the potential for ugliness.

"Okay, we're as ready as we're going to be," I say, assuming the tight diction of a Starfleet Academy lecturer. I stay standing, hoping added stature will give me a much-needed advantage, and call attention to the viewscreen.

"First, what I'm about to share with you is classified. The neck of everyone in this room is in the noose if this gets out."

"Captain, are you sure you want to do this?" Latham asks.

"I can't rely on my senior staff for advice if I don't do this, James." I reply. "And there are a *lot* of personal issues involved in this for me." I can see Hazard's lower lip draw tighter. "I don't have anything close to a perspective on this whatsoever. I need you folks, whether I like to admit it or not."

Let it begin. I draw what may be the deepest breath of my life, and throw a picture of Monoceros Prime on the screen. "Monoceros. A G2 class star. 163,400 years ago it entered its expansion stage, and expanded to a radius of 32 AU. This expansion destroyed the old Monoceros solar system, but created a new one out of the icy comets and heavy Kuipers at the edge of the system. Monoceros IV, also called the Wash, is a dirty water world, created by

melting comets that smashed together. Somehow, during those 163,000 years, life sprang up on that world.”

“That’s an extremely short evolutionary window,” Hazard says, “and it’s really fascinating. But shouldn’t science be taking a back seat to the war right now?”

“Commander, given the unexplained Federation and ISC fleet movements near this system in the last few months,” Kollos replies, “perhaps we shouldn’t jump to conclusions?”

The half-Medusan did her homework, as usual. Sometimes she frightens me.

“Fine. Continue, Lieutenant,” Hazard says, half-sulking at the rebuke.

“Not just life grew in the waters of Monoceros, but intelligent life. And not just intelligent life, but... this.” I switch to a computer rendering. “The Crysian. She’s a colony creature. Named after the naïve unicorn of the waters from Andorian-Sannati mythology, she’s not only sentient, she’s a Level 9 telepath and a Level 5 telekinetic. She’s also able to augment a human’s physical capabilities to the point where they’re virtually invulnerable, even when they’re a nearly hundred parsecs away.” That brings a visible reaction from everyone but T’Doroth and Latham. I take another huge gulping breath. “...and I love her.”

Do I ever get the oddest looks.

No one dares interrupt me. “I was stationed on *Ark Royal* at the time. Fifteen months ago, just before the ISC arrived, not long after the armistice of the General War.” Still no reaction, everyone’s listening. “I was assigned to set up a relay on the Wash, which would record sensor readings in case Monoceros Prime ever went into its retraction cycle.” (All suns that expand, as Monoceros did, will eventually contract into a dwarf star.) “The Crysian was curious about me, and she captured me. I was held in a continuous mind meld with her for 339 hours.”

Ironically, T’Doroth is the one who reacts with the most emotion to that statement.

“Our senses were linked, we explored the time and space, as uncounted years and parsecs passed by. In our minds, we visited distant planets, uncounted cultures. We walked in Time. We saw the Tkon raise the Prometheon Cenotaph. We felt the plasma storm when the Vulcans fired the Fury weapon. I sat beside King Solomon while he dined with the Queen of Sheba. And I really, really smiled when Colonel Green finally got what he deserved for destroying the old North American Alliance and starting the third World War.”

“He was the guide for a cosmic entity as it learnt about humanity,” Latham adds, cutting to the chase.

“The Crysian wasn’t going to let me go,” I continue. “But Captain Jensen, Lieutenant Commander Gable, Lieutenant Pratt, and Ensign Nagura found a way through her barrier. The Crysian responded to their presence by melding all of our minds together. We were a single entity for seventy-one minutes.”

“Captain...” T’Doroth offers an uncharacteristic interruption. “I am moved that you could endure the *kae’at k’lasa* for such a long period of time.”

“Eventually, we persuaded her to let us go, and she did. However, the effects of being trapped in a high intensity telepathic field left...”

“That’s where you got your telepathic shroud,” Lars guesses. Shroud?

“Mr. Said spent eight months in a Starfleet hospital recovering from the experience,” Latham adds, telling them something I was a more than a little reluctant to share. “Mr. Pratt committed suicide, Nagura is currently watching ‘metal insects from Andromeda’ crawl up the walls in her cell on Elba II, Mr. Gable is... well, it’s hard to tell whether he went mad or whether it was

merely his normal behavior catching up to him, and as for Captain Jensen..." He swallows hard. "Greg was beginning to slip at the time of *Ark Royal's* destruction."

"How do you know all this?" Gbeji asks Latham, a trace of hostility in her voice.

"Telepathic trauma is my specialty," Latham answers. "That's why I was assigned to *Ark Royal* after the incident."

"Okay, so why would you want to return to Monoceros after two weeks of this hell?" Hazard asks me. "And better still, why would you want to put all our lives at risk by getting within a parsec of the place?"

"We maintained a tenuous telepathic relationship with the Crysian after the incident," I admit. "She saved my life on more than one occasion." I turn to T'Doroth. "I'd never have survived the destruction of *Ark Royal* or broken free on *The Lasting Peace* if it hadn't been for her intervention."

"That explains much," T'Doroth notes. "So you have come to view the Crysian as a benign being?"

"You're still in love with her, aren't you?" Hazard interrupts, his anger beginning to brim over. "Well?" I don't say anything. "This is wonderful. I'm first officer aboard a dating ship!"

"Down, boy," Lars states. "Let him finish. You do have more to say, don't you?"

"Francis says that he felt the Crysian die a week ago," I admit. "I didn't, but I haven't felt her presence in days. I had planned to use her telepathic abilities for our primary mission to find Captain Jensen. I need to know if she's still alive." I turn to Hazard. "That's the full truth."

There's a silence that even a cricket would respect that lasts for at least ten seconds, but I can also see the anger intensify in Ivan's eyes. "Captain," Hazard finally says through gritted teeth. "I must formally request that you step down from your command, or I will tender my resignation, effective immediately. I cannot serve with anyone who abuses their command and willingly puts his ship into danger to further a purely personal matter."

There's about five more seconds of silence. The Commander visibly seethes as he waits for my reply to detonate the bomb. "Ivan..." Lars says in a soft tone that suggests he wants to calm him down.

"Shut up!" Hazard snaps back.

For a fraction of a second, it looks like they'll go at it, but then Kollok interrupts both of them. "Commander, are you really *that* big of a fool?" she tells the first officer. Ivan couldn't look more stunned if she physically struck him. "This is about *far* more than just a telepathically induced romance. The Crysian is a transhuman being that's friendly to humans. Given the apparent alliance between the transhuman Organians and the ISC, we *need* allies on that power threshold."

"I don't think the Federation exploits cosmic entities, Lieutenant," I tell the navigator.

"Then you're both fools... sir," Kollok retorts – it's the first time she's ever openly questioned my judgment, let alone insulted me. "We're in the middle of a war. The freedom of over a trillion sentient beings is at stake. Of course we've thought of exploiting her. Why else would we have a small fleet stationed three parsecs away in what's otherwise an unimportant sector? Why else would the ISC conduct two major operations near that system when it's strategically untenable to maintain their fleets so far from the Neutral Zone?"

"Wow." Lars says as an aside. "Can you share the data analysis?"

"Certainly, Lieutenant." Kollok answers.

I can tell from the look on his face that Hazard's about to do something drastic, so it's time to stop him now. "Commander, I don't blame you one bit for your reaction," I tell him. "Frankly I'm surprised the whole lot of you didn't just get up and walk out when I mentioned this mission could be part of a personal agenda. However, the one defense I have to offer is that the primary mission of Starfleet is to seek out new life and new civilizations..."

"Frankly, Mr. Said, I'd rather prevent the old life and the old civilizations from wiping us into extinction before I worried about the new ones!" Hazard scoffs.

I shake my head sadly. "I understand that, but... when did you stop being a science officer, Ivan?" Hazard's mouth opens slightly. "I've heard your passion for protecting the Federation, your anger at what's happened to your career. I've seen your courage first hand, your integrity, and your ability, but... I've never seen your curiosity, your wonder of discovery, your respect for the simple miracles of life." The next sentence could just as well be about my career on *Ark Royal*. "Sometimes, when something in you gets broken, you have to go back to your roots to fix it."

"Thank you!" Lars shouts, grabbing Hazard by the shoulder, and surprising everyone in the room. "You just said something that I've been trying to tell this guy for weeks."

"Go to hell, Lars." Hazard says, getting to his feet. "Kenneth." The commander turns to me. "You have a few good points, but can you honestly tell me, to my face, that this talk of strategic advantages and scientific purity isn't just a justification? That your sole motive for going to Monoceros isn't just because you want to check on your girlfriend?"

"I can't," I admit, and I have to work hard to hold myself steady. "However, you've also heard the other arguments from people who aren't personally invested in this. We're not too far to turn back. I'm going to make it your call, Ivan. Do we go to Monoceros, or do we find a safer destination? You decide."

Hazard doesn't look at anyone else in the room. He takes a deep breath. "We're seven sectors away, this ship breaks down like a son of a bitch at the slightest provocation, there aren't many repair facilities along our course, and there are a lot of ships closer to the system than we are. Why does it have to be us, Kenneth?"

"Because I need to see it myself." It's a weak excuse, I admit it. "Also, I've got the strongest bond with her. If the Crysian's still alive, I may be the only one who can communicate with her."

"So you don't believe Commander Gable?" Latham asks.

"Francis's instincts are downright scary most of the time, which is why I'm taking him seriously, but I don't understand why she'd say good-bye to him and not to me." I wonder.

"Species capable of telepathy will almost inevitably wish to entrust their... good-byes... to their closest companions," T'Doroth states, doing her best to avoid mentioning the Vulcan *katra*. I know a little about Vulcan mysticism, but it's information that wasn't particularly acquired willingly. "The contradiction may be important enough to warrant direct intervention."

"I'm not ready to give up, not yet," I say.

"Okay," Hazard says. "I'm not completely convinced, but I'll compromise - we'll go on one condition."

"What's that?" I ask.

"That I get to be a member of the landing party. If she's still alive, I want to meet the cosmic unicorn." He smiles sardonically. "Maybe it'll take me back to my roots."

I don't need to warn Hazard about the dangers – he knows them well enough that we can skip the lecture. “Lieutenant Kollos, we will maintain our current course and speed,” I say, resisting the urge to breathe a huge sigh of relief. “Meeting adjourned people. Return to your posts.”

Everyone leaves but Hazard, although I briefly observe Kollos and Latham having a very intense exchange in the doorway. “We’ll talk later,” Latham tells her, about the only words I clearly overheard. Now what the hell was that about?

But Hazard stays in his seat and signals me to sit down, so it's time for a heart-to-heart with my most troublesome officer. Once again Ivan sizes me up for ten seconds, saying nothing.

“I can't really win with you, can I?” I finally exclaim. “When I try to be detached and professional, I'm too impersonal, and when I do things for personal reasons, I'm too unprofessional.”

Ivan shrugs. “No, you can't win with me, Mr. Said,” he says, smiling slightly. “Especially at judo. Tonight at 1900 in the rec hall. Mind you, I'd understand if you don't show up. Captains always hate to lose to their first officers.”

“I'll be there, with bells on my gi,” I answer. Hazard smiles, gets up, and gets ready to leave.

“Ivan, what'd I do?” I ask him. The change is a welcome one, but I'll be damned if I can figure out what caused it. He stops, stands still, and thinks for a few seconds. “Why'd you call the ceasefire?”

“It certainly wasn't that speech about me needing to get back to my roots,” Ivan replies, then pauses and examines the skeptical look on my face. “Okay, maybe it didn't hurt, a little cold water in the face is sometimes a good thing.”

“So what *did* I do?” I repeat. “I'm new at this job, I like to know when I've done something right so I can use it again next time.”

“Well, in every briefing I've attended over the last five years, the air was dirtier when I left than when I entered,” Ivan tells me. “This time, the air's a lot fresher.”

“And people complain about my metaphors,” I sniff in mock derision. “But there are a couple more things in the air that need cleaning,”

“Okay.”

“First, I apologize for not calling Kollos on the carpet when she called you a fool. That's not acceptable behavior. Second, if you ever tell anyone to “shut up” or “go to hell” again, except *maybe* in a crisis, I'll throw the book at you. I don't care how close you and Lars have become. Respect is mandatory.” Hazard stops and considers the implications of what I said. “This crew is extremely capable, but there are way too many people here who think they're too good for the regs. That changes now. We need to raise the bar on professionalism, and that has to start on the bridge. With us.”

“I completely agree, Captain,” Hazard tells me. “And I apologize to you, and I'll apologize to Lieutenant Lars after I beat him in judo tonight.”

“You're confident,” I say with a smirk worthy of Roger Price. “But you've got more to worry about than Lars, my friend.”

Hazard laughs, slaps the table as a good-bye gesture, and practically bounces back to his duty station. I don't know if I've been insulted or not.

If life were drama, the fact that I'd eventually become friends with Ivan would be as inevitable as a forward facing photon hitting its target at point blank range. But life isn't so conveniently packaged, so I have to remember to be grateful when things work out like a good

story. The only part that's isn't quite as storybook is the number of times he beats me at judo. You think the universe would respect a good underdog.

But yes, life is very good right now. Between Lars, Latham, T'Doroth, and Ivan (and yes, Francis), I've never had so many close friends clustered in one place at one time in my entire life, not even at the Academy. I also come to another (even more astonishing) conclusion - I've earned more respect here than I've ever had in my entire life. Aboard *Ark Royal* Chief Engineer Teller once called me "everyman's kid brother", a remark that was as (unintentionally) cruel as it was accurate, because even those who respected me did so with a bit of condescension. Most of the crew was older than me, and that makes you an unproven commodity. But now I'm spending time with a lot of people who are on their first and second tours; for the first time, I'm older than half the crew, and now they're actually looking up to me.

I guess I'm in transition from being a little brother to a big brother. Maybe one day I'll even receive a promotion to "dad".

It's a three-week trip to Monoceros at Warp Eight, but the continued breakdowns extend the transit time to five weeks. The breakdowns aren't serious, praise Allah, but that doesn't stop *Galatea* from receiving more obscenities from her crew than any other ship in Starfleet history.

Francis and I get very close, much closer than I expected; when either of us have a bad day, we get together in our quarters and just sit for hours, feeling and comforting each other in our minds. Of course, he's far less likable when he opens his mouth, and he sometimes goes well out of his way to irritate me. He says he likes the feel of my skin under his fingernails (one of his stranger sayings, since it's certainly not literal). I need to train Dido to bite on command.

With fewer malfunctions to bother us, the crew settles into more of a routine, and the discipline problems that plagued us during our first few weeks begin to subside. The one surprising incident is a mess hall heavyweight fistfight between Burke and Wirchenko, apparently an annual event in their old Academy rivalry. I respect them both, but I respect discipline more, so they get to share a cell in the brig for two days.

Gbeji and I drift a little further apart, probably because I'm spending too much time with the boys. Though on the plus side, she says very nice things about my poetry, especially the ones I've written about warp engines. I just wish Francis would stop making passes at her.

The one great shadow on my life is that I haven't received any visits from the Crysian. Every night, when I'm on the verge of sleep, I hope against hope that that beautiful voice and presence will grace my mind. And then I wake up, I find myself looking at Francis as he's sleeping on the other bed, and the contrast between raw hope and naked reality is painful.

Thirty-four days into the trip, we finally approach the Monoceros system. I'll confess my heartbeat probably doubled on that last evening, and I did so badly in the nightly judo matches that Ivan and Lars kick me out of the rec room and send me back to my quarters.

I'd do anything to feel her presence right now.

"Captain!" I'm woken from the early rumblings of sleep by Gbeji - she's the only senior officer on the bridge during the late shift. "We need everyone on the bridge *immediately*."

Everyone? We quickly rouse the senior staff and race for the bridge. It's almost amusing to see Latham wearing a portly sportcoat, and Hazard and Lars in matching judogis.

"We've reached six light-weeks of Monoceros Prime," Gbeji reports, making way for Hazard to take over the science console. "There's been a change in the star."

A change in the star? Somehow, I force myself to gaze at the once familiar sight of Monoceros Prime. It's lost a lot of its brightness, and the deepening in its color is also obvious.



My eyes must be a pair of unshrinking circles, not yet wavering with tears, though soon they shall come.

*The sun is shrinking.* I realize as my stomach begins to burn, and the raw taste of bile coats my esophagus and throat. *Monoceros Prime has entered its contraction phase.*

“At current projections, the sun has already decreased in size by 38%,” Hazard states. “The corresponding temperature drop on the planet’s surface would be much greater. I’m sorry, Captain.”

“The Crysian relies on sunlight to survive,” I explain, barely ignoring the urge to vomit. “Photosynthesis. It’s been starved, or it’s starving.” Somehow, I find the strength and coordination to walk to the command chair without looking like a broken thing. “All speed to the Wash, Mr. Kollos. I want to find her body...” It’s an order I never thought I’d have to give.

## II: In Your Eyes

We're still a few hours from the Wash, even at high warp, so we have time to assemble the landing party and decide who's going to put themselves at risk. It's one of those informal bridge meetings, like the ones we hold in the briefing room, with much more comfortable chairs. I'm leaning back in mine, trying to concentrate on the mission, not on the personal crisis.

"The landing party will consist of me, Mr. Gable, Dr. Latham, and - as per our agreement - Mr. Hazard." I announce. "I won't order anyone else to come. If the Crysian's still active, she might - accidentally or intentionally - take a member of the landing party hostage and drive them... well what she's done before."

"Sir," Lars is first to speak up. "I won't let you go on a possible suicide mission without security escort. I volunteer."

"Declined, Mr. Lars. I'm not taking three of my four senior officers and my chief medical officer on this mission. I want you and Kollos to stay behind - I'll need people with your level of competence on this ship in case something goes wrong."

"Captain," T'Doroth says. "I would like to join the expedition." (Hopefully, after the last thing I said, she's not admitting she's incompetent.) "I do have experience with mind melds." It's an almost comical understatement; her eyes, which are black and usually so narrow that they often look slitted are now wide-eyed and almost pleading. I'm not sure why she wishes to go. Is it curiosity, perhaps, one of the few emotions that Vulcans do not mind expressing?

I pause to scan the faces of my chorus, the bridge crew. T'Doroth is almost irritated by how long it's taking me to answer her. "I don't want to risk you," I finally say, "but I can't fault your logic, Lieutenant. Welcome to the team."

"Sir?" Lars interjects. I don't know if he's annoyed at me for choosing T'Doroth and not him. In many ways, Lars is more stoic than a Vulcan; he'd have made a great classical Greek spartan. "I insist that you take at least one security officer."

"I'll agree to take one. Call for volunteers." I tell him. "I want to make sure they know they're not just risking death; they're risking sitting in a padded cell for the rest of their lives gibbering about Andromedan tentacles between bouts of uncontrolled drooling." The description of poor Nagura's life comes out more vivid than I intended.

"I'll do my best," Lars promises, "But Captain, I'm willing to bet there's nothing I can say to them that'll dissuade them."

I think for a second. The security officers on *Galatea* are what would be called a "gallant bunch", but they need to take their jobs a little more soberly. "Have them draw straws. Then tell them to throw a party for the person who drew the short straw." Lars looks puzzled. "I can't think of any better way to tell them just how serious this mission is going to be. Force them to say good-bye."

Lars nods, though I think he's a little shocked by my solution.

We make the final preparations. Hazard stands at the science console, his broad frame watchfully glued to the sensor window as we enter the system at a speed that would take us the length of the solar system in less than a minute. *Galatea* quickly decelerates, without malfunctioning. The Monoceros Wash is cold now, more of a Monoceros Freeze. The ice layer over the oceans is already several centimeters thick at the equator, and much thicker at the poles.

"I'm still reading numerous life forms in the ocean," Hazard tells me, "but most of them are dying. There's a lot of decay in the water; life forms are dying faster than scavengers can consume them."

"The ecology of the Wash entirely subsists on photosynthesis. Or they're parasites that feed off living prey," I explain. "Predators and scavengers are alien to this environment."

"That makes it rather unique. Though I wish I studied more about unusual planetary biosystems," Hazard admits. "Were you planning on setting up a camp by the old Sunwatch outpost..." Then Hazard abruptly gives a sharp hum. "Wait a minute!" he says with growing excitement, and he pulls back his head from the view window in surprise. "I've found something. You'd better come here."

I get out of the command comm and almost skip to the science console. Dare I hope?

"I *am* reading a powerful telepathic field eighty meters below the surface of the water, near the equator."

Oh my god.... I suppress an urge to kiss him and jump through the viewscreen in the vain hope of diving to the planet.

"It's no level nine telepath, though, only a level five," Ivan reports. "I'm also reading warmer waters in a twelve kilometer radius surrounding it." He pauses and smiles at me. "I think you've still got a date for tonight, Captain."

"Get me a solid landing site near her position, and we'll set up a camp and hope to attract her." I say excitedly.

"I have the coordinates, Captain."

"Mr. Kollo, you have the con," I say, smiling like an idiot. "Keep it warm, I may be gone awhile,"

"Aye sir," Kollo says, brushing one of her long brown braids out of her eyes. She seems more nervous than usual. "I will be rooting for you, Captain. I hope things work out the way you want."

That may well have been the most personal comment that Kollo has ever made to me. She fascinates me, along with the rest of the crew. I know the risks, but every time she goes into her

"true form", I want to sneak into her room and see what she really looks like. The same thing, I suppose, applies to people like Roger or half the security officers on this ship, the people who wanted to touch me just to experience what my touch feels like. I suppose we all have some inordinate attraction to unbridled power, and that's probably one of the reasons why the Crysian holds such a potent attraction to me. Hers is a dangerous and irresistible touch.

We assemble in the transporter room, half my bridge crew, Latham, Gable, and Wirchenko as the token redshirt. We bundle up warmly, beam down a lot of supplies first, then head down to the icebox.

"An overgrown comet," Gable says when we materialize on a sheet of flat ice that extends as far as the eye can see. The air is cold and very dry, and there's no wind. The gravity is only 1/18th that of Earth's, so low that we're wearing a gravitic compensator to keep our movements reasonably normal; when we need to travel, we can switch to native gravity and leap into the air like the gaudy characters of 20th Century Picto-myths (which is a lot of fun until you come in for a landing, which is when the hubris sets in).

"The atmosphere's breathable." Hazard tells us something we already know.

"For the next three million years, then most of the oxygen will have escaped the planet's gravity well and the Wash will be uninhabitable," Gable decides to show off his knowledge at Hazard's expense; there's been a subtle rivalry building between them for two weeks. Latham scans the area to determine the radiation level, then administers a round of hypos. There's virtually no protection against solar radiation on the Wash, so taking anti-radiation drugs on the hour is going to be an important part of lives as long as we're down here.

"It reminds me of Siberia - or how it would've looked during an ice age," Wirchenko says, immediately digging into a pack. He and Hazard immediately begin spreading out the base of our habitat dome; once the dome's in place, we'll surround it with a watertight force field in case the ice breaks up. T'Doroth and I have to prod Gable into setting up a relay and observation post. Latham unwraps the heater and begins checking for life signs under the ice. The goal of the initial phase of the mission is to set up a base camp, and then pry open the ice and reconnoiter, planting instruments in the sea bottom to measure changes in the life signs. Particularly important is the presence of what we called *psibrine*, a shrimp-like creature that feeds off telepathic emissions.

"I'd almost forgotten what a scientific mission feels like," Latham tells me as I huddle next to the fingers, unwrapping my hands to the open air.

"You cold?" I say.

"Not cold. A little tired," James tells me. "It's been a memorable shakedown, and not in a good way."

"I've noticed you and Kollos have gotten pretty close lately."

"Don't tell me you're inferring there's a romance, Kenneth. If only it were," he tells me with a slight smile. "She's a unique being. A half-Medusan has special needs which require a buffer of privacy."

"You almost seemed conspiratorial the last few times I saw you two together," I observe.

"Kenneth, if I was engaged in a conspiracy, I'd hardly talk about it," Latham tells me. "And you shouldn't tip your hand that you suspect something's afoot."

Now *that* was an interesting response.

"You lecture too much, James," I reply (trying to hide my interest), "I'm afraid a Captain doesn't have as much time for them as an Ensign." I tell him.

"A Captain needs them ten times more badly than an Ensign," Latham nastily retorts.

"Well, better lectures than check-ups, I suppose," I smile, turning away from Latham to other matters. Hazard and Wirchenko are cutting large holes in the ice in preparation for water ops. I strip off my cold weather gear, and slip into one of our two bathosuits, a bulky apparatus designed to turn the human body into a natural submarine.

"Hold your horses, Captain!" Wirchenko shouts with a thick Russian brogue, throwing aside a piece of ice and stomping his way through the ice to intercept me. "I go into the water first, when I'm convinced it's safe, then you'll follow me."

"You've been talking with Mr. Lars." I say as Wirchenko walks to point blank range.

"I'm in charge of security, and I was ordered to use common sense. So I'm using it," Wirchenko says, and he whispers: "This is one time when I get to boss around a Captain, so I'm going to enjoy it."

"This is all about me throwing you in the brig with Burke," I joke back. "Okay Ensign, I'll let you take point. But I don't react kindly to being coddled."

"Understood, sir." Wirchenko says, and he goes about his business. I put on the bathosuit in the hope that this will help me, but it doesn't. I need to tell myself to calm down and stop pacing. Somehow I find myself wandering over to Francis.

"There are two things I hate more than anything in the universe," I tell my old friend, who's reluctantly setting up a small power generator. "Cold, and waiting."

"Kenneth, who was it who once told me that every time a Captain whines during an away mission, he should lose half a pip from his collar?" Francis chides.

"Jensen did," I sigh. "I was just quoting him." I pause, and listen as a grunting Wirchenko sinks a hook into the cut ice block and rips it out. "Do you feel her, Francis?" I finally ask the question that's occupying most of my mind. "Has she..."

"No," Gable replies, and he puts his arm on my shoulder. For once, the gesture's even more welcome than Francis intends. "Maybe she's dead to me and not to you. Or maybe whatever they scanned wasn't her, it was kind sort of offspring. Are you feeling her, Kenneth?" I shake my head. "Calm down, extend your thoughts..."

I look up at Francis with an expression that probably mirrors Dido's when I scold her and she knows she's done something wrong. I can feel Francis gently laughing at me; I guess he thinks my bout of nerves is silly and neurotic, and that I need to get a grip on myself. And if that's not what he's feeling, he probably *should* feel that way, because it's absolutely true.

"Lieutenant T'Doroth," Francis calls out. The weapons officer abruptly turns to face us. "If Mr. Gable were trying to open his mind to make telepathic contact, should he remain calm or should he get more agitated than a herd of pigs in an earthquake?"

"Calmness is the Vulcan way, of course," T'Doroth says, not reacting to Francis's colorful description. "But given that he's previously achieved telepathic union, he should attempt to repeat the process as closely as possible."

"I always felt her in the moments just before I fell asleep." I say.

"Perhaps delirium is the trigger," T'Doroth speculates. "Maybe if we were to put you to sleep, you would initiate contact."

"Does that mean we have to cancel the swim?" Wirchenko, who's standing on the edge of the conversation, shouts in the distance.

Part of me wants to be clever and tell him to "go jump in the lake". But I'm trying to be a more structured, disciplined commander. "Nothing gets cancelled on this mission until I give the word, Ensign." I finally say. "There's still useful data to be collected with water ops."

"Aye, Captain," the rugged Ensign replies. "I think we've cleared enough of the ice to begin our dive, so we can go whenever you're ready, sir."

"How much daylight we got left, Ivan?" I ask Hazard a question I should reference on my tricorder. Monoceros Wash rotates on its axis every eleven hours; it's always disconcerting to explore worlds where you can notice the day/night cycle between blinks.

"About two hours," the Commander informs me.

"I think we're ready to proceed, Ensign," I tell Wirchenko. "Lead the way." The kid flashes the widest grin I've ever seen on anything that isn't a Antarian shark, and snaps on our second bathosuit. We walk to the edge of the opening, and Wirchenko goes into a protective tuck, then rolls into the water with an icy splash.

"We'll be periodically melting new ice accumulations with our phasers, so call in before you surface," Hazard tells me, and then I join Wirchenko, plummeting into the old comet ocean with a splash. Instantly the dark water, without the welcoming sheen of bright, angelic light that looms above you to tell you that you're returning to the surface soon, becomes an uninviting place. The suit's systems activate, including the lighting systems, which catch Wirchenko swimming around like a happy, muscle-bound seal.

"You didn't feel like skinny dipping, Captain?" he jokes.

"No, Ensign." I reply. Part of me wants to suggest that he extend that invitation to Commander Gable, but I quickly bite my tongue - I like Wirchenko and inflicting Francis on him would not be a wise move. "Another day, in warmer waters."

"Do we head for the bottom, sir, or do you want to explore?"

"We'll descend to a depth of thirty meters, swim due east for a kilometer and then sweep in a counterclockwise circuit before returning to base." I tell him. We're trying to field test the suits before we perform our deepwater operation, this should be routine. Of course, we all know who many security personnel have died on routine missions. Wirchenko confirms the order, and the bathosuits begin the initial descent.

Monoceros is pretty much all ocean, although it coagulates into an icy bottom at a depth of twenty kilometers. There's not much in the way of floating sentiment, and the oceans are a lot less lively than they were fifteen months ago. We are seeing a lot of the glowing shrimp, the *psi-brine*, and little glowing algae filaments that were also commonplace on the last visit. Then there are the long thread eel-swarms, cousins to the Crysian, which travel in packs. They're clustered together more tightly than before. I relay this to the surface, and Hazard speculates it's to keep warm in the cold Monoceron waters.

We reach our target depth and begin to head north, though we're swimming in pretty much pitch-blackness. Just when we're about to hit the northernmost point in the circuit, I receive a transmission - it's from Kollos, back aboard *Galatea*.

"Commander, three ISC medium cruisers have been sighted in this sector. Starfleet informs us they're about three parsecs away from the system. Some of the Second fleet has been sent to engage them."

"Keep me informed, Kollos." I reply. Though I can't really worry about this yet. At best speed, they're still well over a day from Monoceros, and the true, very personal purpose of this

mission is the only thing I'll let into my mind at the moment. The fever dream. To seek out old loves, to strongly embrace what I have bitterly lost, and to find my Captain.

"Captain, what's *that*?" Wirchenko, swimming directly thirty meters of me, has noticed something.

A dark mass is coming toward us. At first sight I think it's her, but I'd feel it in my mind if it were. It's a school of Rays, black-silver creatures as thick as my pinky finger, twenty meters long, with heads like arrowheads. I can't begin to measure this swarm, the cube may be the size of a rugby field on each side. It approaches and swims parallel to Wirchenko, who responds by raising the suit's rudimentary shielding.

"Should I try to get away?" he asks.

"Negative. We're in their territory." I say. They shouldn't even be noticing us - I never encountered Monoceron rays with this sort of predatory behavior patterns before. "Act casual, and gradually move back to base."

"I'm going to move closer to the surface, Captain," Wirchenko tells me. I can see the logic in that, given that the Crysian's rays dispersed when she surfaced, it might make the arrowheads less of a threat. Wirchenko begins to gradually surface. At his request, I edge myself away from the swarm, though the bathosuits generate enough light that I can still get a good view of the action.

I can start to see the ice above our heads - and then the arrowheads strike. One of them tentatively touches the Ensign's leg, then passes through it, ignoring his shields. Blood trickles through the damaged shield into the water, and then I can't see anything. The ocean is a swarm of silver, though there's enough red in those first few seconds to tell me that I've lost him. I try to shout his name, but my throat is utterly raw, and my scream is a dry sickness, both desperate and empty.

The frenzy of arrowheads stop, but the swarm's still obscuring the Ensign's body. I finally manage to clear my throat, and immediately begin to backpedal. "Said to base... We're under attack... we've lost Wirchenko..."

The arrowheads aren't finished. They form a wall of darkness, the silver reflecting like knives. And the wall is getting closer at a frightening speed.

I awaken on my back in the center of a great icefield, and even the cold in my face isn't enough to bring me out of a deep stupor. Yes, I know who I am: Kenneth Said, Captain of *USS Galatea* of the United Federation of Planets, who right now feels like the coldest man in the galaxy. I was wearing a bathosuit, but the pieces of broken waterwear that are strewn beside me aren't providing insulation anymore, and the Starfleet uniform doesn't even make decent longjohns. My hands sting, they're not just raw from the cold, they've both got deep cuts. I can't quite remember where I got them - maybe I should consider myself lucky.

I take a deep breath, and struggle against the blackness of memory. Black is the critical color, black and silver; the last thing I remember was watching the wall of arrowheads rushing at me, and yelling at *Galatea* to transport me the heck out of there. But the call was cut short by something that wasn't a transporter, and after that it was just blackness.

I turn over to my stomach and crawl to my feet, and that's when, God help us both, I spot Wirchenko's body. The handsome young Ensign lies on his back five meters away, flesh is white as a storybook prince, his face serene with the peace of legend. On Urian III, the undertaker cults sing epic hymns to the beauty of cadavers and the lovely whiteness of their bloodless flesh. Until

today I'd have thought they were crazy but now I'm reconsidering my opinion. Oh, Wirchenko. I crawl over to him like an infant to inspect his body.

"So Ensign," I tell Wirchenko, who's holding a hundred different conversations with his death stare. "Some Captain I turned out to be, eh? What was it that the Tasting Prophets told me? *No surer sign of the tragedy that is to come?* I guess it's arrived, my friend." The light-headedness is making me ramble like a drunken man, but the realization of his death is the worst kind of sobriety imaginable. "My friend, what more is there to be said except..."

"Captain!" the communicator sounds like it's cutting through static interference with a knife; the voice on the other end belongs to Ensign Costa, the Amazonian security guard who's also on the duty roster as a communications specialist. "Captain, are you alright?"

As good as a ripe peach on a summer day. But I don't say that aloud. I take a few seconds to compose myself. "I feel very disoriented, Ensign. I'm somewhere on the ice – I don't know how I got here – and I don't know the whereabouts of my current position."

"Shall we beam you to *Galatea*, sir?"

"Negative," I respond, still wincing with my mind to think through a haze of fatigue – this is one of the hardest things I've had to do in quite some time. "Bring down an honor guard detachment to return Mr. Wirchenko's body back to *Galatea*. Once he's aboard, beam me over to the landing party."

"Aye sir."

I turn off the communicator. "Company's coming," I tell Wirchenko. "I'll try to give you a good send-off, kid, it's the least I can do... now what are those?"

Wirchenko doesn't do anything (of course), but I do notice several objects clinging to his chest and face, and that's when I notice that the area's covered in a layer of thousands of milk-white shrimp, the *psibrine*. Twenty of the suckers are also clinging parasitically to my body, and hundreds more litter the landscape. I pick one up and inspect it carefully; it tickles my hand with its bristling vilii. If I could only laugh.

"Sir?" The security team's arrived, and I didn't even hear the transport song. "Sir?" I turn around. Ensign Rigney's friendly, dark face is clearly weighted by the strain of seeing a friend's corpse. What are you saying inside your head, Ensign, I wonder. *I thought it was only a routine mission?* I thought that too.

"Ensign?" I ask, not really understanding what I'm saying.

"We'd like to give you a medical exam, sir." Rigney says.

I nod, switch to a seated position next to the body, and permit the Ensign to wave his tricorder over me. He frowns at the readings; I'd be concerned if I wasn't more interested in watching the other security officers carefully lift Wirchenko's body and place it into a blue-and white Starfleet bodybag, which they follow with a sixty second salute. The last vestiges of our military heritage are our finest.

I struggle to my feet and join them in the act. "You can transport him back to the ship, now," I inform Ensign Rigney when the salute's over. "Ask Mr. Lars to arrange for the memorial. I'll be the one to inform his family."

"Aye, Captain," Rigney affirms. "And sir?"

"Ensign?"

"The tricorder has found signs of recent telepathically induced trauma," the security officer informs me. "We need to get you back to *Galatea*, ASAP, sir."



“With all due respect. Ensign, I’ll let Dr. Latham to make that diagnosis.” I pull out my communicator - it still takes an effort. “*Galatea*, you can beam me over to the landing party.”

With the standard *ayesir*, I feel my molecules scramble as I’m transmitted to a new location like a song played in substance. When the tune’s over, I find myself looking at an almost identical icescape, except this time there are no corpses, only friends. “Good to see you again, Captain,” Latham tells me, advancing with a medical tricorder in hand. “Now hold still.”

“There’s no need for that now,” I ward him away with an outstretched hand. “We’ll do it in Sickbay.” I abruptly turn to Hazard. “The mission’s over, Commander. I’m not losing anyone else. The planet’s dying, and I can’t stop the sun from shrinking. It’s time for me to do what everyone told me to do at the start of this thing. I’m letting go. Of the Crysian, *and* the Captain. They’re all dead, let them rest.”

“You can’t do that, Captain,” Latham snaps, a statement that’s as shocking to me as a slap to the face. Latham was the one who practically knocked himself out persuading me to let go of my emotional baggage. “You’re too close, Kenneth. You give up now, and you’ll spend the rest of your life regretting this decision.”

“I’ll spend the rest of my life regretting the look in Wirchenko’s dead eyes,” I reply. “The mission’s cancelled. It’s not like Starfleet ever took it seriously. It’s about time I got the message. Everyone’s told me I was crazy. Well, they were right.”

“Captain, am I correct in speculating that this decision is based solely on emotion?” T’Doroth asks. “Because logic strongly suggests that the Crysian is *not* dead, and that in fact it is highly probable she was responsible for your rescue.”

I move to object, but Hazard holds up his hand to silence everyone, since they seem to be taking numbers to get in a shot at me. “Captain, let’s take a walk.”

Hazard, who was probably voted “most likely to chew out his Captain” at the Academy, is undoubtedly going to give me the lecture of a lifetime, but he can hardly do worse to me than what I’m experiencing at the moment. I don a cold weather jacket and we begin to walk out of the camp. We’ve taken about fifty big steps when Hazard begins to talk, spitting words through misty breaths.

“Your command’s a joke,” he says, “but you know that, don’t you?”

“I’m not laughing right now,” I reply.

“I know. You’ve been blooded for the first time,” Ivan says, his voice more observant than sympathetic. “Worse, you were blooded without taking the command training that was supposed to prepare you for this day.”

“I know the training,” I reply. “Greg lost plenty of friends, and I remember how he felt about every one of them. And Pratt also took the training. I remember it well.”

“The shortcuts don’t always work.” Ivan says, stopping in his tracks. “Kenneth, I hope you now understand why I was as mad as hell when you took the comm.”

“Well, you were right to be mad.” I admit. “You were infinitely more qualified than me.”

“Kenneth, I didn’t bring you out here to talk about me, or our past conflicts.” Hazard says.

“Cut the warp drive, Ivan, and give it your best shot. Why *did* you bring me here?”

Ivan inhales sharply. “It’s about the decision you’ve got to make. I guess the real question is: Do you want to be a *real* Captain, or do you want to crawl into a shell and do nothing except complain about yourself?”

“That’s an odd question coming from you,” I reply. “Given that’s as good a description of the last three years of *your* life as any I’ve heard.”

"Ain't it though?" Hazard replies, smiling slightly as he begins to walk again. "Most people think of a Captain as an individual, the best individual we've got. But he isn't. A Captain isn't a man, he's the entire damn ship. You understand?"

"Keep going," I tell him.

"People die, systems malfunction; and the Captain upgrades or replaces them if he can, and then he moves on with the mission without giving the loss a second thought. It's a horrible, callous way to live, and there's no shame if you don't want to live that way. But it's the only way a starship can run, especially in wartime. A Captain must know when he needs to be a callous bastard and have the inner fortitude to be one."

"So you're really asking me if I'm serious about command."

"People have faith in you, Kenneth." Hazard replies. "Wirchenko sure the hell did. He was a great kid – smart too. And the rest of the security personnel still have a lot of faith in you." Hazard says. *At least until the shock wears off.* "There's no shame in failing. But there is a heckuva lot of shame in disappointing the people who've placed their faith in you because you can't cope with one moment of pain."

He's right, but I don't know if I've got that kind of strength in me. And then there are other factors. "What about you Ivan?" I ask bluntly. "Do you have faith in me?"

Hazard's face becomes a mask of seriousness. "Well, I like you as much as I've liked anyone I've met in the last three years. You work like a devil, your engineering skill is amazing, you've got great intuition, and when you're confident, you're amazing to watch. But there something's missing." He emphasizes his point with a shake of his head. "I was going to answer your question with a 'no', but the more I think about it, the more it has to be 'I don't know'."

"Me neither." I admit, then turn to something I've been meaning to ask since I first saw Wirchenko's face. "Ivan, do you want me to give you the Comm?"

Hazard stops again. "Damn." He puffs hard and his chilly breath resembles a horse's snort on a freezing day. "That wasn't the reason I brought you out here, Captain."

"I know."

"Ask me again in twenty-four hours," Hazard gives me a considered answer after a long silence. "And if you don't feel like it, I'll pry you out of the comm chair with my own bare hands and throw you back into Engineering where you'll be safe and secure and happy. But whatever you decide, I'll support you."

"That's the First Officer's duty?"

"And a friend's." Ivan smiles.

I nod to acknowledge the bond. "Ivan, in my shoes, would you stay with the mission?" Hazard is reluctant to answer the question, but I finally stare an answer out of him.

"Maybe not on *this* mission, I've never been sold on it," he admits. "But if I believed in this as passionately as you do... well, there isn't a tractor beam in the galaxy that'd be powerful enough to pull me loose."

I swallow hard. "I think you should be a Captain, Ivan." I observe.

"Me too," Hazard replies. I begin to walk back to camp, but Hazard stops me. "One last thing to consider, Kenneth. You don't honor people who have given their lives by pulling out at the first sign of trouble. I think you'd be honoring Wirchenko by seeing the mission through."

"Other people could die." I say.

“Other people can always die.” Hazard replies, “It doesn’t mean you take foolish risks, but you have to realize there’s no bunker against the universe. And some risks have to be taken. A good Captain must be a gambler.”

“Sounds like we should do poker as well as judo,” I reply.

“Judo *is* poker. Poker with muscles,” Hazard smiles, and we begin walking back to the camp. Mercifully, Hazard doesn’t make any jokes about playing with a stacked deck. Ivan sometimes shares Roger Price’s ego-driven sense of humor, but fortunately he doesn’t share Roger’s psychoses or his penchant for betrayal. Although I always found myself curiously stronger when I was dealing with Roger; part of it is the traditional Starfleet rivalry with freighter captains, the other part was having to deal with Roger’s contacts - he who shows weakness to the *Tal Shiar* is liable to die a slow, painful death. Roger always kept me on my toes, but Ivan pushes every button of insecurity I’ve got.

We take long, measured steps. Even the gravitic compensators can’t entirely keep our steps normal in a gravity as weak as the Wash’s, so it doesn’t take us long to get a good ways from camp - we do a half-klick in about three minutes. “There’s one good thing about this place. It puts a real bounce in your step,” Ivan jokes.

“But the only song in my heart is mourning,” I reply. “Poor Wirchenko.”

“A big loss,” Hazard acknowledges. “By the way, after you write the letter to his folks, come to my quarters. We’ll drink to him.”

“I - I don’t drink alcohol, Ivan.”

“Then we’ll find something suitable for the occasion,” Hazard promises as we walk into camp. “No man should go to his grave without one good toast.”

The others advance to greet us in a semi-circle. “Well,” Latham tells me, hand on his tricorder, getting directly to the point. “Do you still intend to abandon the mission? Or has Mr. Hazard managed to talk some sense into you?”

“He has,” I point at Ivan. “It’s okay. I’m going to make contact with the Crysian.”

“Captain?” T’Doroth notes. “I still believe you have already done so. We did not rescue you from the creature that killed Ensign Wirchenko. *Galatea* detected you several meters below the surface of the ocean, then you vanished for approximately twenty-eight seconds, then you and Ensign Wirchenko reappeared on the ice several kilometers from your original position.”

“Interesting,” I say. “I don’t remember anything about those twenty-eight seconds...”

“Logic would suggest that the Crysian was responsible.” T’Doroth adds.

“Sorry, I don’t remember a thing,” I repeat. “Sometimes when I make contact with the Crysian I remember, other times I don’t. The more intense the contact, the more it’s likely to be buried in the subconscious.”

“Captain, what was said in those twenty-seven seconds could be critical,” T’Doroth interrupts. She looks at Latham for a minute, then turns to me. “I volunteer to mind meld with you and retrieve it.”

“Absolutely not!” Hazard interrupts. “I’ve read about the Vulcans who tried to mind meld with the guy. There’s no way you can risk it, Lieutenant. Right Doc?”

But Latham says nothing. “With all due respect Commander, the choice is mine,” T’Doroth states. “Those attempts occurred before iotropomine was developed; I should be safe. And if the Crysian did make contact with the Captain, this is the best way to determine her current mental state.”

“It takes some time to lower my natural defenses.” I say. Given how strongly I’m shielded against telepathy...

“We do need the information to achieve the mission, Commander,” Dr. Latham says, offering surprising, unqualified support for the Vulcan’s plan. “And Lieutenant T’Doroth knows the risks.”

I remember what Ivan told me about the necessity of putting my subordinates’ lives at risk, and can see the uncontestable logic in T’Doroth’s statement. I don’t like it, but I can see it. “I will agree to do it, however...” and I turn to Latham. “Something’s changed in the telepathy field. It’s a lot stronger.”

Latham scans me, then links the results into the ship’s main computer. “According to the computer, your iotropomine threshold has been drastically reduced. Now, the drug’s only effective for between forty and fifty seconds. I would recommend no greater than thirty seconds of contact, T’Doroth.”

“Wait a minute!” Ivan shouts. “Can you even meld when you’re taking a neurochemical blocker? I know enough about telepathy and pharmacology to know it won’t be trivial. Let’s look at our options a little more...”

“You have a point, Commander.” T’Doroth interrupts me, and suddenly she touches me. We both give a half-orgasmic gasp, and I find myself drawn to the look in her eyes. She should be spasming and thrashing wildly, like every Vulcan who’s touched me since the last time I came to the Wash, but this time she manages to keep a piece of her mind intact as we descend into the meld...

My mind to your mind. My thoughts to your thoughts.

***I did not wish you to see me like this.***

Death?

***A cold thing, unguessed cruelty. Now I know why you wish to ward the others from the cooling of the sun.***

Wirchenko?

***So cold, my love, so cold.***

I’d freeze a star to save your life, but I don’t know if I can set one aflame.

***You are fire enough for the moment. If only it were longer.***

You saved me?

***I cannot be a phoenix, my Kenneth, but perhaps you can.***

“T’Doroth!” I shout, breaking the meld. The weapons officer is curled up in a half-fetal ball, a feral sneer on her Vulcan face.

“She...” T’Doroth growls like a man half-possessed by a wolf, completely losing control of her emotions. “She is in agony. Confused! Without hope! Only love remains, a love turned to pain! She could not bear to know you were waiting for her to die!”

“So that’s why she visited me and not you,” I hear Francis mutter under his breath.

“She mourns the death of everyone you loved,” T’Doroth says. “Love! That burning season that is like a knife to our souls, twisting as it rips, gutting our logic!”

“Doctor!” I turn to Latham. “Do something for her!” Tell me this isn’t permanent. Please. But Latham does nothing except stand there with a concerned look on his face, thumbing his tricorder.

It's T'Doroth who makes the next move. She walks over to me - no one tries to stop her, not even Hazard - then puts her arms around me without suffering further spasms. "From the moment I met you on *The Lasting Peace*, I have loved you, Kenneth Said. For your courage, and for your gaze, that gentle fire that reminded me of the men of Vulcan when the *plak tow* fades. A look that I hope to see on the face of my own mate when his fire burns..."

And then T'Doroth kisses me. I don't resist it at all, I hold her tightly, and share her passion for at least a minute. It's surprising how much I'm enjoying this, this happy unguessed dream. The meld lingers, we become more consumed by each other with each passing moment, and still we kiss even when our breath is spent. Finally she opens her eyes, I can see the Vulcan hardness return.

"Forgive me, Captain..." T'Doroth gasps. "It was... the influence of the meld... I did not guess your mind would be..."

"Of course," I smile, still holding her, unconsciously rubbing her back. "She's very frightened, and she's still a god compared to us..." T'Doroth looks at me with increased annoyance, and I let go of the hold and look down, red-faced. "She has very powerful emotions..."

"The Crysian is not dead, but she *has* undergone a radical change," T'Doroth explains. "She has utilized her telepathic control over the psibrine to collect energy for her, otherwise she'd be as dead as she thought she was going to be when she visited Mr. Gable. But she will not last much longer."

"Damn." I gasp.

"The energy she collects from the psibrine is the only thing keeping her alive, and they are dying from the cold. She is a colony creature who relies on telepathy to hold the colony together, while the colony sustains her intelligence. It is only a matter of weeks before she passes the point where the colony will begin to break apart, then she will become an animal, and then she will finally die. Weeks, perhaps even days."

"No..." I half-sob. I suppose the news shouldn't come as a surprise, but after everything that's happened today, can anyone blame me if I give in - for a moment - to an extreme emotion?

"Kenneth!" Francis interjects, prodding my back with a poke of his right hand.

I ignore him (as I do too often). "The Wash is too big for us to move to a new orbit..." I brainstorm, speculating on ways to save her life.

"Kenneth!" Francis shouts.

"Maybe we can launch a shuttle into orbit and use its sensor array to collect solar radiation, then concentrate them on the planet. Supplement its diet."

"Oh Kenneth..."

I can't think of any other ideas so I turn and face him, annoyed that he's interrupted my train of thought. "What?" I say, snapping at him harder than a Klingon biting a scone.

"First," Gable says, "I was in a mind meld with you for an hour, and you've never kissed me like that."

"Francis!" I object. Allah, will that man never change? "Barring intervention from a higher being, we're never going to..." No, I shouldn't even be dignifying the jibe with an answer. I give a very visible sigh. "Just get to the point, okay?"

Gable smiles evilly in response, that annoying little... theoretician. "Second, me and Dr. Latham have come up with a bit of a crazy idea."

"Spit it out." I request. The Lieutenant Commander straightens himself and puts his hand on my shoulder, smiling broadly. He reminds me of a drunken lieutenant who makes an obviously dubious pitch at a cocktail party but still expects it to work out.

"How would you like to take on a *very* special passenger for a trip aboard *Galatea*?" he asks.

## **Interlude:**

### ***Three Years Ago, Spring 2292, Babel***

”And when the D7 came barreling up behind us... and I mean it was so tight on our six o’clock that we could have used it as a cuckoo clock...”

“That’s nice, Gary,” Greg Jensen answered, looking around the conference room for a chronometer, or anything that might distract him.

“...and that’s why you don’t blindly rush into a Jovian’s magnetic field, you stupid Klingon son of a bitch!” Captain Graham Parker laughed and continued to tell his story as if he had Greg Jensen’s complete focus and attention. “Clever move, huh?”

“Sure,” Jensen replied, flashing him a smile. “Truly inspired, Parker.” He wasn’t sure what *Briar Rose’s* Captain had done that was so clever, but nine times out of ten, when someone asks for feedback, they’ll be satisfied with a pat on the back by an idiot. Especially when they’re on their fifth round of Spican brandy. Later that evening, when he returned to his quarters, Greg Jensen would be saying a hundred Gwaiian prayers of joy that he wasn’t being billoted with Parker for the duration of the conference. He’d be surprised if one of the Admirals didn’t put him on report.

“And I told him that. I said ‘you blood-wine soaked stupid Klingon bastard, if every Commander was as cosmically stupid as you, this War would’ve been over three years ago.’” Parker half-gurgled his anecdote. “I said that, and it’s even recorded in the log!”

“I feel really safe knowing you’re out there facing the Klingons.” Jensen responded. “If more Captains were like you... this would be a *real* war.”

Greg Jensen had learned the fine of art of irony at the Academy. The remark wasn’t meant as a compliment, and Graham Parker would’ve realized that if (at the moment) he thought the major goal of the war was something other than protecting the right to consume copious quantities of Romulan ale. “Riiight...” Parker replied, flashing his party-smile. Jensen nodded, tittered some vacuous affirmation, and breathed a sigh of relief as soon as he saw Parker intercept a Commander and began to tell him the same story.

“Let me guess,” Dalta Theyvo brushed Greg Jensen and took him aside. “Using the magnetic field of Grayson VI to conceal mine deployment.”

“You must’ve heard the story when he was more coherent.” Jensen replied. “I hate parties. They remind me too much of the bad parts of the Academy.”

“A word of circumspection, my young Captain. Don’t be so distracted by your discomfort, and keep your filters up,” the Grazerite Admiral advised. One word in a hundred that’s spoken here is gold, one word in ten thousand is platinum – but that’s more than these people would normally give you.”

“And the rest gets flushed down the toilet after you take a dump.” Jensen replied. “I’ll keep your advice in mind, Admiral. Now if you’ll excuse me... once more into the breach...”

“Don’t forget they’re not Klingons...” Dalta Theyvo added, referring to the people from the conference.

“I know they’re not...” Greg Jensen replied. “But all things considered, I’d rather be on Strahkeer, performing a suicide mission.”

“As would any sane Starfleet officer...” Dalta Theyvo acknowledged, then bowed her head to greet Admiral Thursk, a man who had the distinction being the youngest Admiral in Starfleet, and who would undoubtedly engage in her in a weighty conversation on the disposition of his grandchildren. “Good evening, Admiral...”

Greg Jensen nodded and discretely withdrew from the conversation; he had been to diplomatic conferences before, but not many, and never as a Captain. War did not afford him the luxury of honing the art of the diplomatic skirmish. He scanned the room: amid a swarm of various Federation types, there was a party of a dozen Gorns, a half-dozen Mirak, and two Hydrans sitting mournfully in glass cases. Most of the aliens wanted to discuss politics; the Feds, who were weary from both the long war and the long diplomatic conference, wanted to talk about anything *but* the war.

“Excuse me?” An inquisitive Hydran Captain nudged Jensen. The three legged methane breathers were a close ally of the Federation in the war – if the borders were contiguous, most people figured they’d be Federation members. “Are the rumors true? Are you the son of a god?”

“No, the only god I know in Starfleet is Scott Pallamas,” Jensen replied with a smile. “We look a lot alike, but I can’t throw thunderbolts out of my hands. I’m Greg Jensen.”

“I... Hruz-Inm’n,” the Hydran stated, pointing one of his limbs at the Mirak. “I’m afraid I have succumbed to the vice of rumors. May I ask you about another one?”

“Certainly.”

“Are you the Starfleet duelist I heard the Gorn talking about.”

“Duelist?” Jensen wondered.

“Yes, the one who slew three Klingon Dahar masters in Bat’leth duels. That *is* you, is it not?”

Jensen suddenly adjusted his collar. “I can’t talk about mission specifics,” he told the Hydran; the answer was (as it always is with good diplomacy) both blunt and evasive.

“Well...” Hruz-Inm’n mused. “If you were a god, *and* you were capable of besting the finest Klingon warriors in personal combat, I would put up a shrine to you on my ship. It would be a way to honor our Federation allies.”

“No, no shrine for me.” Greg Jensen answered, trying not to show how much the idea horrified him. Diplomacy did demand accommodation. “I suppose I could try to get you some pictures of Scott – he was a junior during my senior year at the Academy...” Palamos, son of a Starfleet Officer and an entity who claimed to be the god Apollo, had been one of the few people



that Jensen had allowed to enter his inner circle. “I can even get you one of him wearing a toga, if you need him wearing godly raiment...”

Now *that* had been a party I enjoyed, he added to himself.

“That would be much appreciated...” Hruz chirped, then he waved an appendage at a Mirak to change the subject. “Excitable creatures, aren’t they?”

Jensen glanced at the Mirak and discovered that the situation was starting to get ugly. A security team from *USS Regency* had separated them from the bulk of the diplomats, but the great wolf-cats, who looked both drunk and bored, had made their way around them and were arguing with a pair of Tellerite envoys, who were openly complaining about their smell.

“Hasn’t anyone ever told them that smell is the one sense that should never be invoked?” A middle aged man, in a doctor’s formal dress uniform, who wore Commander’s pips and a chestful of service ribbons approached them. “You’re Jensen, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” Jensen approached the stranger with a laconic attitude.

“Dr. James Latham, Chief Surgeon, *USS Regency*,” Latham introduced himself. He had heard many stories of Greg Jensen – he had been featured in many briefings – and had to confess to a certain curiosity about meeting him in the flesh. “You *do* know why they call them Tellarites?” he whispered. “Because no matter what you *tell* them, they’re always *right*.”

Latham laughed, and even Jensen chuckled and nodded. “I do not understand the joke,” Hruz replied.

“Commander...” the Captain said, observing the argument intensify. “Inject me with 5 ccs of *tindarine*.”

“Pardon?” Latham wondered. *Tindarine* was a common (and very powerful) sedative – it’d put Jensen to sleep in seconds.

“Do it, Doctor,” Jensen replied. “That’s an order.” He pointed to the palm of the hand, and that’s where Latham quickly dispensed a dose of *tindarine* into the Captain. Jensen nodded, took the edge of his Starfleet badge, and sliced a razor thin cut along his knuckles. In the meantime, security was having words with the Mirak Ambassador, but it looked like he was too drunk to care. A troika of security officers was heading in the direction of the Tellarites, but it would take them a few seconds to reach him.

“I understand the reason the Mirak bray at night is because they’re frightened of the Lyrans!” the Tellarite laughed.

*Why do we even let them into the conference?* Latham thought. Predictably, all hell broke loose. The biggest and meanest of the Mirak, a two and a half meter tall gold-furred male named “Claw Who Aims Warfire”, suddenly grabbed the Tellarite, screamed something unintelligible (the translators guessed that it had something to do with “vomit”) and began to shred him. The Tellarite squealed when the first blow struck him, but passed out before the second landed. But the berserk Mirak did not relent.

“Let’s make this personal,” Greg Jensen said, shaking his head at coming to the rescue of a creature who was obnoxious as the Tellarite. He took a deep breath, grabbed the Mirak by the arm and yanked as hard as he could. It would have dislocated a human’s shoulder, but the Mirak barely noticed him. Greg followed up being punching his huge opponent in the back of his head, a blow that was hard enough to start the fight in earnest.

The Mirak sliced Jensen in the stomach, but the Captain ignored it, and, bobbing and weaving like a boxer – an action that widened the circle of combat, which Jensen hoped would give security an opening to use their phasers if he fell – he delivered uppercut after uppercut to the

Mirak's jaw and throat. The ribs were a more accessible, tempting target, but they were also heavily reinforced. Claw Who Aims Warfire lunged, only to receive a strong right hook in his mouth. He snapped at the hand, and received a second fist to the lip for his trouble. Jensen's blows were like lightning, and when he scored a solid blow, it made a hellish cracking sound, the sound of cracking bone. No one could tell – yet – whether it was made by the Mirak or Jensen's knuckles.

Fifteen seconds into the fight, Claw Who Aims Warfire landed a solid strike that gouged a deep gash from Jensen's shoulder to his chest, but then he was overwhelmed by a wave of vertigo, his leg buckled, he fell to one knee, which put him at an equal height as his opponent. Jensen quickly maneuvered himself behind the Mirak, caught him a chokehold, and delivered repeated sharp blows to the Mirak's temple. After ten seconds, even the Mirak couldn't stand the punishment. Jensen let him drop to the floor, then he turned to the Tellarites.

"You owe me your life," Jensen rasped. "You can repay that debt by making a formal apology, then resigning from the diplomatic service. A Federation diplomat ought to know better." He turned to the Mirak ambassador, cradling his broken hand, and raised his head and turned it slightly to expose his throat (which, to the Mirak, was a gesture of trust and honor) then he gave a stiff bow and left the hall, looking for a small antechamber to examine his wounds. Latham followed him.

"They won't realize that he was put down by the drug as well as your right uppercut," Latham said as he treated the hand. Delivering the drug via blood contact with the Mirak's soft mouth – a clever idea, though the strapping Captain could've lost a hand.

"That's one of the reasons I choose it." Jensen replied, wincing in pain.

"I take it your Gwaiian physiology has a high tolerance level for tindarine," Latham noted.

The young Captain nodded. "The drug was no more to me than a local anaesthetic. Though the hand still hurts like a Rigilian lullaby," he added, referring to the torture technique and not the song.

"And were your victories over the Klingons also cheats?" Latham asked. It was an issue of curiosity, not necessity.

"Two of them were. I sent in a small prime team to drug their bloodwine before the first fight, and as for the second one... well, he wasn't a real Dahar master. When we found out who the Klingon commander was going to be, we sent some phony messages to the garrison that built up his reputation. We knew the man was a braggart, so he accepted the title and then I came in, challenged him, and beat him." Jensen admitted. "We needed to break the Klingons' spirits. I need to show them that this whole 'one Klingon soldier is worth fifty Feds' is just another load of bilge... Ow!"

Latham continued treating the wounds. "That was quite the berserker look on your face during the fight!" he remarked. Jensen shook his head.

"I wasn't berserk," he informed the doctor. "If I had been, either everyone in that room would be dead, or somebody'd have to fire their phaser at its maximum setting and kill me. I take a very strict drug regimen to make sure I don't lose control, and even with that, Starfleet Intelligence always keeps at least one set of eyes on me at all times." He sighed. "I imagine they'll stick two more people on me now."

Latham tore a cloth from the Captain's tattered uniform and used it to wrap around the restored hand – bracing the reconstructed member certainly wouldn't hurt. "I imagine every

admiral in that room's going to want to talk with you. Whether they'll promote you or kick you out, I don't know, but..."

"I won't be demoted," Jensen said. "And if I am, I will crawl over a dozen Mirak, Klingons, or whoever, to get back into my chair." He looked at a party of Starfleet Security dragging the Mirak out of the room and smiled. "I don't accept defeat, Doctor. It's not the Starfleet Way. The Captains I most admired went out of their way to cheat even death. Why should I be any different?"

### III: Reopening Wounds

“Captain’s Log, Stardate 8238.1,” I say as I settle into the bridge chair. After a day or so in the cold, crystalline air of the dying Wash, the bridge of *USS Galatea’s* feels as comfortable as a log cabin with a Franklin stove. “The senior staff has unanimously agreed to transfer the Crysian aboard ship, provided we first get her permission. We’re using low yield phaser bursts to melt the ice around her location and supplement her lost energy reserves; sensors indicate that this is having a positive effect.”

*Energy Reserves. Sensors indicate.* Do all Captains sound like such... Herberts?

I continue the entry. “We’ve already dislodged our shuttlecraft and knocked out the walls into the adjoining cargo bays to provide additional space for her.” *Her.* Not “beloved”, or “the most precious creature in the universe”, just “her”. Hopefully that sounds professional. “In a few hours, I will attempt to mentally contact her and explain our plan. In the meantime, I’ve got a very unpleasant duty to perform.”

“Captain,” Lars calls out when I finish the log. He’s already changed into his formal dress uniform, red with gold trim and a chestful of ribbons that’s rivaled only by the quilt that Greg displayed on formal occasions. “Starfleet says they’re trying to locate an ecosystem suitable for transplanting the Crysian. And *USS Calypso* has already been diverted to the system; they’ll arrive in six days with some of the best marine biologists in the Federation.”

“Only six days?” I wonder. “I keep forgetting how good those new engine upgrades are on the *Oberth* refits.”

“I know.” Lars notes. “Oh. And the fleet’s driven off those ISC ships that were seen here recently,” Lars reports. “We hope.”

“They’ll be back,” I say. “The price of peace is eternal interference.” The bridge doors open, revealing the large, square-jawed figure of Ensign Brandon Antonio “Tony” Burke, a wall of red and gold muscle in his dress uniform. “Ah, Ensign, you wanted to see me?”

“Yes sir,” Burke says. “I was told you wanted me to give the eulogy at Ensign Wirchenko’s funeral.”

“You have a problem with that?” I ask.

“Yes sir,” Burke tells me, but stands there in a very uncomfortable silence. If the circumstances weren’t so grave, it’d be funny. I look at him and wait for an answer that isn’t coming. The palms of his hands wipe the sweat onto the back of his thighs.

“Well, what’s the problem?”

“Uh... Captain... if I say it, I might lose your respect...”

I close my eyes briefly and fight the impulse to sigh. “Just say it, Mr. Burke.”

“Okay. It’s Wirchenko. You’re asking me to deliver a eulogy for someone I spent years loathing,” Burke says. “Every time our paths crossed, he’d say something that made me wanted to kick in his teeth. He was obnoxious, immature, an overgrown mountain-boy who challenged me at every opportunity and sulked whenever I kicked his tail.”

“I see...”

“And people liked the guy! They always took his side! They made excuses for him! Every time something happened between us, I always came out of it looking like the bad guy.”

“Mr. Burke,” I say. “You knew Wirchenko longer than anyone here. You saw him in action more than anyone else on *Galatea*. Consider this to be a tactical exercise – put aside your rivalry, identify the positive qualities of your old opponent, and give an honest eulogy that will leave everyone in the room in tears.”

“Mr. Burke,” Lars adds. “Honor your brother, and the uniform he wore.”

“Yes sir,” Burke says, and he does a precise military turn and heads back to the turbolift.

“He’s still got some growing up to do.” Lars remarks.

“As do we all.” I add, then pivot to face the security chief directly. He’s still looking at the turbolift with an intense stare through the thick brush of Efrosian eyebrows. “Do you think I’m making a mistake? Exploiting a funeral just to test Mr. Burke?”

“I thought it was the best idea you’ve had since you came aboard ship.” Lars replies.

“I’d better go get changed,” I say, yawning as I get to my feet. It’s amazing how little sleep I’ve had in the last few days.

“Deck 7,” I say, as I hold down the turbolift shaft. I feel the smooth acceleration of the lift take me to my deck. After a brief trip through *Galatea*’s, the doors open - and I find T’Doroth waiting there.

“Hi...” I say, a little embarrassed.

“Captain,” T’Doroth acknowledges, carefully walking past me.

I return to my quarters to discover my roommate lounging on his bed in his usual state of dress. I can’t complain too much – it is his scheduled “meditation time”. Dido’s lying on my bed, sleeping as she usually does most of the day.

“Well...” Francis smiles as I start to change into my dress greens.

“It’s far from well, I’ve got a funeral to attend,” I say, and I turn around to face him. “By the way, thanks for the suggestion about converting the shuttlebay. I don’t always thank you the way I should – especially when you go out of your way to annoy me – but I do appreciate you.”

“Any time.” Francis replies, and he leans back slightly. “Now about T’Doroth...”

“What about her?”

Francis laughs and teases me with a whistle.

“Haven’t you ever seen *Casablanca*?” I shrug, referring to a classic work of 20th Century human cinema. “A kiss is just a kiss.”

“I think the line goes: ‘*a kiss is still a kiss*,’” Francis corrects, using his datapad to connect with the ship’s computer. “And only a puckhead like *you* would downplay one of the great love stories of history so he can avoid the consequences of his one moment of unfettered passion.”

“You must be starved for entertainment,” I reply. “Either that, or you’re trying to drive me over the edge.”

“Ever the martyr, Kenneth. One day they may even found a religion about you,” Francis’s chuckle is purely vindictive. “Well, if my taunts don’t move that sexually-arrested soul of yours, consider this. What T’Doroth said wasn’t about the Crysian, it was about herself. *Her* experiences. *She* is interested in *you*, at least on a subconscious level.” He leans forward and grins. “And it’s a meld. Melds are two-way streets. What about you, Kenneth?”

“I’m got a funeral to attend...” I say, getting up to leave.

But Francis gets up and blocks the door. I can feel the sense of self-satisfaction in his mind. “Oh, grow up...” I sneer.

“You mean, act more like an adult?” Francis says through a smug mockery of a smile.

“What do you think I meant?”

“I was wondering if your idea of adulthood includes... facing your true feelings and not trivializing them.” Dammit, I hate it when he actually has a legitimate point to make.

“No.” I say. “I meant stop grinning like a demon and *enjoying* it when other people are in pain.”

Francis puts his hand on my shoulder, the big brother routine that he enjoys so much. “Kenneth Said, only *you* can take a wonderful emotion like love and turn it into a problem.”

“It’s a gift,” I retort, slipping past his guard. “Now let me get to my funeral, okay?”

Francis may be more tenacious than the Tal Shiar, but somehow I manage to escape from his clutches, storm through the door, and head down to the rec room (which has been converted into a makeshift chapel for the service). Some sort of 21st Century Ukranian neo-Classical dirge is playing. Several officers in formal dress are standing around the door, including Hazard.

“Security is holding a private service first,” my first officer explains. “I don’t think they’d mind if you go in...”

“No, I’ll hold back.” I reply. I need to figure out what to say.

“By the way,” Hazard leans over and smiles slightly. “What’s going on between you and T’Doroth?”

It’s a good thing I don’t have a stick in my hands because if I did I’d hit him with it. But mercifully, the private service finishes, the doors open, and a dozen redshirts, standing at attention on the aisles, phaser rifles raised in the air. They look like a regiment of ancient British rifles, true soldiers. Wirchenko’s coffin is already sitting in the center of the room, open for all to see.

I take the podium, and wait for the rest of the crew (about thirty people will be attending). The dress uniform begins to itch, and it kills me that I have to ignore it. One of the good things about spending hours by yourself in Jeffries’ Tubes was that when you had an itch, you could scratch it. Lars comes over to me and we exchange comments on the letter I sent to Wirchenko’s parents. He also, unfortunately, asks me about T’Doroth.

If Wirchenko rises out of his coffin and asks me about T’Doroth, I’m going to walk into an airlock and throw the switch.

“Welcome,” I clear my throat to address the assembly, a process I have to repeat several times. “We’re here to honor the memory of Nikolas Gregory Wirchenko. One of the great lessons that space teaches us is how small we really are, and brief our lives are, but ‘small’ and ‘brief’ don’t mean ‘unimportant’, because ‘importance’ is a matter of personal judgment. From where I stand, the life of Ensign Wirchenko was a very important thing.” I wince, struggling against the tears.

And that’s my contribution to the funeral. The bulk of the service is given to Ensign Burke, who tells a funny story about he and Wirchenko first met when they were first year cadets at the Academy – he found Wirchenko in bed with his girlfriend, a apocalyptic infidelity which began their feud and inspired a eulogy that’s laced with honest irony.

“We meant a lot to each other – mostly a lot of pain: swollen lips, bruises, and worse. I wouldn’t be as good at taking a punch if it weren’t for Wirchenko. I didn’t like him, he didn’t like me, but boy, did we ever respect each other’s fists, and I suppose that’s as high a compliment as you can pay a fellow security officer.”

“In the last day or so, I’ve tried to extract things from the man’s life and see if there’s anything I can learn from it that’ll make me a better person. Unfortunately I’ve come to the conclusion that life doesn’t work that way, at least not for me.” He stops and composes himself, as does most of the gathering. “Some people look to others for heroic inspiration, but the truth is we’re only people, and our lives are just lives, and rather than ascribe some deep meaning to them, we should honor them for what they are – the struggle of highly flawed individuals to survive and even build something in a universe that’s built for decay.

“Wirchenko, I’m not going to miss you very much. But I’m not going to forget you either, and I will think of you with respect. We competed a lot in life, and now I’ve got to compete against your memory, so I guess you threw the last punch, you son of a bitch. Bye, Ensign, and warp speed to Heaven, my friend.”

And that’s pretty much the funeral, at least for me. There’s a delay with the photon launcher, so we’re forced to wait and chat, conversations I don’t remember clearly. All the officers want to tell me their stories about Wirchenko – next to Lars, he was the most liked officer in the department – and I should be trying harder to remember them. Anecdotes are the best revenge.

I can’t help but be drawn to the look on Wirchenko’s face, and I keep thinking... well, you know. I wish it were more of a recrimination. If anybody’s blaming me for his death, no one’s calling me on it, and I wish someone would. The face itself is more serene than I imagined, as if Wirchenko’s struggling in death to reassure me. But how can I *not* feel responsible, and how can my position aboard ship *not* have been tainted by what happened to him? Why the hell is everyone being so nice to me? The only person who seems as depressed as I am is Burke, so we naturally seek out each other’s company. We barely trade words, but we don’t move far away from each other and there’s a lot of eye contact.

Eventually, the torpedo bay is ready (another charming incident in the life of *USS Malfunction*) and Hazard finally breaks up the gathering for the final duty. The casket is closed, a Federation and a White Russian flag is draped over it (his dad’s a diplomat) and four pallbearers carry it through the ship to photon controls. I speak the familiar verse in the Christian book about the sea giving up their dead, then we fire Wirchenko into the Wash. It splashes down somewhere in the ocean of its Southern Hemisphere – the cooling of the Monoceron sun will ensure that this man, this son of winter, will be encased in ice forever. And that’s how we say good-bye. I hold

myself together long enough to get back to my quarters, where Francis and Dido greet me, and I suffer a breakdown that's beyond the fondest dreams of my old Romulan torturers.

Now we're in a holding pattern around the Wash, waiting for *Calypso* to arrive. I do send survey teams down to inspect the planet, but keep them well away from the landing area – it'll provide additional data for the environmental team. Every time I send one down, I gnash my teeth at the thought of them.

Life has actually found a sort of normalcy on *Galatea*, a normalcy that's rather boring until we wait for the specialists' recommendations on how to transport the Crysian and create a stable ecosystem for transport. Since my psionic field intensified, judo's out of the question, so most of my time is spent as a spectator, watching Hazard being thrown around by Lars, helping Gbeji try to solve the PPD problem, seeing Latham and Kollo continue to trade curious glances.

On the fourth night after Burke's funeral, I have a dream of transporting down to the surface of the planet. There's the vague recollection of a scuffle with Francis, and some shouts and the sound of Dido barking (don't you hate those early parts of a dream that flow past your memory like seawater, leaving behind a briny, slightly slimy feeling) and then I appear on the planet: bare-chested and standing on ice and not feeling the cold in the least. As before, there's virtually no breeze. The sun is hitting the ice surface at odd angles, diffracting into seven prismatic shafts, a rainbow I can walk on.

"I'm here," I'm talking to the vast coldscape, feeling the sea gently rocking beneath the ice, the planet's breath. "Let's begin."

The ice rocks, almost toppling me to my feet. A solid spear of black-silver living metal juts through the ice about twenty meters from me, then a second, then a third. It's like a cage that rises out of the ground like a great mouth, and in seconds I'm swallowed. But although I find the world around me is plunging into a blackness that's discomfiting even to someone who's used to looking at interstellar space, I'm not afraid.

"Beloved," I say, as I begin to feel her presence. The swarm of spears – the host of her body – is everywhere around me, and I can feel various parts of my mind start to come alive, as her mental energy randomly stimulates areas of my brain. I laugh, I cry, I do spasm-dances and speak in tongues, and my mind struggles to embrace her thoughts like a man staring into a nova without going blind.

***At last...Or is this Death of which you so often spoke, a trap for eternity? Where one's best hope is to behold their most desired thing with their final glance?***

"This isn't death," I say. "Where have you been?"

***The answer is unclouded. I spoke to you through your comrade Francis. It was the only way to reach you, when I was... I was very weak, my mind cold, and the universe...***

"Dim," I say, completing her thought. "Your sun is fading. We think we have a way to save you..."

***You trust too easily... In the brightness of your science, against the darkness of your breed. Though against the tides and currents that steer our path, no rank nor decoration can change it...***

"I don't understand," I say. It's impossible to stop to breathe – how do you describe this feeling, like every neuron in your brain is firing at once, and you've got twenty different voices shouting in your skull, and you know that nineteen of them belong to you?



*I will come with you, beloved, to the end of the stars, or to the final twilight. I will encompass you when you wish... shield you at need... and protect the other burning of your heart...*

“What?”

The cage of the Crysian that englobes me opens like a bloom. The sea should flood and drown me, but instead it ripples like light passing through a lens. And that’s when our senses voyage from Monoceros, traveling along a tachyon wake, past little *Galatea*, that ship of clay that was prepared by the Federation in a desperate gambit, past the *Bat’leth*, where *Ark Royal* burnt and spread its ashes as a phoenix over the nebula, past the border of Romulan space where Roger’s cold body drifts in space, with only a dog’s promise and a forgetful friend left to bring it home. Music comes through the most clearly: music and poetry. As we travel through space our perceptions broaden, branch, and latch onto hundreds, then thousands, then millions of songs. We’re no longer living creatures, we’re a pair of great choirs, flying through space at impossible speeds.

No wonder we all went mad the first time. And Latham thinks some Vulcan technique can protect us from *this*?

The thought races faster and faster, a warp engine picking up speed. The Crysian warns me, as she’s done before, not to let my attention wander, or she might lose me. That’s when I find myself in what feels like a small planet – no, it’s a ship, a bat-like ship – that (like the Wash) is filled with water. Everything is a moving green-grey aquatic curtain except for one very small space, a four-meter cube with a fresh nitrogen-oxygen atmosphere. It’s an ISC interrogation cage - I’m in one of their sickbays. Dolphin-turtles, the Rovillians, swarm around the area, chattering in squeaks and bird-like pecks.

“How are you doing today, Captain Jensen?” a Rovillian wearing a doctor’s uniform addresses the occupant. It’s Greg. He’s wearing some ISC garb that’s way too large around the neck, sitting on a cushioned bench. Suddenly he stirs like a mildly unsettled beast, then I find him looking directly at me, even though we’re hidden from the Rovillians.

“Captain Jensen,” the Rovillian repeats, and I suddenly realize it’s Luiif.

***The universe does not allow such coincidences of such magnitude to occur...***

“I know.” I tell my beloved.

“How are you doing today, Captain Jensen?” Greg flashes a smile and turns to Luiif.

“Very good, doctor.” Greg says. “I’m feeling rather strong today. And not quite so alone.” He pauses, wondering whether he should keep quiet. “Kenneth is here.”

“Lieutenant Said?” Luiif questions, surprising me that he knows about my promotion (I guess enough time has passed). “The *kir’khybit* said he was on Monoceros. Does the planet have such power?”

“For Kenneth, it does,” Greg says, and his voice gets more urgent. “Kenneth, can you make yourself appear? There’s a lot we need to discuss.”

“Greg?” I can feel the pull weaken as my grasp on Luiif’s ship, *The Sound of Doves* is weakening. The Crysian’s not nearly powerful enough to sustain this distance, not for long, not anymore. “How did you...”

“Be quiet and listen.” If Greg’s been brainwashed, he shows no sign of it – in fact, he looks in much better shape than he was in the month before *Ark Royal*’s destruction. “Tell no one I’m alive. I have a new mission, hopefully one that will end the war. Inform Dalta-Theyvo, and tell Francis if you absolutely need a confidante, but no one else.”

“What kind of mission?” I ask, as I feel the telepathic tether rapidly weaken to a snapping point.

“The type of mission that I do better than anyone else in the galaxy,” Greg tells me. “To kill whatever’s in front of me. Only a handful of ISC leaders stand in the way of a chance at genuine peace between the quadrants. I’m going to remove them.”

“Greg!” I shout, and I find myself back on my knees in my quarters, coughing. Francis has grabbed a tight hold on me, and he’s trying to shake me back into consciousness. I can feel him in my mind, he’s panicking at the exact same time he’s trying to convince me to calm down. I laugh and push him away.

“Latham’s on his way,” the Commander tells me.

“Thanks, I guess.” I say. “Did you feel her?”

Francis says nothing, but I can tell that he did. “Bloody empathy...” he moans, realizing that he couldn’t keep *that* secret.

“Was I down on the planet?” I ask, getting to my feet and brushing myself off. I’m wet, and I spot silt on the bottom of the shower.

“No,” Francis lies to me again. It’s such an obvious lie that I should take it as an insult, but I don’t. Francis moans in self-reproachment. So does Dido.

“We’re bringing her aboard,” I declare with a smile. “We’re saving her life, then we’ll figure out where we go next.”

Francis looks down and away from me. “It’s finally begun,” he says, in a voice that’s both portentous and sarcastic. “You’d better mark *this* stardate in your log, Kenneth. Because whatever happens, no one’s going to forget it.”

One of the hardest things in life is to walk into a situation where you know you’re going to disappoint your friends, but duty doesn’t give you any other options. That’s what I’m facing now. I must walk into my ready room, meet with my senior staff and inform them that the Crysian took control of me and that, subsequently, I’m a risk to my job. A Captain’s primary duty is to the mission, but his secondary duty is to his crew, and except in extreme situations, the secondary overrides the primary. A Captain has to be able to look his bridge crew square in the eyes, and tell them he’s doing his best to safeguard their lives. His best, my best. But how can I tell them that now?

I mentioned this to Francis a few minutes ago. He told me to stop whining. As usual, I’m ignoring his advice.

I’m the last one in the room; all the senior officers are sitting at the table, and from the looks on their faces, I just interrupted a very intense conversation.

“Captain,” Hazard offers me a more tentative greeting than I expected. *They know*. I tell myself. How could they *not* know? This ship is too small to contain gossip, and these people are just *too* good at their jobs for comfort.

I don’t sit down, instead I lean on the table with two outstretched arms, looking straight down the middle of the table, getting a good view of everyone. “Yesterday...” I begin the meeting. “I came under the control of an alien entity. Should this reoccur, I expect to be relieved of command immediately, with the caveat that you should not attempt to physically restrain me under these conditions unless I’m performing an action that directly threatens the security of this ship.” I inhale sharply. “I know you have questions and comments. Let’s hear them.”

“Why aren't you stepping aside now?” Hazard asks after taking a deep breath. People glower at him with distinct looks of discomfort - he's doing an unpleasant but necessary duty - but I don't. And it's a damn good question. Just why *am* I clinging to this command? What the hell do I see in it?

"I..." I stammer, hoping my subconscious will step in and provide me with the perfect answer. But Doc Latham taps the desk with his closed left fist and gets everyone's attention.

“The mission requires that we transfer the Crysian aboard this ship.” Latham says, his focus shifting from Hazard to Lars to me. “The creature trusts him. Therefore, with Mr. Said in command, it's much more likely to trust *us*.”

“I don't see why it's necessary for him to stay in command.” Hazard argues. “And for Pete's sake, sit down Lieutenant.” he adds, directing the remark squarely at me like a well thrown right hook. “You're hovering like a Ornithoptrix Vulture.”

A little sheepishly, I force myself to sit down. But my attempts to defend myself find themselves on autopilot, as Kolloos takes an opportunity to express herself. “When you force an alien species into an uncomfortable position they will almost always default to a command figure,” she explains. T'Doroth raises an eyebrow. “The closer the relationship between the alien and the command figure, the smoother the transition. We know the Crysian is skittish, but she trusts Mr. Said. Keeping him in command may be the only way we can achieve our mission.”

Lars coughs. “Frankly, this mission is a recipe for disaster. We're dealing with one of the most powerful telepaths ever recorded. Bringing that thing aboard *Galatea* isn't even remotely close to an unacceptable risk, not if she can take control of the command staff.” Lars turns to me, sadness etched on his fierce face. “Leave her to die on Monoceros.” He observes the involuntary blood loss from my hands and face. “Sorry.” He adds, apologizing for the reaction and not the opinion.

Now everyone's waiting for me to talk. *I do love the dynamics of this group*. “Our mission is unchanged.” I say, finally choosing obstinance over a long argument. “We won't abandon a creature in need, nor will we ignore our mandate to seek out new life. If I even remotely felt that I was a threat to this ship, I'd order you to strand me on the planet and go to warp. But I don't believe I am.”

“That's an awful lot to risk this ship on... a feeling,” Hazard addresses the room.

“It is.” I acknowledge. “But past experiences don't indicate that she's a threat to the ship. And ‘risk’ is a tag that's attached to every uniform in the fleet.”

“Every time I have heard a Captain express such sentiments, it is to justify unwise actions,” T'Doroth, who had been quietly observing the scene, finally speaks out.

T'Doroth's remark threatens to loose the genie from the bottle; it's time to end this meeting before the bottle explodes in my face. “Everyone has their standing orders. They apply to any officer aboard this ship who might be unduly influenced by an alien telepath...”

"Captain..." Lars interrupts.

"Meeting adjourned."

The troops scatter, though Lars gives me a lingering graveyard stare that reminds me of Roger Price in one of his nastier moods. Sorry Lieutenant. I did hope to get a few minutes of peace and quiet before returning to the bridge, but as I should have expected, Hazard lingers.

"We need to talk," the commander says, in a voice that's about as friendly as Lars's stare.

“Let me guess, your objections weren't personal...”

“Wrong.” Ivan snaps. “I'm sick of having my viewpoint continually ignored. I'm smarter than that, and entitled to more respect than that, and you bloody well know it!”

I take a deep breath. "If it's any consolation, the first thing I think about with any of my command decisions is how you'll react."

Hazard shakes his head. "That doesn't even remotely console me Kenneth. You're no telepath. I don't care how sharply honed your intuition may be, I'm not giving my input through proxy, Lieutenant. You might find that collaborating with me isn't as painless as you think, and a helluva lot better for everyone in the long run."

"I understand." I answer.

"I've heard that before!" Ivan tells me.

"I'll try to do better."

"Time will tell," Hazard says.

I guess I'm on probation. Fine. I've got other things to do. I gesture at the communications relay that juts out of the table. "Commander, I need you to open a secure channel between *Galatea* and Admiral Dalta-Theyvo."

"Would you mind sharing the reason for this communication?" Hazard questions.

The conversation comes to a dead stop. I should be really annoyed at the Commander for asking that question. I suppose if I were half a Captain I'd tell Hazard to file a formal request for the information (or, better yet, stick his question down a black hole and wait for the universe to collapse). But he's got every reason to be upset, and I need to show him some trust, even if it risks earning more of his disrespect.

"While under the Crysian's influence, I established telepathic contact with Greg." I explain.

"Captain Jensen?" he wonders. I nod. The commander's frown deepens. "The son of a bitch survived the *Bat'leth*? How?"

"I have no idea how he pulled it off." I answer.

"Are you sure? The Crysian could have been showing you what you wanted to see."

"With telepathy, you can't be absolutely sure of anything, but I'm not about to spend the rest of my life second guessing myself." I answer. He's got a really good point, but we both know the accepted procedure is to ignore the possibility of telepathic tampering unless there's strong evidence – otherwise you can spend your entire life wondering if you're trapped in a transporter hallucination, or in an alien holographic environment, or in a telepath induced fantasyscape. I know of at least five "galactic legends" going around the fleet about officers who became so firmly convinced they were trapped in some other reality that they had to be committed. For awhile I just laughed at them - until I met the Crysian.

"So where is he? What did he say?" Hazard asked.

"The ISC has him, or he has them - the situation wasn't clear."

"Maybe he's a prisoner."

"It didn't look like it, and he didn't act like it. He informed me that he intends to find a way to single-handedly end this war." I answer.

"Single-handed? That's quite the Messiah complex he's got." Hazard scoffs and he bristles at my reaction. "I won't apologize for my opinion, Lieutenant."

"A lot of people who don't know him well say the same thing," I mutter.

"The more I find out about your former Captain, the more he seems like a complete psychotic," Hazard finishes his sentence. "But if the mission is to find him..." He pauses, looking at me for an answer (or for confirmation). "What is our mission priority now anyway? To transplant the Crysian, or to save your Captain?"

"I have no idea. That's why I need to contact the Admiral," I answer. Hazard begins to work at the console, and in a few seconds, he's made contact with *Midway* and her communications officer.

"My apologies, Captain." The comm officer, a burly Caitian male says after a fourteen second time delay. "The Admiral is no longer aboard the vessel."

"Can you locate her for me?" I ask.

"You'd be better off redirecting your communications at Starfleet Command," the Caitian tells me through a severe rolling of his "r's". I look at Hazard and he shrugs. The communication is abruptly cut, and Hazard automatically contacts Starfleet Command. There's a thirty-eight second delay until they direct my inquiry to a human female wearing a Commander's uniform.

"Admiral Delta-Theyvo's commission with Starfleet was terminated, effective three days ago." I'm told. "You will now report to Admiral Lorn Danforth."

"Why wasn't I informed?" I ask. "And what happened to Delta-Theyvo?"

"I am not permitted to discuss the Admiral's situation..." the Commander replies. "*Galatea's* mission is being reassessed. You will be informed at the appropriate time as to the disposition of your command and your mission. In the meantime, you are to await the arrival of the science vessel *Calypso*. Starfleet out."

The screen goes blank. Both Hazard and I look at it, then each other, with drop-jawed expressions.

"Congratulations," Hazard says. "You just took an overloaded bureaucratic torpedo on your starboard bow."

"That's what it feels like," I admit.

Starfleet bureaucracy can do wonders at uniting a fractured command. "So what next?" Ivan asks me, without even a trace of his earlier antipathy.

"I wonder..." Delta-Theyvo had been Greg's mentor, sponsor, and friend; she had protected him from the moment he entered the Academy, and she had transferred that loyalty to me. Part of it was the typical Grazerite loyalty bond, which could be much stronger than a human's, and part of it... I don't know, some political agenda perhaps? Either way, every bit of certainty I had left regarding this mission had just been blown out of space by the command change. No, not *every* bit, by Hell or high water, though a Klingon fleet barred the way, there was one thing I *had* to do.

"We're going to save the Crysian." I finally announce. "We're bringing her aboard. Beyond that, I haven't a clue what's going to happen to us."

So now it was a waiting game. We periodically irradiated the ice surrounding the Crysian with short phaser bursts, and every time we did so, I felt a little better inside. I couldn't tell if it was my old link with the Crysian at work, or just wishful thinking. She continued to come to me in my dreams, and to Francis as well. The bond between us two unlikely bunkmates also got stronger; I could begin to sense Francis the moment we came on the same deck, and as for Francis, he was beginning to socialize with the crew in a more normal fashion.

"So what should I wear for my date with Gbeji?" he asked me, one night in our quarters, as he tried on a horrible looking Rigilian *kravnat* that made his penchant for nudity look like an attractive fashion statement.

"How about something with less glitter? And color?" I quip.

"I could turn Dido into a hat," he smiles. The Marshound, who's flopped lazily on the bed, stirs half-obliviously.

“And I could throw you out an airlock.” *My God, from the tone of my voice, I’d swear that Roger Price were alive again.*

“Oh Kenneth,” Francis shakes his head. “What did that poor airlock ever do to you?” He continues to tease me. “You don’t have a problem with me dating Gbeji, do you?”

“It’s your life,” I say, but no, that’s *not* true. We’re linked. Everything we do is felt by the other. Worse, I get the distinct feeling that at least on a subconscious level, he’s dating her because of me; because I had feelings toward the young engineer that I refused to consummate, he’s going to give me at least a vicarious experience of dating. Damn him. Next thing you know, he’ll try to get me vicariously drunk.

“By the way, Kenneth, if you ask me real nicely, I’ll give you my recommendations for coordinates to phaser the planet’s equator that should allow us to keep the ecosystem stable for a few weeks.”

“Francis, I order you to pass those coordinates to Mr. Hazard.” I state.

“Captains always have trouble distinguishing ‘ask nicely’ from ‘order’.” Francis rolls his eyes, and uses his fingers to form quotation marks.

“Tough.” I say. “Enjoy your date. And if you upset her in any way...”

We’re interrupted when the ship goes to yellow alert. I immediately bolt for the comm button.

“Talk to me Ivan.” I say.

“We need you on the bridge,” he says.

I throw my uniform top over my civilian shirt. “Remember. Do not disappoint her!”

“Look who’s talking!” Francis retorts as I rush out the door. The little so-and-so just *had* to get in the last word.

I count the seconds it takes for me to reach the bridge – twenty-eight seconds, good time for a yellow alert – without employing a command override on the turbolift. “What’s the situation?” I ask as I head to the chair.

“The Nurion and Evryn long range sensor arrays have been compromised.” Ivan tells me, handing me a Starfleet report.

“The ISC has found a way to feed false data to our long range sensor arrays.” I note with alarm.

“They’ve effectively got a strategic-level cloaking device.” Kollok adds. “Their fleets could be anywhere. Starfleet is probably going to break up the fleet to widen our sensor grid while they work on the problem.”

“Have any orders come in yet?” I ask.

“Negative.” Ivan informs me.

“Good call on the yellow alert.” I say. “Raise *Calypso*. Tell them we need her here as soon as possible.”

Ivan gets to the communications console and sends them a signal. There should only be an eight second delay, but two minutes later, we still haven’t heard from them. “Okay this is *wrong*.” Ivan states, noting with irritation that I’ve taken the “Captain Vulture” position looking over his shoulder. *Sorry Ivan, it’s just nerves.*

“Red alert,” I declare, after taking a second for the implications to sink in. (I don’t think about what this is going to do to Francis’s dating life.) I return to the comm, which suddenly feels claustrophobic; I half expect an ISC fleet to jump out of the viewscreen that’s staring me in the face. “Commander, I need your assessment on the simulations we’ve run on the extraction procedure.”

“There’s too many variables,” Ivan says. “I don’t trust it. Nobody’s done anything like this before. We could kill her.”

“She’ll survive.” The statement is purely involuntarily, an almost religious reaction. My fingers reach for the comm button. “All hands, this is the Captain. Due to complications, we’re going to have to start the extraction procedure early. All assigned personnel immediately report to their assigned stations. We’ll head into the atmosphere in five minutes.”

It sounds impersonal doesn’t it? But now I understand what Shakespeare meant when he said *The Die is Cast*.

So *Galatea* heads down to the planet. The upper atmosphere, a thin crust of swirling ice particles, offers us a futile challenge, for although the ship’s never operated in atmosphere before, this is one untested system that doesn’t require the frequently-malfunctioning heuristics that plagued us earlier on the journey. I suppress the urge to say “steady as she goes, Mr. Kollos” – Captains seem to say that a lot, and it doesn’t really mean much, does it?

In minutes we’re directly over the Crysian’s position. A low-level phaser burst clears away the ice, opening the ocean to our tractors. I smile. “Orders?” Kollos asks.

“She’s not expecting us yet.” I say. “We need to talk.”

At my instruction, Dr. Latham enters the bridge, hypo in hand. “Are you ready?” he asks. I hold out my arm, and he injects it.

And then there’s singing, singing everywhere, a great chorus of a single quavering note. I realize that she’s not just willing to participate in the extraction, she’s eager. She’s going to be with me, and protect me, and love me, and sing to me, and we’re going to explore a universe together...

And then there’s a rain on the planet, a rain that issues from the deeps of the deep ocean, rushing and leaping, pouring upward through foam as a gouge of cold green water. It’s an inverted rain, and those who would have stood away at some distance on the ice sheet might think they were observing the Horseshoe Falls of Niagara while standing on their heads.

“The rain is laughter.” I say.

“It tickles,” Francis replies with virtually the same voice.

The laughter is answered by a pallicade of a thousand thousand raised spears, a Spartan host that lifts into the sky with immaculate precision, spears which gleams red-silver in the reflected light of the faint Monoceron sun.

I start to shake, involuntarily, and I can’t tell whether it’s the ship or the telepathic link reasserting itself. A thought occurs to me that since the Crysian imprisoned me for so many weeks, it was only fair that I was doing the same to her.

It’s hard to describe the next few minutes of my life: even my link with the Crysian never prepared me for this. First there’s her anxiety, but there’s also an exhilaration at the physical sensation of flight, feeling her bodies being hoisted like a lover by the tractor beam and pulled into the cold, embracing hold. And then, when she enters the ship, there’s *thought*, many more minds than she’s ever experienced, and she dances inside them, her thoughts flitting from crew member to crew member, even into Dido, gathering their experiences.

“Don’t hurt them!” I say, but I don’t need to say it; she’s playing, and she’s gentle in her exuberance. And when she looks into a person, I feel it, and so does Francis, and once again we experience an onrush of memories too rapid for our cerebrums to handle. The knife of Allah, the universe is in our hands.

And then it's over. I stir, and I watch the crew, all nursing migraines, rise out of their seats. Latham staggers over to T'Doroth, who seems to have suffered more than the others.

"This was a extremely bad idea." Lars says. I look on him, with the sudden knowledge that there's a piece of him that's held me in complete contempt from the beginning, an ingrained prejudice against my rise to rank and station that he's fought hard to overcome, at least until Wirchenko's death. I also know the extent of his deep feelings toward Hazard, like mine for Greg, they're as intense as you can get without a physical union. Hazard has no idea what those Efrosian rituals that he's performed with Lars actually mean.

I look at Kollos, who's still managed to be an enigma to the Crysian, and I shudder for reasons I don't quite understand.

I look at T'Doroth, who's struggling to recover, and I'm looking at Latham, who's holding her steady, and I suddenly understand the truth about the man who suddenly entered my mind just after the first union on Monoceros, and a lot of Greg's old suspicions about him suddenly make a lot of sense. The friend is a stranger that I understand for the first time now. "Doctor." I tell him. "James, I *know*."

"That's unfortunate, Kenneth." Latham answers. "Though I was prepared for it."

I get out of the comm. I can feel her in my head – she doesn't understand the implications of what's happened, but I do. "This is Captain Kenneth Said, USS *Galatea*," I say into the Captain's log. "As of Stardate 8240.6, I formally step down from command."

I may as well leave my command with dignity.

"Uh, Kenneth..." Hazard stutters (and looking at him, I now realize where a lot of his conflicts originated, and despite them, just how loyal a friend he's become). "Not that I intend to pass over a chance at command, shouldn't we..."

"I'm sorry, Ivan. You're not getting command either." I say. "Doctor, shall you tell them, or shall I?"

Latham bows his head and faces a stunned bridge crew. "Kenneth, you can be very difficult sometimes."

"That's the trouble when you bond with a crew," I say. "You don't like seeing them deceived." I take a deep breath. "Ladies and gentlemen, with the completion of this phase of *Galatea*'s mission, I will be stepping down. Dr. Latham will be assuming command of *USS Galatea*."

"On whose authority?" Ivan shouts, as expected. I walk over to my friend, and I put my hand on his shoulder – the psionic feedback was terminated when the Crysian touched their minds and attuned them to our telepathic frequency. Funny, just at the moment I lose my command, the one thing that separated me from my crew ceases to be a problem. Yet another irony.

"Starfleet Intelligence." Latham answers. "I *am* a medical doctor, but I am also an intelligence operative, rank Captain. After the first Monoceros meld, I was sent by Starflint to observe Captain Jensen, to determine whether he could be still trusted after his exposure to the Crysian, and to measure the effects of the telepathic union on the survivors. When Captain Jensen died, I was ordered to shift my focus to the person who was most strongly effected by the link, Lieutenant Said."

"That's why you were so concerned about me when I was traveling with Roger."

"That mission was ill-advised," Latham says. "Again, I'm sorry Kenneth. I was acting completely as your friend, at least until we reached Murray Waystation, when I received orders that forced me to be more... professional."



“You mean impersonal...” Ivan growls.

“Yes, *impersonal* Mr. Hazard!” Latham flashes back through angry eyes. “I’m sorry you’re upset with the change in command, you’re just going to have to be satisfied with being first officer on the most important ship in Starfleet.”

That remark stops everyone except Kollos, who’s looking at the doctor as if an expected drama was playing itself out. “What did you say?” Hazard says.

Latham doesn’t answer him directly. “Your decision to come to Monoceros dovetailed very nicely with our goals, Kenneth. Which brings us to the current situation – to the opportunity.”

“And just what the hell is that?” Hazard asks.

“Our mission, at last, ladies and gentlemen,” Latham says, sitting down in the Captain’s chair. “Phase one was to get the Crysian aboard. Thanks to Lieutenant Said, that has been accomplished. Phase two is to work with the Crysian until she can use its abilities to enhance this ship in the same way she can with individual life forms. Once that’s been achieved, we will proceed to phase three... Kollos, please display historical record Latham-1.”

Ancient footage of primitive Earth warplanes is displayed on the main viewscreen. There’s an awkward beauty in those fragile metal birds even as they drop death on those below them. “The Pacific campaign of Earth’s Second World War,” Latham explains. “The United States had been ambushed, bloodied, and demoralized until a brave commander named James Doolittle bridged the seemingly impassable gulf of the Pacific and brought the war directly to the enemy.”

He flicked up another display, a field of unfamiliar stars.

“This is ISC space, secure beyond the Gorn and Romulan frontier, it has not been touched during this war. *No one* has touched it. But Phase Three will change that dramatically. Protected by the Crysian, we will enter ISC space, proceed to the Concordium’s capitalworld, and stage an attack.” A lot of jaws drop. “Once we’ve demonstrated an ability to do damage to the Concordium, it is hoped that the ISC will finally negotiate with us in earnest and end the Pacification campaign once and for all.

“Gentlemen, we go to bring war – and peace – to the galaxy.”

“Riiiiight.” Hazard replies skeptically. I can’t help but smile.

## IV: To The Grindstone

“I want to make one thing clear – this isn’t being done as a slap in the face of the Federation,” Teller said, in a calm voice that makes my blood run cold. I wish I couldn’t believe that the former chief engineer of *Ark Royal*, a man whom I served under for years, would be wearing *that* uniform. “I think of this as the ultimate act of *loyalty* to the principles of the Federation.”

“No, the ultimate act of loyalty would be shooting you, you son of a bitch.” Rigney hisses, making an obscene gesture at the screen.

Latham's showing us the weekly Starfleet news briefing, which is held in one of the ship's remaining cargo holds in front of a big screen. I'm standing between a cluster of engineers, who lean quietly against the wall while sitting on the floor, and the security staff, who are anything but quiet - most of them have confiscated crates to use as chairs and don't hesitate to comment on the FedNews stories as they come up.

“Traitor.” Ensign Burke, the biggest man in security, adds with a bass growl.

I'm not Captain anymore, but as *Galatea's* second officer, I still rate a chair at these assemblies. I lean back slightly in my seat and give Rigney and Burke a dirty look. It probably goes unnoticed, given that we need to darken the room for these briefings, but it's discouraging to see so many officers in agreement with them. *Come on people, you should know better than anyone just how effective brainwashing techniques can be!*

“The Federation needs a course correction, back to the high-minded principles of peaceful coexistence that we once stood for,” another human in an ISC uniform adds. “We’ve given Starfleet to the warmongers. Transferring our loyalty to the ISC is the only way a man of conscience can take it back.”

“*Al'taelh* Teller,” the interviewer addresses my old superior. “You *know* that a lot of your old Starfleet comrades will be upset – to put it mildly – at your defection.”

“The Concordium has promised that we won’t be placed in situations where we’ll have to directly confront the Federation,” Teller nods at the reporter while he’s talking. “There’s plenty of support duties that we can perform. But that’s almost beside the point.” The smile that forms on his face looks almost artificial. “The Federation is the dream of universal peace and prosperity. The reality of that dream is the ISC. I haven’t betrayed anyone, I’ve simply embraced our ideals. We didn’t leave the Federation, it left us. But one day, maybe not in my lifetime, I believe the Federation will agree with my decision and honor it.”

I get up to walk out, and Latham decides to end the briefing. The lights come up.

“If I ever got my hands on this Commander Teller...” Shotev, another security officer, the big Andorian, begins to vow.

I’ve had enough. “That *wasn’t* Commander Teller,” I snap. “Commander Teller was my superior officer for two years on *Ark Royal*. I don’t know who that man was in that propaganda piece – it may have looked like him, but it wasn’t the man I knew.”

The security team, unaware of my connection to the traitor, suddenly falls into an embarrassed silence.

“The man we just saw was *sick*. He was sick, people! Brainwashing is a sickness to which every damn person in this room is susceptible.” I remember Roger Price shivering in my arms in a Tal Shiar cell, and I get even angrier. “The Commander Teller that I knew would have preferred to die before he spewed that toad-swill to the galaxy.” I say. There’s a long silence. “Sorry, Captain.” I finally say to Latham.

“You’re relieved, Lieutenant,” Latham says. “Return to your quarters.”

“Aye sir,” I don’t argue the point, and I turn around and begin to walk back to my quarters. Lars quickly joins me. “What do *you* want?” I snarl. The Crysian gave me a look inside Lars’s mind yesterday, and I found out that he wasn’t as much of a friend as I thought he was.

“I beg your pardon.” Lars wonders.

“Sorry, Lieutenant, I’m not in the mood,” I snap. Lars grabs me, and I give him a *how dare you look* which he promptly ignores.

“I wanted to say that you needed to lighten up.” Lars tells me. “Everyone in that room is keenly aware of what the ISC can do. They’re blowing off steam.”

“I just witnessed how a friend of mine was forced to turn against everything which he believed, and all your people could do is make a joke of it.” I retort in a trembling voice. “How dare you tell me to ‘lighten up’!”

“Point taken,” Lars replies, not particularly happy about acknowledging it. “On the other hand, no one should be happy that very soon the ISC propaganda machine is going to be screaming ‘Even Starfleet resists Starfleet’ to a receptive audience of jackasses.”

“It’s not his fault... it’s not his choice... dammit, we both know it wasn’t his choice,” I shoot back. Lars doesn’t look convinced. “It isn’t his fault!” I repeat, almost numbly, almost a mantra.

Lars stops. “Fine, Lieutenant,” he says in a tone that indicates it’s *not* fine, then turns around and walks away without saying a word. Good.

I’ve been ordered to go back to my quarters, like a little kid being sent back to his room. I’ve never been known for insubordination, but this time I don’t obey the orders. I suppose one might label it petulance worthy of Ivan Hazard’s worst moments, but I think the case could be made that Latham was only trying to get me out of the briefing room before things turned bad. So I go elsewhere. To her.

The cargo bay wall is a solid bulkhead, but not to me, not now – she knows I'm coming, so I walk through it like it was a curtain of water. What lies beyond is only dimly lit, a dark kaleidoscope of swirling shadows moving in a continuous sweeping pattern, but it's inviting. I'm immersed in water, but don't feel it; there's no pressure, no wetness (and fortunately, no drowning).

***Your mind is in pain.*** She observes. The shadows cluster around me in a orbit of concern that plunges me in an almost total darkness.

“That's part and parcel of any social relationship.” I try to explain, knowing she won't quite grasp it. “You make an investment of pain, and hope it turns into a reward. It's like the pain of sunlight turning into food.”

***But the pain is often so much greater than the reward.***

“You're right,” I affirm. “We're a very inefficient species in that regard, but that's who we are.” I sigh. “Beloved, how are you feeling?”

***Better – now that you are here. It feels so confined in this “hold”, and yet so loose... I long to emerge myself in the deep pressures, but there are no deeps here.***

“We were worried about that,” I concur. “We'll try to simulate that by increasing the local gravity when you feel the need. Just give me or Francis a telepathic signal and we'll arrange it for you.”

***I am with you. What pains I feel are small compared to that reward.***

“I feel the same way.” I sigh. She's in my mind now, and it's wonderful as ever. My Crysian, that narcotic of contour, pressure, shadow... it's an odd love, but I don't think it feels that different from any other kind.

Now that we're together, she hooks into my senses and projects them through the ship. It produces a bit of a fisheye distortion - I'm definitely not used to seeing *Galatea* through such an alien perspective. We start with the bridge, where Latham is glumly checking through sensor logs and trying to get a handle on fleet locations. Nothing of interest at the moment, not anymore. We head down through crew quarters (Francis, meditating naked in my quarters, notices us and says hi). The Crysian, not used to animals, finds Dido a little intimidating.

We make our way into the rec hall where off-duty security have set up a pool table and are shooting the breeze and drinking a few Tarqalians, Tellerite brandy-beer in tall stemless glasses. I'm told it's one of the best drinks in the galaxy.

“Just put two and two together,” Rigney says, grimacing as he misses his shot. “Wirchenko dies for no good reason, Said loses his command - I'm surprised Starfleet had the brains to take it away from him - and then he goes off on *us* because we don't appreciate his former superior lipping frogface.”

“Except the Lieutenant was right.” Burke snaps. “Anyone can be brainwashed. Anyone.”

“So speaks the telepath,” Kaamtaut, the Grazerite woman, sarcastically states.

“As does every study that Starfleet's ever commissioned on the subject. Or the Klingons, or the Romulans...” Burke replies.

“At ease,” Lieutenant Lars sighs. *Sometimes, I sense his thoughts, being chief of security is like a cross between refereeing a rugby game and raising a family.* He aims his cue and expertly sinks the 12-ball in a corner pocket.

“Sir, we all know why Said lost his command,” Rigney states. “He killed Wirchenko. And he likes to ‘swim with the fishes’...”

“If only they *were* fishes. Everyone’s had a headache since that thing came aboard!” Kaamtaut complains.

“You guys don’t know a thing.” Lars snorts, basking in Rigney’s frown as he sinks another shot. “How long did any of you guys last in the brainwashing exercise at the Academy? Anyone go over forty-eight?”

“I did, sir.” Burke said.

“Of course *you* did, Tony.” Lars sinks another shot. “Anyone else?” No one raises their hand. “I lasted one hundred and eleven, and that was inflated because they stopped the exercise to make sure I wasn’t going to die. Teller and the other traitors have been worked on for two whole months. The best anyone can hope for in that situation is that they’d find some way to kill themselves before they break.”

“I heard Said lasted six days with the Tal Shiar.” Burke notes. “You gotta be impressed by that.”

“Only an idiot wouldn’t be.” Lars says. “Though time doesn’t matter to the *Tal Shiar*. They’re patient little bastards.”

“I don’t care how long he lasted. I don’t trust the Lieutenant anymore,” Shotev, the Andorian, insists. “He just doesn’t have what it takes.”

I’m convinced that if Burke ever becomes a legend, it’ll be for his temper. “Are you crazy!” the big man shouts. “You were with him on that mission. He’s got enough guts to fuel a fleet,” I can sense Lars’s mental agreement, even though the remark doesn’t even warrant a nod.

“Okay, maybe going along for the ride with Wirchenko when he sent him to his death is more gutsy than your average command incompetent.” Shotev says as his antennae drop in irritation. “But even if he wasn’t responsible for reddening Wirchenko’s shirt, there’s something way ‘off’ about the guy.”

“There’s something ‘off’ about *everyone* in this crew,” Lars counters. “Whatever we may feel about each other, the best thing for us to do is to stick together, because with what’s coming, we’re going to need everyone, *especially* Lieutenant Said.”

“So spill the beans, Lieutenant. What’s the mission?” Rigney insists. The other security officers back the request.

“I never divulge orders, and you know it.” Lars says. “Just make sure your affairs are in order, because when it happens, it’s gonna be more *serious* than any of you guys can imagine.”

The room gives a collective gulp. Lars smiles and sinks the eight ball.

“Okay, it’s my turn,” Burke says, pulling his Herculean frame out of the chair. “Rack ‘em, Lieutenant.”

The Crysian doesn’t quite comprehend the subtleties of the situation. She concentrates mostly on Lars. *He defends you, yet he blames you for the loss of the other swimmer.*

“He does,” I affirm.

***I am sorry... I had not strength enough to intervene.***

“I wish you had. Wirchenko was a good kid. But I don’t blame them for holding me responsible.” I say. “Still, it was nice to see Burke come to my defense. Do you think you can do something nice for him?”

***Of course.***

Burke takes his break shot. All the balls find their way into the pockets; the eight-ball trickles into the corner last of all. The floor is littered with the shards of broken Tarqalian bottles, which drop out of the flabbergasted spectators’ hands.

We continue to travel through the ship, watching and pulling a few pranks – I figure it’s good exercise for the Crysian to learn how to manipulate fine control, especially if she’s going to reinforce the ships’ systems. After that, our senses return to the hold and we stay together for several hours. I justify the visit to Latham by saying it’s part of the ongoing project to acclimatize the Crysian and persuade her to protect us. I don’t think he believes me, but as long as the reason doesn’t insult his intelligence, he’ll accept it.

It occurs to me that Latham may have showed me the footage of Teller to get me so angry that I’d do anything I could to get the Crysian on our side. That’s the problem with manipulators – even when they aren’t trying to manipulate you, you’re always on watch for it. Living in a nest of conspirators forces you to turn life into a fortress. It’s a pretty awful way to live.

A day after we leave the Wash, I come onto the bridge to spot T’Doroth and Latham locked in a frenzy of conversation. “Ah, Mr. Said.” Latham says. “How goes the project?”

“The Crysian’s agreed to put up a weak force field around the ship. Weak being relative – the test increased our shield strength by 86%.” I answer. “But we have no idea how she’ll react to feedback when the shields are hit. She might not be able to take it.”

“In which case, the mission’s a wash.” Latham nods. “Well, Kenneth, we’re about to find out. The light cruiser *USS Dieppe* is currently six hours away – with an ISC strike cruiser on its tail. She’s sent out a distress signal, and we’re answering it. You’d better prepare your friend for battle. It’s arrived.”

I’ve officially been reassigned as ship’s engineer, a duty which I’m technically qualified for even if I haven’t accrued the necessary years of experience. However most of that job is still being done by Gbeji; my real duty is liaison to the Crysian. There’s no viewport into the hold to give me a decent view of her, so my visualizations are based on subconscious impressions. We gave her as much room as we could, but it’s almost unbearably tight and claustrophobic for her. Several times, she has the equivalent of panic attacks, and it takes an extreme effort of will to calm her down. If she loses control, it’s quite possible we’ll end up like that ISC boarding party after Argos got through with them.

I suppose I should be thankful that Argos isn’t still around to add new subsystems to the works. Our lives are enough of a disaster area.

“My love,” I say, as I feel her mind sink into mine like a lover nestling into one’s bed. “We’re about to fire a shaft of light. When it fires, can you concentrate on it as it leaves the ship to make it burn brighter?”

***I am not strong, Beloved.***

“I know.” I acknowledge with slight sadness. “But your cacoon is working well. If you maintain the cacoon and strengthen the shafts of light, we’ll be happy.”

***I do not believe it is possible for me to make your vessel powerful enough to ensure the crew’s happiness, Beloved. It would be easier if I could fill its crew’s minds with happiness instead.***

“Easier, but not desirable.” I say *very* quickly.

***So I guessed.***

Hmmm. I wonder if she’s developing a sense of humor?

There’s a window of four hours between the final test and the engagement. I spend most of that time with her, comforting her, trying to gauge how likely it’s going to be that she’ll find a

way to regain her strength. It's like performing a bed vigil for someone who's really sick who doesn't quite realize the extent of their illness.

A half-hour before the battle, battle stations is called, so I return to my post, a console between the engineering and science stations. "How's the *deus ex machina* coming?" Ivan asks as soon as I step onto the bridge. The rest of the regular bridge crew is already here, performing final systems preps. It's really odd to see Latham in the Captain's chair.

"She'll help us as best she can," I'm speaking to Hazard, but everyone's interested in the answer. "Our tests showed that she magnified phaser output by 117%."

"That's going to give us the combat effectiveness of a heavy cruiser, or thereabouts." Lars estimates.

"It is difficult to say precisely." T'Doroth adds. "Much will depend on whether she can augment an alpha strike. If she cannot, it would be better if we stayed back at range and relied on Mizdia." T'Doroth referred to the tactic of firing weapons one at a time, to increase the chance of affecting a ship's subsystems.

"We won't know until we try." I offer an opinion. From the looks on people's faces, it's universally unpopular.

Ten minutes later, we rendezvous with *USS Dieppe*, the light cruiser. Starfleet's ordered the two of us to stand together and launch an attack on the strike cruiser. *Dieppe's* Captain, who isn't cleared to know our secrets, openly questions the orders and informs us that she'll retreat at the first opportunity.

"Good luck outrunning the strike cruiser," Latham says slyly. *Dieppe* should be thankful we were in range to intercept.

"Sir," Ivan interrupts us. "We've entered the strike cruiser's extreme sensor range. It's noticed us."

"And it continues to advance?" Latham questions. It's not close enough to display on the main screen yet.

"Affirmative." Hazard answers.

"So frog went a-courtin'," Latham said with a hum. "And he did ride, uh hum." He received some odd looks as everyone on the bridge wondered if that monotone was his attempt to carry a tune. "I suppose you would all prefer Mr. Said's attempts at poetry."

"Silence *is* golden, sir." I reply, trying not to be offended by the remark.

"Well, Mr. Said, now that you finally have the golden opportunity to rebut my criticism of your verse." Latham replies. "Make the most of it."

"Sir!" Kollok breaks the levity with a report. "*Dieppe* has taken a position so we're directly between them and the strike cruiser."

"Sir." Lars says. "We could send a security detail to clean up the mess they're making on the bridge."

Even Gbeji laughs at the remark. "Shall I order them to stand beside us?" Hazard asks.

"Negative," Latham says shrewdly. "If they try too hard to make it look like we're defending them, the ISC may assume they're worth defending and make them the priority target. I will make a note of their actions in the log. Mr. T'Doroth, please cut energy to the plasma torpedo. We will not use them in this battle. That surprise will be sprung on the ISC at a later date."

"Aye Captain," T'Doroth says.

I can't help but notice my mind begin to drift away from the confines of the bridge; the talk of ship positions and politics that fascinated me just days ago were a fever dream; real, yet

impossible to grasp. The more I concentrated on what's going on around me, the wilder my perceptions get.

"Hey, Lieutenant..." Obviously they're noticing that I'm less than steady on my feet – Hazard steps away from the science station and puts a hand on my shoulder.

"I... I..." I stammer like a man who's thoroughly burnt his brain in the pursuit of narcotic pleasures.

"Do we need to get you to Sickbay?"

***I need to share your strength***, She tells me, and I repeat it aloud without giving it a second thought."

"Sorry, should've guessed." Ivan says. "Tell her not to mess around in there too much."

"Affirmative..." I moan. The bridge takes on a fisheye perspective, and I find that I can flit my senses around the ship – and even out into space – as easily as moving my eyes in their sockets. It's a little subtler than I'm used to from the Crysian. "I think I've adjusted. I've now got an enhanced view of the battlefield."

"Very good." Latham says, trying not to sound *too* concerned. But it's become a lot easier for me to sense the falseness in a person's voice.

"Two hundred clicks and closing," Ivan announces. "Three minutes to extreme weapons range."

Kollos displays the enemy on the mainscreen, while Latham brings up a tactical hologram for reference in front of the Captain's chair. "Steady as she goes. Mr. T'Doroth, alpha strike at 6,000 kilometers."

"Yes, Captain."

My sense leap forward into the bridge of the ISC, one of the odd multi-level domes with a Veltressai suspended in the center on a descending platform. "I can see them now, Captain." I say.

Latham leans forward in the chair. "Do you have any idea what their plans are, Mr. Said?" he asks.

"The Captain is Veltressai. Dome shaped forehead, telepathically linked to three twins. He's suspended in the center of the bridge, his mind working with his counterparts to guess at what *Dieppe* is hiding. And there are others..." A cluster of three unrecognizable aliens, with huge crystalline heads covering two-thirds of their body, sit in a triangle on each side of the podium. They're slumped in a meditative state – they remind me of Oriental monks with hats three times the size of their bodies. My senses fix on them, drawn by a compulsion that overwhelms me, and I knock on them as though they were a door. Abruptly they lift their heads in unison and sing to me.

"Mr. Said?" Latham already realizes that something's about to go terribly wrong.

"Lance-arrugh!" I shout. I scream in pain. I don't just experience pain, I experience pain's son and its two wicked daughters. A portion of the agony makes its way through me into the Crysian, but though I expect her to falter, she does not. I can also feel Francis take some of the psionic burden on himself.

"The Lansrum." Latham says in a chilled, expectant tone. "*An extremely rare ISC race, they're dedicated psionic hunters.* T'Doroth, I need you to meld with Mr. Said and absorb his pain, now!"

"Captain, I do *not* advise that." Kollos objects.



“Advisable or not, it’s an order.” Latham snaps. “Mr. Lars, take weapons control. Now, T’Doroth!”

“One hundred clicks.” Hazard announces. “And believe it or not, the Crysian’s defensive field is still holding.”

“Of course it is...” I moan through the pain. “Her hand is upon us.”

“My mind to your mind... my thoughts to your thoughts...” T’Doroth kneels beside me and places her hand on my shoulder. It feels cold to the touch, penetrating my uniform, freezing my skin. But it is a luminescent cold, like reflected light on a winter’s eve, the snow adds to the brightness of the world.

“You have the loveliest smile, T’Doroth,” I say. I’m not sure why – she’s not smiling, but there is a radiance to her that reminds me of one.

The pain subsides even as drops of green mist fall onto the Vulcan’s face, dripping like dew drops down her cheeks, coloring her ears. For a moment, I think it gives her an exotic beauty, like an Orion dancer, and then I realize that it’s Vulcan blood, and my heart stops beating.

“No!” I shout. “T’Doroth, get away!” *Break the link.*

“Fifty clicks,” Hazard’s ethereal voice is lost in the mist of events. Although her physical form remains with me, maintaining her Vulcan winter touch, I sense her consciousness shudder, and there’s a distant call, and she’s gone. Staring into her green Vulcan eyes, I know that T’Doroth’s left the bridge, and I’m tracking her like Dido, down the labyrinth of *Galatea*. For I suddenly find that my ship has a soul, and that soul is T’Doroth, and that I cannot let her die anymore than I could allow that to happen to the Crysian.

“T’Doroth!” I cry out as I catch a glimpse of her rounding engineering. For once, I ignore the warp engines’ throb.

With a fixation that’s singularly Vulcan, the weapons officer ignores my call. Corridors race past us in fragments of seconds... broken time. But I know where she’s going.

“My lady,” T’Doroth says, stands before the Crysian, a pale moonlight against her sun. “I understand why you need me, and what I must do, but you do know that I hate this.”

***I do not understand your hate.*** The Crysian’s majestine presence does not attempt to deceive her. ***And I do not wish you pain, but I must protect my Kenneth.***

“He is mine, too.” T’Doroth says, and to my surprise, the Crysian honors her more for saying it openly. “And I shall sing your song, mother.”

“Entering weapons range...”

I follow T’Doroth as she steps outside the ship, as she walks toward a vessel moving well beyond the speed of light. At that speed, slowing down light to a manageable speed, it’s like walking between ripples on a great pool. I’ve often wondered exactly *what* kind of an entity the Crysian might be – we’ve all thought she was a telepath who was capable of warping the fabric of space-time, but now I’m beginning to suspect that she’s the opposite, that she’s a warp of the space-time continuum that happens to be capable of telepathy. I suppose that’s an easier answer for an engineer to empathize with, looking on her and seeing a living warp drive.

T’Doroth stops on the bridge of the *Necessary Duty*. The three Lansrum look on her with horror, knowing what will happen. She sings a Vulcan song and the Lansrum grab their heads with vestigial hands and try to hold back the pressure. To call it a futile gesture goes without saying. The Lansrum heads explode into many shards, and the humanoid shrapnel destroys everything around them, including the bridge crew of the *Necessary Duty*. As the hull breach siren began to blare, T’Doroth nods at me, wipes the blood from her face with a trembling right

hand and collapses in the wreck. Immediately I grab onto her... well, consciousness I suppose... and carry it back to *Galatea*.

“Why you?” I ask.

“Neither you – nor *she* – is trained to use their mind as a weapon. Power is not enough.” T’Doroth’s explanation is as weak as it is calm. We’re back on the bridge, and my consciousness returns to my body with a shudder.

“Mr. Said, are you still with us?” Latham snaps.

“Aye sir.” I answer, not taking a much-needed moment to capture my bearings. “Lieutenant T’Doroth has destroyed the enemy bridge.”

“Unfortunately, the enemy Captain is Veltressai.” Kollos says, nervous as I’ve ever seen her as the magnified strike cruiser looms large on the mainscreen. “Taking out the bridge means we’ve got two angry soul-mates seeking vengeance for the dead member of their triad.”

It’s hard to not think about T’Doroth, who’s still lying still on the bridge.

“Do we still have the augmentation?” Latham asks. I concentrate for a moment to feel my link with the Crysian, and nod.

“Shields at 114%. Without the bridge, they may not notice our augmentations,” I report.

“Incoming!” Hazard shouts as a sphere of green plasma, large enough on the magnified image that its light washes Latham in a sick light, erupts from the prow of the strike cruiser.

“Evasive maneuvers.” Latham orders. Unfortunately, we were forced to give up our shuttlebay to accommodate the Crysian, so we no longer have the protection afforded us by our two shuttlecraft.

“Impact in three... two...”

We grab onto the side of our chairs and hold on as tight as frightened teenagers grabbing their lovers on the dangerous parts of a thrillride. No, tighter. I briefly get a sense that the plasma torpedo struck our number 2 shield square in its center, knocking it down to 30% normal strength. A pair of phaser-2s follow, expertly striking the vulnerable spot. On deck six, the penetration of the second shot tears through the superstructure of the ship, and I feel two crew members – Crewman Reynolds and Ensign Costa – suddenly exposed to the cold vacuum of space. Their fear and panic is palpable. Immediately I knock Gbeji aside, lock onto the transporter controls, and get them to Sickbay.

“Lieutenant?” Gbeji wonders as she gets to her feet.

I say nothing. When the Crysian’s power is within me, speech often seems like a trivial, burdensome activity. Words are clumsy instruments to interpret one’s being.

“Six thousand!” Hazard shouts.

“Alpha strike now!”

*Galatea*’s phasers shoot into space and catch the strike cruiser as it begins its turn, dropping three shields and producing long scorch marks along its sides. Our strike causes hull breaches on at least four decks, and the resulting ion cascade that washes over the ship is brutally spectacular.

Oh, and *Dieppe* fires a photon torpedo that misses its target badly.

I can feel the exhilaration rise all over the ship, a rising tide that lifts all hopes. *Necessary Duty* fires a port phaser on us as we pass, and then an aft, but they don’t strike any of our vulnerable shields.

“High energy turn now, Mr. Kollos.” Latham instructs. “We’ll overrun and fire all available weapons into their exposed shields.”

“Performing high energy turn.”

*Galatea*, almost in defiance of the laws of physics, suddenly pivots and finds herself about eight clicks off the ISC's stern. Unfortunately, that's when we eat the mine that the strike cruiser just launched.

"Direct hit to number three shield." Hazard says. "We were damned lucky we hadn't finished orienting ourselves." *If it had detonated outside our exposed number two shield...*

As usual, Ivan's statement of the obvious is flatly ignored. "Steady, Mr. Kollos. I want a good view of that thing's undercarriage."

There's a flash of light that briefly illuminates the strike cruiser's starboard section, and *Dieppe* fires a phaser-2 into its number 4 shield and weakens it to 93%. Good job, people.

Our strike is more effective. Two phaser-1s and a phaser-2, magnified to be far more effective than they ought to be, rape the ISC's exposed hull. We can see explosions on at least six decks. The strike cruiser immediately veers away from us and runs as fast as its warp engines will take them. Even the vengeance of the Veltressai wasn't enough to keep them in the fight. We've won.

Latham immediately gets out of the Captain's chair and inspects T'Doroth. "Dr. Bradley, we have a medical emergency. I'll need you to prep Type K Vulcan blood. Mr. Hazard, you have the con."

"Aye sir."

"Mr. Said, you look like you have questions, so follow me."

Lars and a security detail quickly arranges a stretcher party for T'Doroth, who's clearly taken massive internal bleeding.

"Sir, the Lansrum?" I ask when we get into the turbolift. The doors don't close fast enough for anyone's taste right now.

"The ISC suspected we'd attempt to transplant the Crysian. Those creatures are telepathic assassins, ordered to act the moment it became apparent they wouldn't have a chance to grab her for themselves. Very nasty."

"You make it sound like she's a major prize in the war."

"That's because she is," Latham tells me, and he stops me to inspect the Vulcan's white face. "T'Doroth..." he moans in a tone that makes it one of the least encouraging sentences I've ever heard.

## V: Unfinished Business

*“The avenues of Shikaar  
Logic’s brown labyrinth which burns  
White beneath La’shark’s grim gaze.  
This is where my vision takes you, T’Doroth.  
Where the people walk with precision of clocks.  
Where my voice longs to speak your name.*

*Your Vulcan heart arrests, but cannot stay  
My deep emotions which now flow  
Like sand rapids churned by desert currents.  
They are wild movements in a still, grave place.  
We should be dancing in the dust, you and I,  
For I long to see you dance with me.  
I want to see your brown eyes open,  
To bask in the reflected gleam of an orange sun...”*

“Kenneth!” Latham places his hand on my shoulder, nudging me as I stare upon the comatose T’Doroth.

*"A pallid funeral face reflecting  
The sterile gleam of soft Sickbay lights..."*

"Kenneth! Poetry is not going to awaken her." Latham swallows. "Especially yours."

I respond with a galactic-class scowl. "Doctor, through circumstances even more convoluted than the one that put me in command, you're now my Captain." I reply. "You're welcome to be my Captain. But please don't expect me to accept friendly jibes. I reserve that privilege for my *real* friends."

Latham appears genuinely wounded. "Have I really done something that bad?" he asks.

"Absolutely," I reply. "I used to have some respect for Starfleet. Please note my use of the 'past tense'."

Latham almost breaks into laughter. "You're still an adolescent at heart, Kenneth. That romantic view of the universe of yours would be charming if it weren't so obsolete."

"Why are they obsolete?" I reply.

"We're at war." Latham gives the obvious answer. "The freedom of trillions is at stake, you know this as well as I do. And in war, personal feelings – especially your sort of romantic pride – are the first casualty."

"We've been at war for most of the last ten years," I observe. "It's a miracle any of us has got any pride left."

"That doesn't change things, Kenneth."

"You manipulated me." Sometimes the simple truths are the ones that needed to be stated. "I knew what was at stake, and I was more than willing to sacrifice. But... there are limits, doctor."

"Fine." Latham says. "Your feelings, your forgiveness and especially your poetry are all insignificant compared to what we face. And so are mine. Our enemy – so much like ourselves, except for their disregard for freedom – is winning this war."

"I noticed," I say.

"And you know truly frightens me? The ISC are allied to the Organians. Organians. Beings who have evolved millions of years beyond any of the galactic races."

"Pacifists." I note. "We both know that."

"Meddlers," Latham counters. "We both know *that*. With powers beyond our ability to comprehend, let alone defeat. Your Crysian may be the only weapon we've got to counter that advantage. We're insignificant. She's not. They had to use you - *I* had to use you - because this baroque manipulation was our best chance to get her aboard a Federation ship."

"But she's not a weapon," I say. "Or a soldier."

"No. She's an entity who should be transplanted onto a world where she can live her life peacefully for the rest of her days," Latham admits. "And you're an engineer who should be happily spit-polishing a Jeffries' Tube. And Greg should still be alive and experiencing the many kindnesses that exist in this universe, so he could forget the Hell he had to endure on Gwai. And I shouldn't be anywhere near command, or any place that forces me to violate my Hippocratic Oath. Unfortunately..."

"...we can't always get what we want."

"I was going to say that when the universe goes insane, only a madman or a fool expects things to be as they *should* be..." Latham replies, a reply that's interrupted when T'Doroth begins to stir. I can feel her presence in my mind, a candle that suddenly lights in the darkness.

"...Captain..." It's amazing that even when a Vulcan is waking from a coma, they're still more controlled and composed than most humans can hope to be. "We are out of danger?"

"Tactically yes. Strategically no." Latham answers.

"Those creatures..."

"They were horrible, I'm sure." Latham replies.

“No. Pitiabile would be a more accurate description.” T’Doroth answers, logic permeating her disoriented state. “The Lansrum did not accompany the ISC by choice. A certain number of the planet’s telepaths are gifted to the Concordium at their time of ripening by planetary elders who fear their power...”

“I’m sure that the Doctor would recommend that you get some rest, Lieutenant.” I interrupt. She bristles at the sound of my voice.

“A Doctor would, perhaps.” Latham replies. “Your Captain, on the other hand, will request a full and detailed report when it’s safe for you to provide it. And Kenneth...”

“What?”

“Most friendships experience a few setbacks. Don’t discard them so quickly.”

Something in what Latham said brings home the changes in my life. Yes, I used to crawl around Jeffries’ Tubes, and perform simple engineering duties for pleasure. Then somehow, somewhere, my life had turned into something from a dramatic serial, a neverending tangle of relationships. In the days that followed our battle with the ISC, most of my relationships reached a state of equilibrium, as if awaiting the next great event of my life to throw them into upheaval.

Francis and I are a mix akin to matter and antimatter, but such combinations fuel starships, so we continued to nurture each other and draw strength. Francis’s relations with the rest of the ship are poor at best – once again, he isn’t a popular member of his crew – and I get the impression that he longs for a good shore leave where he can behave as irresponsibly as he can possibly get without spending the rest of his life in the brig.

Gbeji and I have settled into a professional relationship, slightly cool but not cold. Her abilities as an engineer aren’t particularly held in high regard (nor do they deserve to be, although I wouldn’t say she was an incompetent). I supervise her duties, and when things go well, we smile slightly at each other. She’s dating Ensign Rigney now and they seem to be pretty happy together.

Lars and I have never really discussed the issues that bother him about me, the ones I uncovered during my link with the Crysian. I know he’s not the sort of man who’d appreciate being told about telepath intrusion. Nonetheless we often socialize, mostly judo bouts and poetry readings, and occasionally we join the ship’s meditation circle. Only once does either of our masks drop; one day, after we’ve had a particularly grueling judo session, I ask him when he was planning to hold the wedding between Ivan Hazard and his sister. One of the Efrosian rites that Lars had secretly sprung on Hazard was a troth ritual, designed to make the commander part of his family.

“What?” Lars wonders, staring at me in disbelief.

“I... I saw some of the Efrosian relics in your quarters awhile back, and I saw Mr. Hazard’s badge on the circle of betrothal.” I stammer, desperately trying to think of anything that would cover what I discovered. “I’m sure you were joking.”

“The symbology of the *Apotishyi* is a rather arcane subject,” Lars continues to wonder what I know - and how I know it.

“I guess it was a joke,” I smile.

“No, you’re simply mistaken.” Lars replies. But it’s a lie. He quickly excuses himself.

Ivan Hazard and I, now relieved of the burden of the command/subordinate relationship, have become very close friends. We socialize a lot together, from judo to (unwanted) double dates

between us and some pretty Ensigns from *USS Dixon*. I think we'd probably get even closer if I didn't make for the galaxy's worst drinking buddy.

"The only reason you put up with my company is because you're spying on my relationship with the Crysian," I tell him one evening. We've stayed up until the early morning hours, turning our discussion of the original Doolittle raid (and the horrible things that happened to *them*) into a broad discussion of our native military traditions, dominated by detailed descriptions of a nigh-legendary historical regiment named "the Princess Pats". He's drunk, sitting on a backward facing chair with a beer in hand. I'm half-lying on my bunk, not drunk, but fatigue's become an acceptable substitute. Francis is sleeping, quiet as ever, nestled face down on a pillow in a crumpled bunk while displaying his broad back muscle and protruding buttocks. We ignore him. Dido sleeps most of the time, as usual, but periodically she gets up, does a circle around the room, and lies back down again.

"You think so?" Hazard smirks like a card player who fakes an emotion to cover the fact he can't keep up his pokerface. "I'm a spy?"

"You tell me." I smile.

"Of course I am." Ivan tells me, and I nearly fall out of the bunk. "Face it Lieutenant, you're in a telepathic union with an alien entity, and you can draw power beyond human kin..."

"But I've never hurt anyone!" I protest. Well, it's true, unless you count that time on *Ark Royal* when I sent ten people to the infirmary, or anything I did to the ISC (after all, they *are* our enemies).

"Oh Lieutenant," Hazard shakes his head in sad amusement. (As far as the Commander's concerned, my rank may as well be my given name, considering often how he uses it.) "How many Gary Mitchells is going to take before we realize that whenever humans and transcendents unite, the first thing that gets jettisoned is humanity."

Mitchell was an officer aboard *USS Enterprise* who - poor guy - succumbed to alien telepathic invasion and went as mad as a Tellarite in a box about thirty years ago. "So you're worried I'm going to go crazy?" I ask, unintentionally looking over at Francis.

"No, I'm worried you're going to become dangerous." Ivan replies, taking a swig. "Am I wrong?"

I choose to ignore the question. "Why on Earth would even you tell me that you suspect I'm going to become a threat to this ship?"

"I'm a damned poor liar. And you're hooked into one of the most powerful telepaths known to man," Ivan deduces. "If anyone expects to keep a secret from you..." He takes another swig.

We quickly change the subject and the revelation of Hazard's suspicions don't really interfere in our relationship. Most of his frustration has been transferred to Latham, whose command he treats with open derision. When he did this to me, I saw it as a challenge, a nuisance, and an occasional threat, but most of the time I rolled with the punches. Latham, on the other hand, is trading ridicule with ridicule. I'm glad no one's come to blows yet.

Then there's T'Doroth. Lady of my Vulcan love verse. The sight of me causes her to physically recoil, not because I've done anything to her, but because she constantly senses my emotions through our empathic link and finds herself as frustrated as Vulcan hell that she's experiencing emotions that she can't possibly control. Yet when things are calm and we've been together for a few minutes, I can sense her mind inch toward mine like a schoolgirl tentatively holding out her hand, and then we enjoy the empathic sharing. It's as it should be. She's one of *us* now.

Like Francis and I, T'Doroth sometimes finds herself drawn to the Crysian's tank at odd hours, and occasionally she'll even enter it and merge with her. I can feel her when she does, her senses venturing far afield, usually to Vulcan, occasionally to old haunts. I'm not sure exactly what she's doing, but roots are important to T'Doroth. Unlike Francis and I, we've never merged with the Crysian at the same time, and so she's managed to maintain some of her privacy. That's okay. Privacy is precious on a starship even when no one aboard's a telepath, and not everyone is a terminal exhibitionist like Francis. Praise Allah.

*Galatea* joins with a five ship task force designated "Sensor Convoy 13"; we go on long patrols while we wait for the Federation to figure out a way to purge the ISC infiltration of the sensor net. There's a lot of interaction between the task force, particularly between *Galatea* and the heavy cruiser *USS Gobugson*. A friendly rivalry develops between our security force and theirs, which culminates in a rugby game held on the surface of Nova Antares IV, a soon to be inhabited Class M world. *Gobugson's* got six times our crew compliment, but we whip their keesters pretty badly, 54-7. I hate to imagine what the score would have been if Wirchenko were still alive.

It's not just the natural physical ability of the crew, which is outstanding. *Galatea* has one dirty little secret that we haven't yet shared with Starfleet: Latham's medical team has measured an average 14% increase in every crewman's physical strength, endurance, and reaction times since the Crysian came aboard; just being in proximity to her has altered us in ways that we've only begun to realize. I don't think she's cognoscent of what she's doing to us – it's spill-over from her natural regenerative cycle.

It's also translated into superior toughness, mental fitness and (unfortunately) heightened aggression. This crew really doesn't need help in acting like Academy recruits, but we're getting it.

Six weeks after the Wash, the Crysian is still slowly regaining her strength. Certainly her augmentations have improved; we're up to 238% shield and weapon output, all while simultaneously augmenting our boarding parties to a level which (while not quite as devastating as my initial rampage on *Ark Royal* so many months ago) would probably be comparable to a prime team composed of a half-dozen Greg Jensens. She keeps her spirits up by going into people's minds and exploring interests. The crew experiences periodic headaches and very interesting dreams. On the days when the Crysian's health sags, her control gets sloppy, and sometimes we share the dreams. She's attracted to images of deep water, of shadow and shaky forms, and those are what we dream, marine echoes. Unfortunately, I can live without them. They remind me too much of Wirchenko's death.

Six weeks after the Crysian was brought aboard, it should be obvious even to an idiot that she'll never regain enough strength to be able to augment *Galatea* to a level where she can protect us from an ISC echelon. Of course that's when we get new orders. Starfleet believes that the Crysian would heal more quickly if she spent some time on a world with conditions similar to the Wash. It makes a certain sense; unfortunately, comet-washes orbiting red giants are as rare as a planet type can get.

"We think we've found one, inside a remote sector." Latham pulls up a starchart and a planetary diagram. Latham's roused us all from our late night's sleep and even T'Doroth is annoyed, but as soon as the starchart lights up, everyone in the briefing room realizes that the last six weeks of relative boredom has come to an abrupt end.

"That's in Romulan space," Lars points out. The observation certainly gets *my* attention.



“Actually, it’s beyond Romulan space, in an area controlled by the ISC.” Latham informs us. “We’ve been told it’s a remote sector, not likely to be patrolled by the Concordium, and we’ve been given permission by our Romulan allies to cross their territory. So that’s our next step. We will proceed to Androthaxis Wash, deposit the Crysian in its ocean, and give her a chance to nurture her strength in a comfortable environment.” He takes a swallow and a deep breath. “Do you foresee a problem, Mr. Said?”

Dammit, he *knows* what the Romulans did to me. But *I* also know how badly she’s longed for free waters, and I won’t deny her a chance to regain that sense of freedom. “No sir,” I reply.

“That settles it,” Latham states, getting to his feet. “Meeting adjourned. Mr. Kollos, we’re breaking orbit. Set course for the Neutral Zone, maximum warp.”

Sometimes, you’ll encounter a hopeless situation that’s made even worse by the teasing of one’s “friends”. Eight days into Romulan space, I’m forced to confront one of the most impossible challenges of my entire life, and my friends can’t wait for the humiliation to begin. Hazard stands beside me and rubs my shoulders without even remotely concealing his glee. “Suck it up, Lieutenant. It’s not all that different from the *kobayashi maru*, except for the physical pain.”

“Don’t tease him, Ivan,” Lars adds from the sideline. “It’s bad enough that we’re throwing our Lieutenant to the wolves.”

“Wolves?” I wonder aloud, looking up at my opponent, the tower of muscle that’s Ensign Brandon Antonio Burke. “This is a bloody kodiak!”

Burke, my opponent in a random draw, is saying nothing, though his facial expression resembles the smile of a wolf or a domesticated canine that’s been caught in a predatory act, someone basking in a guilty pleasure. Lars calls for the match to start. We bow and lock up. I can sense his physical power even before he grabs me, perhaps because (given his twenty centimeter height advantage) I’m at eye level with a massive, hirsute chest that’s visible through his loosely fitting *gi*.

“Anyone want to bet against the kodiak?” Ivan smiles. The entire room, twelve officers, is watching the match with eager anticipation. But not even a Pakled would take that bet.

Fine. Let’s see if I can surprise people. Let’s see if I can surprise myself. I perform a leg sweep, which catches my huge opponent squarely behind the left knee. But it doesn’t buckle. Burke responds with his own leg sweep that sends me hard to my back, and he falls on top of me. Somehow, the leviathan thump of our combined weight doesn’t completely take the fight out of me. I actually kick and squirm a little, but then Burke locks his huge arm around my head and right arm, leans back to press his one hundred and forty-kilogram frame squarely on my sternum, and the entire room winces in sympathetic pain.

“You win...” I croak, breathing a huge sigh of relief when he releases the hold. I ignore the helping hand he offers to pull me to my feet.

“I think you broke him.” Hazard observes, chuckling.

“You okay, sir?” Burke asks.

“I’ll be fine.” I say, ignoring the impulse to cough. “Remind me never to get you upset.”

I lift myself off the mat to the sound of applause. It doesn’t make me feel better. I check myself with a med-tricorder to make sure nothing’s cracked or broken. That’s the last match of the evening in the round robin, so once everyone’s checked the scores and tomorrow’s draw, it’s

time to go. I'm still off-duty, while Ivan's got a half-shift supervision scheduled; we say good-bye as we head out the door. Burke bounces through the door after me.

"Lieutenant, you don't mind if I have a few words with you?"

"I would be afraid for my life if I said 'no', Mr. Burke." I reply. I always allot myself the opportunity to tell five jokes each week (but no more than that, otherwise people might think I have a fully developed sense of humor and mistake me for someone else).

"Not here." Burke says. "Shuttlebay control." *The one place on this ship where we can physically view the Crysian.*

My curiosity is piqued. I nod, and we proceed into the turbolift. It's relatively late, a half-hour before shift change, so the deck's empty and lift traffic's light.

"Has anyone ever told you that you've got a really nice empathic profile?" Burke remarks. "It's one of the best I've ever felt." I'd forgotten he was a telepath. "It's very calm without being too controlled or uncaring, and it's very strong without being overbearing. You've got a wonderful sense of inner balance. Ever since we attuned to your psionic signature, it's been a joy to be around you."

I *really* wonder where he's going with this. "This isn't prelude to recreational empathic sharing, is it?" I ask, scowling.

"Would you object if it were?" Burke asks. He reads my disapproval. "Sorry. I wasn't trying to make it sound like I was bringing you back to quarters after a telepathic date."

"It's not sex, but it is *extremely* intimate, and I'm a very private person." I reply. Sure I do empathy-share with Francis all the time, but that's an uncontrollable side effect of the meld. "Although I am flattered that you like me for my brains." *That's joke number two.*

"Actually sir, I was actually hoping to get some telepathic pointers about making contact with the Guest." Burke replies. "I want to talk with her." I look at him with a surprised glance. Burke, a little embarrassed, continues to walk at a pace that's hard to match toward the shuttlebay. "I see her all the time," he almost whispers. "She sometimes goes into my mind, and it feels... powerful."

"Most telepaths aboard ship avoid her." I note.

"For a telepath, being around her is like staring at the sun," Burke says. "But I never shied away from staring at the sun."

That's when the realization strikes me. "You don't just want to talk with her." I say. "You want to meld."

"Yes sir." Burke admits.

"You know that the Captain and Mr. Lars would never approve."

"With all due respect, Lieutenant, the Captain and Mr. Lars have not given us any standing orders forbidding telepathic contact."

"They weren't expecting need them. That's an oversight, and you know it." I say, half-ready to contact Lars on my communicator.

"Aye sir." Burke says as we arrive in the shuttlebay. Most of the regular systems have been shut down, replaced by my jury-rigged systems to monitor the tank, and we can see the tightly bunched mass of the Crysian swimming slowly around its environs: a claustrophobic shadow, the poor girl. "So are you going to help me?"

"Of course not," I say. I glance at the shuttlebay controls and compulsively perform an inspection of the tank systems. An engineer will be an engineer, especially when they need a diversion.

“I can be very helpful,” Burke protests.

“I don’t care if you want to be my new best friend.” I reply. “Do you know what happens to people who meld with her?”

“None of you were trained telepaths,” Burke counters.

“The Vulcans told me they thought telepaths might get brain-fried sooner. You’re insane to even consider it...” I reply – and that’s when I spot an odd anomaly in the tank monitoring systems. I try to trace it – it’s linked to life support, but requires command access. Only Latham can activate this thing... a failsafe? “You son of a bitch.” I say, and I’m *not* given to swearing.

“Something wrong?”

I give Burke a long, glance through a dark and intense perspective. If things start to go badly for us on *Galatea*, a security officer like him may be able to protect the Crysian in ways I can’t. She’s so vulnerable here, and she’s at the mercy of a few officers who could kill her with the flick of a switch if they felt threatened.

In short, we could *use* him. And he’s willing to be used.

“Come with me, Ensign,” I say, my hand going to his shoulder, and I feel the eagerness in his mind press against me with an almost irresistible force. He’s a candidate, all right.

We open the airlock, enter it, close it behind us, and watch the mass of the Crysian surge ahead, a moving wall in a dense blue fog. We walk into the water, and she shields us. I can feel her kiss my mind, and I tell her what Burke wants.

As with T’Doroth, I am the gateway. First I join with the Crysian, her power filling my mind and body with unlimited puissance, then Burke melds and joins us in the sensation. I suddenly experience his life through his eyes – born in Sicily to a family of Italian telepaths of gypsy descent (his grandfather had been awakened by contact with some nameless alien during his tour on the *NX-Farragut* one hundred and thirty years ago). I live the life of yet another man who may as well have been a eugenics project, pushed by his parents to further his telepathic and athletic prowess. Both talents directed him to a career in Starfleet.

Unfortunately, it’s not all good news. It immediately becomes obvious that Tony has, with the sole exception of the darker episodes of Greg’s life, the most unpleasant history of anyone I’ve ever melded with, a history of bullying and domestic abuse (even a mild punishment is frightening when you get precognitive flashes of it). He’s every bit as egotistical and conceited as Wirchenko told me, and he’s ambitious – this meld is but one step in a carefully laid plan to advance his career. Additionally, he hopes it’ll give him an edge over the other telepaths in his life, most of whom are family, all of whom he distrusts. Nonetheless, he’s nigh-fearless, dedicated to the crew of *Galatea*, and he genuinely respects me (and Lars, for that matter).

We spend about a half-hour together, grappling each other in a tight embrace that’s more telepathic than physical. I have to restrain him from getting sucked into the Crysian. Finally, I sense his fatigue, so I literally drag him out of the airlock and back into the shuttlebay. He lies on his back for minutes, pupils wildly dilated, breathing so hard that I’m worried he might have a stroke. “Wow...” he finally says. “Now that’s what I call a meld.”

“Was that intimate enough for you?” I ask.

“There’s nothing like experiencing someone’s life history in a few minutes.” Burke notes.

“I’m surprised you didn’t die of boredom.” I remark.

“No, it had its moments.” Burke smiles, propping himself with his arms. The boy’s definitely resilient. “Especially when you tore apart that invincible Captain of yours... when you took out the ISC heavy cruiser... the way you handled that Roger person...”

Roger. He's been a lot on my mind lately. "Not to mention being tortured by the Romulans." I add to the list.

"That *was* worse than anything I ever went through." Burke admits. "One of the things I was taught is that family – that is, other telepaths – have a duty to share people's pain and reduce their emotional burdens. Since none of the other people you melded with had a chance to share that experience..."

"That's an interesting offer." I deduce.

"Kenneth, as you noticed when you were going through my head, I'm a bit of a precog." Burke says, getting to his feet. "And I can tell you right now that particular experience is about to become *very* relevant to our lives..."

That's when I receive a signal to report to the bridge. "It always happens at the worst time," I say. "Look Tony, you're going to have to be very careful about hiding this. You're going to be tempted to spend a lot of time around her – and probably me as well..."

"I know sir." Burke puts his huge hand on my shoulder and gives me the equivalent of an empathic noogie. "It's our secret, sir. And sir – one of the things I've seen in the future is that you're probably going to need to seize control of *Galatea*. If that happens, I'm on your side."

The sentence hits me like a sledgehammer fist to the stomach. "I wish that was more comforting." I say, and I leave him alone to do the one thing he wants to do with the totality of his being: to gape in child-like wonder at the telepathic aurora of the Crysian, a sun worshipper who runs onto a white summer beach, seeking the perfect tan – and instead watches his skin blacken in the proximate light of a blue-white sun.

When the turbolift doors open, I see the ship's alert status switch from green to yellow. I'm glad I took a minute to stop by my quarters to change into uniform. Latham suddenly swivels in the Captain's chair, and I'm worried he already knows about my little conspiracy with Ensign Burke.

"Mr. Said, I need you to examine the data at the science station."

I nod, calmly walk over to the station, and jostle with Ivan for a view of the sensor window. "Power signatures. Cloaked ships." I announce, not yet registering the alarm. "It looks like the ISC sensors tech aboard *Galatea* is very sensitive to cloaks."

"That's probably why the Romulans have lost three major engagements to the ISC in the last year," Latham states. "How many Romulans?"

"Hard to tell," I answer. "My best guess is about four of them. One of these signatures looks like it could be a dreadnought, the other three look like heavy cruisers, though I suppose this fuzzy one could be a triad of light cruisers in a tight formation."

"I *told* them that," an annoyed Gbeji mutters under her breath.

"I recommend going to red alert, Captain," Ivan says. "If I recall correctly, the Romulans promised they would avoid our course."

"Romulans keeping their word," I reply. "That'd be a novelty." Of course, I know it's an unfair statement as soon as I say it – the *Tal Praiex* are as honorable as they come. The *Tal Shiar*, on the other hand...

"Another two subspace signatures are converging on us." Kollo is analyzing the course ahead of us and not finding anything good.

"Red alert?" Hazard again asks.

“Negative,” Latham says. “For all we know, they’re here to help.” Hazard and I trade glances, and so do T’Doroth (who only recently returned to duty) and I. “Mr. Hazard, please hail the dreadnought. Open channel.”

“Aye sir,” Ivan grunts in a constipated tone. “Open channel.”

“Romulan vessel, this is Captain James Latham of the Federation starship *Galatea*. No Romulan ships were supposed to approach us on this mission. Would you please explain why you violated our agreement?”

Hazard flicks a switch, and a sly, silver-haired Romulan admiral appears onscreen. “Captain Latham, I am *khre-riov* Inluke Tomarand.” I wish this was unexpected, but between Burke’s precognitive warning, and Roger’s stories about his dealings with *Tal Shiar*, this makes perfect sense. Suria may have held the disruptor that killed Roger Price, but this man – the “garotte-general” of the *Tal Shiar* held Suria’s leash. “An alarming ISC presence has been spotted in this sector. Naturally, we came to protect our allies.”

He’s lying through his teeth (and Latham knows it) nonetheless we’re badly outgunned. “I thank you for your assistance, *khre-riov*, but we would prefer that you withdraw.”

“I do not understand what would motivate such a dangerous request,” Tomarand says, fencing well. “Of course we will comply, and I hope I have *not* offended you. Please allow us to make amends. We humbly invite you and your senior staff to dinner aboard my ship. It has been far too long since Starfleet has gotten a taste of what the *Rihannsu* have to offer.”

Cute. Roger told me Tomarand was the kind of man who loved nothing better than to twirl his mustache. Unfortunately, there’s no real way to avoid this, and James also knows it.

“Fine. Would six hours give you enough time to prepare?” Latham sighs.

“Make it seven, just to be on the safe side.” Tomarand replies, and the viewscreen abruptly goes blank.

“Guess what the main course is going to be,” Ivan snaps, looking at me. Everyone else is lost in silence, except Gbeji.

“I thought it was a generous offer,” she says, a little timidly. “I’ve heard their food is really quite good, and their ale is legendary...”

“Ensign,” I reply sadly. “I don’t think you know my history with the *Tal Shiar*, This is a trap, pure and simple.”

“I’ve heard of wolves in sheep’s clothing,” Hazard says, “but who ever heard of the sheep going naked?”

“You do not have to come, Mr. Said.” Latham tells me.

I take a deep, sharp breath. “It’s more important to protect *Galatea* than me. If Tomarand’s planning to trap me to find out what I know about the Argos, it’d be better if he tries to take me aboard his ship than here.” I reply. “So let’s see if Romulan cuisine lives up to its billing, okay?”

The Romulan flagship is the RIS *Rheto’shran*, which roughly translates into the name RIS Phoenix. Apparently on Romulus something resembling a phoenix actually does exist; during spawning season, the mother-birds feed directly from the firefalls of Romulus to provide fuel for their eggs, even though the firefalls badly burn them. I have no idea why anyone would want to name their ship after a suicidal breed of kestrel, but it’s questions such as these that demonstrate just what a poor grasp I’ve got on the way the universe works.

“Romulans never name anything without a reason,” Francis informs me, handing me my dress uniform.

Formal dress uniforms, even ones as comfortable as the ones worn by Starfleet, always seem like they're a mutant breed of a straight jacket. "So the name indicates just how far the people on that ship will go to protect the Romulan empire?"

"In according with the principles of *mnhei'sahe*, Romulan honor." Francis replies. "Kenneth! You're the last person I'd expect to sleep through an Academy cultural lecture!"

"I wasn't sleeping, I was busy pondering the mysteries of their cloaking device," I protest, struggling with my uniform's top button. "Who designed these?" I finally growl after it fails to button for the fourth time. "I hate formal dress uniforms. They always feel like they were meant to be worn by over-the-hill admirals at Starfleet cadet parades."

"Quit grouching," Francis says. "You were born to wear that uniform, it's a natural fit."

"Are you saying I'm an over-the-hill admiral?"

"No. Just terminally stiff," Francis says with a laugh. Dido lifts her head to give him an odd look.

I finally finish fitting into my uniform, which is much too tight around the neck, shoulders, and chest (I guess in the last year I've added a reasonable amount of muscle to my lanky Arabic frame) and head to the transporter room. All the senior staff will be going, except for T'Doroth, who's still a little worse for wear from her experience with the Crysian and the ISC. (Not to mention the traditional animosity between Romulans and the Vulcans – and I thought the Turks could hold a grudge!)

"So when do you expect them to spring the trap?" Ivan leans over to me and whispers wryly in my ear.

"Why?" I whisper back. "Did somebody start a pool down in security? Put me down for two hours, forty minutes."

I suppose the levity helps us deal a little better with this *kobayashi maru* scenario, but Latham's not laughing. Latham tells us to be silent, then injects us each with a small subdermal security device. "We stay within ten meters of each other, or *Galatea* gets a signal to transport us back aboard ship."

"You got any subdermal phasers?" Ivan jokes.

"I'm carrying one." Lars quips. Everyone but Latham gives him an odd look. "Seriously, I'm packing: a phaser and a tool kit. It's a reasonable precaution for this type of mission."

"Just don't ask him where it's implanted." Ivan smiles, and we shake his head in disbelief.

"Don't." Lars answers his friend. "It's not very comfortable."

We step on the pad. "Keep an eye on each other." Latham instructs us, even though it's one of the last things in the universe we need to be told. "This *is* a combat mission." I notice James picking up a long, narrow box from the corner of the room. A gift perhaps?

"Wish I had a phaser." Ivan says, and we beam over to the Romulan ship.

I've been told Romulan vessels have come a long way from the stoic, utilitarian warships that originally inspired humans to mangle the *Rihannsu* name after a variation of the Roman Empire. The transporter room is spacious, its walls a moving painting of assorted birds of prey flying over a rather pretty volcano landscape.

"Welcome to RIS *Rheto'shran*," a tall Romulan officer says, a young man with jet-black hair and dark eyes to match. "I am *erei-riov* Telegron."

"Thank you, Sub-commander," Latham responds, translating his rank. "I am Dr. James Latham. This is my first officer, Commander Hazard, my chief engineer, Lieutenant Said, my third officer, Lieutenant Kollos, my chief of security Lieutenant Lars, and Ensign Gbeji."

“So many bridge officers in one place?” It’s an obvious observation, but one which I’m surprised he’d openly make.

“Many of my crew wanted to experience your hospitality,” Latham lies through his teeth, and he hands the lanky Romulan the gift box. “This is meant to be presented to the *khre-riov*. A gift to be opened after the dinner.”

“Thank you, though your company is gift enough.” Telegron answers courteously. “Now please follow me.”

It isn’t a long walk from the transporter room to the dining hall – I guess the Romulans wanted us to see as little of their ship as possible, and we’re led into a surprisingly large chamber. The ceiling and the upper walls is a viewscreen projection of surrounding space, and the room is lit by point lights only slightly brighter than candles. The dining table is circular, and a burly Romulan chef is busily cooking in the center. Long plates, ceramic with gold plating, are set into one of twelve places in the setting, with several golden forks set diagonally next to each plate as well as five small bowls in which assorted spicy sauces have been poured. They obviously expect us to do a lot of drinking, as there are at least three goblets for every person.

“I guess we’re being poisoned in style,” Hazard whispers again. But I don’t really hear what he has to say. At the head of the table is Tomarand, resplendent in a gold leaf foil and black dress uniform, decorated with a scarlet and green sash on which the titles of his noble house have been written in ancient script (like ancient Vulcan and Arabic, the calligraphy is absolutely exquisite). But my eye is drawn to the woman at his side, wearing a sky-blue dress across which hologram birds slowly glide, and a red scarf over her Romulan hair.

It’s Tashayl Suria. Roger’s killer.

“You seeing a ghost?” Ivan reacts to my reaction.

My reply’s barely audible. “No. Just someone who deserves to *be* one,” I retort, and I take a cue from Latham’s face and put on the phoniest smile imaginable. Ivam gets the message – he gives me a very quick pat on the back for support.

“Dr. Latham.” Tomarand rises to his feet and addresses us with his own mastercrafted grin. “So good of you to come. Allow me to introduce *Arrain* Tamask...” he points to a big *sraes* who’s probably his chief of security, “...my culture officer *Arrain* Taradin,” he motions at an older Romulan man who looks incredibly bored, “and *daise-fvrihai* Suria, who’s joined us on a trading mission.”

*Like hell she has.* I’m so disgusted by the lie that I almost blurt it out. If I were still Captain... well, who knows what I would have done if I still were in command of *Galatea*.

“Thank you, *khre-riov*,” Latham bows, taking his place on the table next to Tamask. Of course, I’m seated next to Suria. “Interesting lighting you’ve chosen...”

“The *Rihanssu* prefer to dine under the stars, Doctor.” Tomarand replies. “Under the watchful eye of our ancestors.”

“...who curse you if they witness you performing any misdeeds at table.” I add curtly. *No Francis, I wasn’t sleeping through that lecture.*

“You seem well acquainted with our customs, Mr. Said,” Tomarand notes.

“That should not come as a surprise to you, sir.” I reply, as openly insulting as I can get and still maintain the cloak of diplomacy. “And moreso for the lady here.”

Suria blinks, then leans back in her chair, saying nothing.

“And of course, I should introduce our chef, Mr. Travarus.” Tomarand demurely changes the subject. “He is, in my humble estimation, one of the great treasures of *Ch’Havran*.”

“We look forward to sampling his skill,” Latham says.

“Then let us begin.” Tomarand says, “with the custom of my house. May everyone please stand?” We get to our feet, though I’m hardly in the mood to honor his request. He begins the dinner with what passes for grace among the Romulans, “I invoke the memory of my grandfather, Irego Tomarand, *riov* of the Blinding Star, to watch down on us and ensure that I do proper homage to his memory and the hospitality of his table.”

Irego Tomarand. I’ve heard stories about the man, who was the “official” head of the *Tal Shiar* in the 2260s, when the Romulans first reintroduced themselves to the Federation by destroying our neutral zone outposts and murdering hundreds of Federation citizens. Since then, I can’t say they’ve improved very much. But the speech is stirring – Tomarand’s tongue is smoother than a polyprotein finish. Then Tomarand looks at Latham so he can select one of *his* ancestors to watch over us. But before James can speak, I interrupt the proceedings.

“I invoke the memory of my friend Roger Price who, like the *Rheto’shran*, chose the path of sacrifice, so his comrades could live and honor his memory.” I state, looking at Suria. She’s expressionless. “He had rough manners, and was often a poor guest, but some things are more important than appearances.” I add, unbuttoning the top button of my ship.

Latham sighs slightly, but only slightly. Tamask, the big security chief, looks really upset, to the point where he sending Tomarand an unspoken signal that they should walk away. But the insult only makes Tomarand’s smile broaden. “Alas, poor Roger. Few Federation citizens have been such a *good* friend to the Romulan Empire. But you really should invoke a family member, Lieutenant.”

“I was,” I counter. “We spent days together, naked in a constrained space as tight as a womb, sharing each other’s pain. In that way, he was like a twin brother to me, *khre-riov*.”

“Point taken.” Tomarand purrs. “Now let us feast. Mr. Travarus, let Mr. Said be the first one to be served.” Travarus beats a piece of meat to tenderize it, slices it finely, then serves it with diced bulbs which remind me of baby turnips. “You vocalize yourself quite well, Lieutenant. Do I detect an actor’s training?”

“There’s no acting in what I just said,” I reply.

“Come now, all starship officers are thesbians,” Taradin, the culture officer, asks. “Is acting not a requirement at your Academy?”

“No.” Hazard replies; I guess the tension in the air’s a little too thick even for *his* taste, and that’s saying something – Hazard’s the sort of person who could have given Thomas Paine lessons in agitation. “There’s an old tradition that everyone in the Academy has to take part in a performance of an old melodramatic serial...”

“*Flash Gordon*,” Kollo, who had been watching the proceedings with her usual quiet, clinical interest – finally speaks up. “We get a cast together, stage a performance, then three days later a new cast plays out the next chapter in the serial... it’s been running continuously for over a century.”

“Is this some great work of literature?” Taradin wonders.

“Oh hell no,” Ivan almost breaks out into laughter. “It’s wretched. Shockingly bad, Melodrama, as I said before, of the worst kind. It’s just a way to blow off steam when things get too intense at the Academy. It’s actually a lot of fun.” Ivan leans back with a bit of a heroic pose. “I was Flash.”

“The title role.” Tomarand smiles. “And you, Mr. Said? What part did you play?”

“I was a Clay Person,” I admit. “A victim of evil magic who could walk through walls.”



“That sounds like your curse turned into a useful talent,” Tamask reluctantly pipes up. I notice that Suria’s not saying anything – having been served the first course of her meal, she’s grinding the meat in her mouth like a wolf gnawing a bone. Tamask keeps a very watchful eye on her.

“Useful talents often come with a very steep price tag,” I say. I turn to Kollos. “Let me guess, you played... Princess Aura.”

“No, I was the queen of the Frost People.” Kollos says. “I think she was named Allura. Human subtlety at work.”

“Subtlety is not a strength I have observed in your species,” Tomarand notes through a sharp smile.

“There was certainly none to be found in *that* production,” Kollos affirmed. “*Oh icy cage of winter, I summon thee! The blizzard’s fury, I thrust at thee...*” She indicates that she performed the line with an accompanying pelvic thrust. Ivan swallows hard to avoid spitting his turnips. “So I imprisoned Flash with my ‘terrifying ice magic’.” She turns to Gbeji. “So did you play a part, Ensign?”

“I was Dale,” she says. “And I was very good, too!”

I look over at Lars. “And you were...”

“Either Ming, or Baran, I’d guess,” Hazard says.

“I wanted to be Ming,” Lars replies, wondering whether this conversation was worth the effort. “But I arrived too late to get the part, and I ended up playing ‘Second Hawkman Guard’. The harness was extremely uncomfortable. I wondered why they never used a gravitic tractor. And those wings...”

“Gravitic tractors and realistic wings would have looked too good.” Hazard explains. “If it ain’t hokum, it ain’t *Academy Flash Gordon*. So what about you, Doctor? What part did you play?”

Latham looks directly at me when he answers. “I was Flash too,” he says.

And here I would have sworn he would have played Zharkov. Shows you what I know. Mind you, I’d have pegged Greg Jensen for a Flash, but he ended up losing a coin toss to Scott Pallamas and played Sharko, King of the Shark-Men, instead. He was supposed to run around in swim trunks and wrestle Flash for about thirty seconds before getting beaten, but both he and Pallamas (Flash) got so bored by the fight scene proposed by the director that they cooked up their own twenty minute fight sequence without telling anyone. It ended up bringing down the house, both figuratively and (almost) literally.

“So what is the theme of this... *Flash Gordon*?” Taradin asks.

“A human hero comes upon tribes of aliens whose petty differences allow them to be exploited by a tyrant.” Latham explains. “The hero unites the quarreling people through a series of courageous acts. Together they bring the tyrant down.”

Tomarand takes a sip of Romulan ale. “You are quite correct, Mr. Hazard. It *is* a melodrama.”

“Do you an acting background, *khre-riov*?” Latham asks.

“As an adolescent, on *Ch’Rihan* (what you humans mistakenly call Romulus) I acted in a number of theater companies. I was most fond of the part of the Seventh Sword in Tromarak’s *The Assassin*.”

“But you choose a different career.” Latham’s just continuing the conversation.

“Pretense is for children. And it requires the actor to constantly confront emotional pain,” Tomarand replies. “I suppose I got tired of *that* very quickly.”

“The wine is excellent,” Gbeji says, and she’s right.

“Your courtesy is appreciated, Ensign,” Tomarand replies politely. “More *revindor*, anyone?”

“I didn’t realize Romulans liked their meals so spicy.” Hazard notes, taking a swig of scented-water. The *revindor*, a spiced fermented meat, is rather strong for the terran palette. I wonder if Vulcan dishes are this challenging?

It quickly becomes obvious that Suria can’t keep her eyes off me (and truth to tell, it’s hard for me to stop looking at her). Let’s confront it directly. “So, *daise-fvrhai*,” I smile wolfishly. “How have you been doing since our last meeting?”

“Frustrated,” Suria says. “I left some business unfinished, and it gnaws at me.”

I nod toward the big security officer and then back to Suria. “You’ve done an admirable job of coping.”

“The best is yet to come,” Suria replies, and for the first time, Tomarand visibly frowns. “I’m quite tired, *khre-riov*.”

“Obviously,” Tomarand says sharply. “You should return to your quarters, *daise-fvrhai*.” It’s phrased as a suggestion, but men like Tomarand *don’t* make suggestions. Suria rises from the table and, giving me a glance filled with the promise of once and future pain, she leaves. Tamask follows her exit with a certain lunatic obsession in his eyes. Suria’s staying true to form; she still likes her men physically large and socially challenged.

“Have you had many problems with the ISC?” Gbeji asks, trying to find common ground with the Romulans. It’s a hopeless effort, though one has to admire her persistence.

“Quite a few, although the Gorn corridor is less well defended than ours, we’re a much quicker way for them to the Klingon Empire.”

“And as much as we have issues with the Klingons,” Taradin adds, “the ISC has come to the conclusion that breaking them will break the spirit of the quadrant. Safeguarding the route into Klingon space has become a priority.”

“You’ve worked together before.” Latham says, referring to the Klingon-Romulan alliance during the General War.

“*Never* gladly.” Taradin growls.

“I would have thought that the ISC defeat at Pholos would ease the pressure on the Federation front,” Tomarand observes. “Instead, they’ve redoubled their efforts, especially around Ruerte Sang and Monoceros.”

“They are persistent,” Latham agrees. “Every time we hand them a defeat, we lose the next five engagements. Same with the Klingons. Same with you.”

“Which brings me to your mission,” Tomarand says. “Oh, I know you won’t discuss the particulars. But it doesn’t take a genius to calculate your course. I confess the curiosity is killing me.”

“Better curiosity than the ISC,” Latham says. “I hope you realize that the success of our mission will be of extreme benefit to everyone involved.”

“Unless of course, the ISC decides to concentrate its efforts on closing the routes into their empire,” Tomarand counters. The remark throws a bucket of ice cold water onto what’s already chilly proceedings. “After all, people can have the most remarkably adverse reaction to invasion.” And, in what’s probably been the five hundredth pointed glance of the evening, Tomarand looks directly at me, and through me. “It’s annoyed me on several occasions.”

We conclude our meal (they decide to follow human custom and offer dessert as the final course – it’s an oddly sweet and spicy sponge-cake), and Telegron brings out the gift box and hands it to Latham, who in turn hands it to Tomarand. “A gift, *khre-riov*.”

“Tamask, if you would do the honors...” Tomarand isn’t in a trusting mood. He hands the long box to his chief of security (who’s returned from comforting Suria). He draws a large, sophisticated scanner and inspects the package for nearly a minute.

“It’s metal.” Tamask growls. “There is no electronic mechanism, no biological agents... I believe it is safe.” Tomarand nods and gestures him to open it. The big security guard does so – then throws down the box in disgust.

“How dare you!” he snaps. Lars is instantly on his feet and interposing himself between Latham and the angry Romulan.

“Why, Tamask, whatever is the matter?” Tomarand wonders. Tamask picks up the box and displays its contents to the Romulans. It’s a sword.

“It’s an antique,” Latham says. “This saber is over three hundred years old. It was wielded by a brave English soldier in the Battle of Balaclava.”

“Dr. Latham,” Tomarand says through a smile that threatens to turn into a snarl at any moment. “You *are* aware that when an enemy sends us a sword, that’s meant as a challenge, are you not?”

Latham feigns surprise. “And when an ally sends a sword as a gift, it’s a sign that we wish to support you in battle, even if the situation doesn’t let us fight by your side.” He looks at Tamask. “Why would you assume the gift is an insult, *arrain*?”

“Forgive us, Captain,” Telegron, who’s been largely silent throughout the proceedings, motions Tamask to sit down. “We have endured much lately. Everyone’s tempers are on edge.”

Tomarand simply laughs and takes up the blade, weighing it carefully. “You come bearing a double edged sword, Dr. Latham. A man could learn to respect an opponent with such tastes.”

“I am not an opponent, *khre-riov*.” Latham states.

“A pity it has no mate,” Tomarand says – I get the impression that if it were possible, he’d be fencing with Latham with more than just words. “Such a charming relic. It clearly dates from a time when one’s life depended on the quality of such blades.”

“It does.”

“Then how can I possibly take offense at such a gift?” Tomarand smiles. “Tamask, let this be a lesson not to take offense so quickly. We’re not Klingons, you know.”

“Yes, *khre-riov*,” Tamask grunts like Hazard when he’s given a contradictory order.

We get up from the table and talk with the Romulans as we’re served our final drinks. We’re thoroughly liquored, except for me, since I’ve foresworn the stuff. I sense Tomarand waiting for just the right opportunity to corner me, and I don’t make it easy for him. It takes him about an hour to finally accomplish it.

“I have wanted to meet you for a long time.” Tomarand says. “And you look like a man who has something to say.”

“I have a question.”

“Ask it.”

“Why didn’t you have the decency to return Roger’s body?”

Tomarand pauses for a few seconds. Swallowing his drink quickly, he flashes me another fake smile. “I also had something that needed to be returned to me. Nobody ever quite had the decency to bring it back. It feels terrible, doesn’t it?”

“I want his body sent home to his family.” I snap, implicitly threatening one of the five most powerful Romulans in the entire Empire, on his own flagship no less.

“You must have been very close to him. I know you were, you see, because I was close to him too, and you were one of his favorite subjects. In fact, he once told me that he planned to kill you.”

“I don’t believe you.” I say, but it’s a lie. I knew how homicidal Roger could be.

“I did try to dissuade him – I don’t know if I was effective or not, but you may very well owe me your life, Kenneth Said.” I say nothing, and the lack of emotional response begins to grate on him. “Might I suggest that you show a little more gratitude to me?”

“Suppose I asked you for Suria’s life in exchange for the Argos...” I haltingly propose. “What would you say to that?”

“I’d say, give me the Argos, and you’ll have her head transported into your quarters within the hour.” Tomarand promises.

I could almost laugh. Trusting the word of a *Tal Shiar*, on the other hand, would rank as a mistake of cosmic proportions. “Return Roger’s body to Westminster, and I’ll consider it.” Tomarand doesn’t look convinced, but before he can express his doubts, Latham grabs me.

“It’s time to return to *Galatea*, Lieutenant,” he says. Tomarand clearly looks disappointed. I’m expecting him to make his move to corral us now, but he doesn’t. The six senior officers of *Galatea* quickly make their way back to the transporter room, and we return to the ship without hindrance. Nor has *Galatea* been boarded by Romulan marines, which was the other scenario that played in our heads. Latham gives us all a thorough tricorder inspection (being replaced by a surgically altered Romulan double during transport was one of the more improbable scenarios, but we’re not taking chances).

“This doesn’t make sense,” Kolloos echoes everyone’s concerns. “This was the ideal time for them to attack *Galatea*. They wouldn’t forego it.”

Latham nods grimly. “Mr. Said, take this ship apart if you have to, but if the Romulans have sabotaged us – “ That’s the only remaining scenario left unexplored. “I want it stopped before we go to warp.”

“Aye aye, sir,” I reply, and I signal Gbeji to return with me to engineering. It’s going to be a *long* night for everyone aboard *Galatea*, but for the engineers, it’s going to be a special night in Hell.

## VI: Every Dog's Day

Fourteen hours after returning from the *RIS Rhetoshran*, I'm into my third shift without a break. We're making the assumption (over Security's strident objections) that the Romulans found some way to compromise our ship.

"You know what would be really funny?" Gbeji muses as we approach the fifteenth hour, the last four spent on a relay-by-relay inspection of the sensor grid. "If the Romulans didn't do a thing to us, because they knew we'd be so suspicious that we'd paralyze ourselves looking for sabotage."

"Sorry Gbeji," I snap. "My laughter has been delayed on account of lack of sleep."

"I wish you'd laugh more, Lieutenant," Gbeji says. "You've got a very nice smile."

"I'll be smiling again... once we've found what I'm looking for."

Gbeji adjusts the main sensor grid, checking for residual images when it's turned on and off. "No ghosts, Lieutenant. There's another theory we can cross off the list."

"Negative, Ensign. Adjust the sensors by thirty degree arcs and repeat the test," I instruct. She visibly sighs – it's no fun to repeat a routine task eleven times. "I was expecting to find two acts of Romulan sabotage, the first being the one we were *meant* to find, and the second being the *real* act of sabotage."

"I think we'd have found the first by now," Gbeji observes.

"Yes, Ensign," Dr. Latham says, walking into sensor control. He does a cursory inspection of the subspace relay control, which is meant to record any transmission picked up by the ship.

"Security swears there was no intrusion," he informs me.

"I'm inclined to trust them, but I know how efficient the *Tal Shiar* can be..." I reply. Illumination from the panel lights up Latham's face, giving his beard a sinister blue-green tint. "You actually act like you know what that panel does," I say.

“We’ve had a number of close approaches by cloaked shuttlecraft, and there were eighteen transmissions broadcast by the Romulans at this ship. We’re looking at each transmission for hidden instructions.” Latham tells me, ignoring the insult.

“Get Francis working on it,” I suggest. “Gable’s brilliant at that sort of thing.”

“If he can keep his focus,” Latham says. “That’s always a problem for him.”

“Focus? Francis can’t even clothe himself, let alone focus.” I scoff. The observation brings a smile to Latham’s face. “So what else is happening?”

“Security is walking along the exterior hull, checking every millimeter for cloaked packages.”

“It sounds like we’re the busiest ship in the fleet,” I say. “I can’t think of anything else we should do. By the way, I really liked your gift. I know you weren’t insulting the Romulans on my behalf, but I profoundly enjoyed the gesture.”

Latham smiles slightly. “I knew you would have a special appreciation for it. They may outnumber us, they may cripple, capture, or even destroy us, but I’m not going down without at least one act of defiance.”

“I felt the same way,” I admit. “Which probably explains my behavior. I’m not normally so insulting...”

“Kenneth, don’t forget to whom you speak,” Latham tells me. “It was my job to study you for months. I *know* you. You’re one of those rare individuals who becomes more competent the angrier he gets.”

“That’s the Greg in me.” I shrug.

“No,” Latham replies. “When Jensen got angry, all hell broke loose, so he just learned how to fake anger and unleash it at the appropriate moment. Jensen could never afford to lose emotional control.”

“I remember.” I say, and I turn to Gbeji. “How are you doing with the ghost check?”

“I’m about thirty percent done. Nothing.” Gbeji says.

“You’re far too quick to consign your positive qualities to your ‘meld-mates’, Kenneth.” Latham tells me. “I was impressed by the strength you showed onboard the Romulan flagship. In fact, I was so impressed that I recommended you to Starfleet Intelligence.”

“You did what?!” I shout, forgetting all about the sensors.

“You have what the Romans referred to as ‘testicular strength’.” Latham notes. “Combine that with your intelligence...”

“I’m not ruthless enough, Doctor.” I say, trying to shut down the conversation *now*.

“You’re ruthless enough to negotiate with the head of the *Tal Shiar* for a person’s life,” Latham’s words make me slightly sick to my stomach. “You’re ruthless enough to pluck Mr. Gable from the safety of *Vespera* – a man who’s like a brother to you – and put him into a life-threatening situation. And you’re ruthless enough to condemn a security officer to eventual madness just because you needed an ally to protect the *Crysan*.” Latham says, shaking his head. *Damn, he knows about Burke*. “The last one was a mistake, of course, it shows that you need training. But you have the necessary qualities in abundance. Kenneth, I’ve never known anyone who I thought would make a more outstanding intelligence operative than you.”

“Thank you, Doctor, but Starflint isn’t the Starfleet I joined.” I say. “I want to serve with a clean uniform.”

“The price of freedom is eternal vigilance.” Latham quotes. “And sometimes, vigilance is best done from the shadows, by men in dirty uniforms, people who will do anything for the thirty one sections of the Federation constitution.”

Latham's completed what he came here for – the pitch – but I'd rather serve aboard a freighter. I suppose at some time I should try to sit back and objectively figure out why Starfleet Intelligence is such an anathema to me; I suppose those months in captivity after the initial meld with the Crysian explains most of it, though I've also prided myself in respecting life-forms in ways that Starflint can't. But I have to admit Latham makes a lot of good, uncomfortable points about the person I've become. A few months ago, I was bending over backward to avoid killing members of the ISC. Now, I'm manipulating and abusing close friends. When, in Allah's name, did I become capable of that level of immorality?

And so the hours seem to become, like the famous code, days. And yes, we've looked for contingent triggers, alterations to our warp drive sequence that will kick in a "lower all shields" command after a certain amount of time has passed. Yes, I'm trying so hard to think like a *Tal Shiar* that it's giving me a migraine.

It's been eighty-two nearly sleepless hours since our meeting with the Romulans. I've long abandoned the sensor system, and redundant engineering systems, and hidden files in the main computer... now I'm on the bridge doing a sensor sweep on the nacelles, looking for sensor packages buried just below the ship's skin, since multiple hull inspections have turned up nothing. The bridge crew's reassembled; twelve hours ago, Latham ordered Ivan to get some sleep and a hot shower. He's threatened to put me in the brig unless I do the same. "Just one more scan, Doctor. I'll be in my bunk in twenty minutes, I promise," I say. It's the fifth time I've promised that in the last twenty-four hours.

And that's when Francis bounces out of the turbolift and onto the bridge: naked and completely covered in sweat. Even by Francis's standards, this is a little much. If I wasn't so sleep deprived, I'd find it funny.

"Have you forgotten the uniform code, Mr. Gable?" Latham's in as bad a mood as everyone else on the bridge.

"Oh, who cares about the uniform code?" Francis says with the galaxy's most irritating smile on his face. "I've figured it out. I'd forgotten what an hour of meditation in an Andorian sauna can do for the mental processes. I highly recommend it..."

"Mr. Gable, either put on some clothing, or tell us what you've found." Latham says in a mock-patient tone that promises him a long stay in the brig if he doesn't satisfy him in the next five seconds.

Francis goes over to the science console, where Hazard gives him a wide berth. "As I thought. Computer activity is way above normal."

"That's because we're performing diagnostics on at least seventy different ship systems." Ivan retorts.

"That's a *big* mistake. The diagnostics are..." Francis says, and then he's interrupted by what can best be described as 'all hell breaking loose'. With a rattle and a thump that can be felt throughout the ship, *Galatea's* impulse engines kick in, the ship veers downward and to the left so hard that the inertial dampers can only partially compensate for it, and then we see the slight doppler haze surround the viewscreen that tells us that we've gone to warp.

"Mr. Gable?" Latham's voice is marked by frustration.

"I was too late," Francis shrugs. "I'll head back to the sauna and try again. See you in an hour, Doctor.... Captain... Captain-Doctor..."

“Sir’ will suffice. And you are *not* dismissed.” Latham says, eying the rest of the bridge crew. “Has anyone...”

“I can’t override what’s happening,” Kolloos and Hazard are practically in perfect harmony with that statement.

Latham scowls – we all knew something like this was going to happen, but still... “Red alert!” he calls - fortunately, we’ve still got working internal communications. “Mr. Gable, please tell us what we’re facing.”

“Well, I’m not exactly sure...” Francis says. “But the diagnostics systems are the trigger... and something’s using them as a cover for the rewriting of the ship’s instruction set. The ship is teaching itself to obey the Romulans.”

“Oh... no...” I mutter as I experience one of the worst *aha!* moments of my life.

“I’m listening, Mr. Said.” Latham turns to me with an expression that’s colder than the air outside the ship.

“It’s the heuristics! The one system on this ship that we can’t reliably diagnose because they’re a quantum system.” I explain. *Isn’t ISC technology absolutely lovely?*

“Wait a minute...” Hazard says. “We’ve been trying to directly override those heuristics for the last month, and we haven’t even come close to doing it. How the hell could the Romulans manage it in a few days?”

“They shouldn’t,” I say. “They don’t have the specs...”

“*That...*” Latham warns. “Is a foolish assumption. Never underestimate the *Tal Shiar...*”

“But we don’t fully understand the system ourselves!” I shout. How on Earth could *they* manipulate it when we can’t?

“Again,” Latham scowls. “It is unwise to underestimate the *Tal Shiar...*”

So speaks Mr. Starfleet Intelligence. “I still don’t understand why they just didn’t attack us,” Gbeji says.

“Pretext,” Kolloos answers, beating Latham to the punch with the explanation. “Suppose we deviate from our assigned course and enter some sensitive area of Romulan space?”

“The Romulans can take *Galatea*, claim self-defense, and the Federation has no legal reproach for their actions.” Lars snarls. “Diplomacy...” he adds, spitting the word like a curse.

“How long until we’ve left our assigned area?” Latham asks.

“We’ve been allotted a half parsec deviation and we’re currently at Warp Seven.” Kolloos says.

“At that speed, it’ll take us eighty-two minutes.”

“I recommend self-destruct over capture, sir.” Hazard says, looking directly at me. I’m not sure how to react to that suggestion.

“Both self-destruct and warp core jettison are inoperable, Captain.” Gbeji reports, shooting Hazard’s idea down.

“We have eighty-two minutes to regain control of *Galatea*.” Latham says, “Or we may as well deliver her... and her passenger... to the *Tal Shiar* with open arms.”

“Speaking of her,” Hazard turns to me. “Can’t that god of yours do anything to help?”

“Ivan, sometimes you can be such a...” I reply, and then I bite my tongue. I always get too defensive about her, it’s a weakness I need to learn to overcome. “No, I don’t think so. She doesn’t understand the intricacies of ships’ systems.” I finally say.

“She augments people. Maybe she could augment your intelligence?” Hazard isn’t willing to let the idea drop. “Make you smart enough to find the answer. Put your intelligence on a quantum level?”



“That sounds like a *very* bad idea to me,” Lars says.

I have to admit it's an intriguing possibility - for about two seconds. I've expanded my senses, and I've expanded my consciousness by melding with people, but what Ivan's proposing would put me at a completely different level. Unfortunately, it's the same level as Gary Mitchell and all those people in Starfleet horror stories, the people who became god-like megalomaniacs who lost all human compassion and who had to be destroyed before they snuffed out everyone they loved. What I went through the first time with the Crysian nearly did that to me, and it took me a year of rehabilitation to get some sense of normalcy back in my life... “I doubt it'd be good enough, but if the Captain wants me to try...” I finally stammer, trying really badly to hide my discomfort.

“I don't, except perhaps as a last resort,” Latham responds. “Contrary to popular opinion, no one's brains are going to be char-broiled while I'm in command, and that includes Mr. Said's.” Hazard looks like he wants to say something, but Francis holds up his hand to get everyone's attention. “People I am thinking!” he declares. “Please give me a few seconds of peace and quiet!”

“You can't give away time,” I mutter. It's a dumb thing to say – I guess arguing with Francis has become so engrained that it's almost an instinct.

“Kenneth, I love you like a brother, but... shut up!” Francis declares, wagging a finger at me. Somehow, the look on his face is so infectious that even I can't suppress a grin. “Now! Let's look at the problem from the heuristic's point of view. Instruct. Test. Instruct. Test. Instruct...”

“That's too simplistic, Gable.” Ivan objects. “The paradigm is a quantum process. It's more like “Goal. Instruct. Test. Switch Approach.””

“Okay, let's do the quantum dance!” Francis says, bouncing to the Captain's chair, then bouncing back to Hazard's side. He strikes a pose that's halfway between Rodan's Thinker and a circus strongman. “I'm Quantum. The Big Q. I have defined goals, but my approach is completely unpredictable. Some pointy-eared scientist – sorry T'Doroth – told me ‘let's input a problem with the following conditions. First: figure out how to control the ship's systems. Second: figure out how to prevent the people aboard from overriding my control of ships' systems. Third: when the first two conditions have been achieved, bring them to me.’”

“That does summarize the command set,” I say. “As we know it.”

“I'm obeying *that* instruction, leaping from one possibility to the next until I've succeeded. I want to go there...” He points to a spot in front of the viewscreen, then begins to jump around randomly. “So I leap around until I've randomly hit the correct spot.”

“That's still a gross oversimplification of quantum mechanics.” Hazard observes, sulking.

“But suppose I fool the test into believing *this* spot,” he points to the place he's standing, “is *that* spot.”

“So... in other words, suppose we find a way to fool the computer into believing it's solved the problem...” Hazard muses.

“Exactly! And it's a great dance step too!” Francis smiles.

Hazard, suddenly overwhelmed by the enthusiasm of his own inspiration, grabs Francis by the shoulders. Gable smiles evilly until Ivan lets go in embarrassment.

“If I knew what our final destination was supposed to be, I could probably manually realign the sensors into making them believe we've arrived.” Kolloos promises.

“That's one place where the Crysian might be able to help us,” I state. “With your permission, Captain?”

“Granted.” Latham says.

“Francis, come with me.” I’m not supposed to give orders to a Lieutenant Commander, but Francis is sort of a special case. We get into the turbolift.

“So you want me to help you with the meld?” Francis asks.

“No, I just got embarrassed by you hopping around naked on the bridge like a hairless kangaroo,” I answer. “This isn’t Vespera.”

“Some of us aren’t so shallow that we need artificial strictures – like clothing – to define our lives,” Francis says. “Hiding one’s natural beauty is an affront to the universe. You don’t see a star wearing a suit and tie, do you?”

Francis definitely needs sleep – the remark’s inane even by his standards. “Let’s just meld. Somehow I can actually put up with you when I experience your totality, rather than just your most annoying bits.” Francis just laughs and I can feel what he’s thinking. “You’re right. I *am* cranky when I’ve only had six hours of sleep in the last four days.”

“You don’t sleep enough.” Francis tells me. “I sometimes think that dog of yours is the only creature onboard this ship that does. Of course, I also get the oddest feelings from that animal. It’s just... strange.”

“How black is that kettle of yours?” I ask.

“Very funny, my brother,” Francis says, slapping me on the buttocks. I’m too tired to be irritated by the gesture. “But seriously, the way it looks at me sometimes... and it’s not just me, have you ever seen it around Lars? It’s almost like a mute human trying to scream.”

“A strange mascot for a strange starship,” I shrug.

“You’ve got to start questioning the universe a little more, Kenneth.” Francis tells me. “It makes it a much more interesting place.”

I don’t say anything else to him until we’ve reached the Crysian. We’re welcome here – we walk through the bulkhead like it doesn’t exist, and we’re in deep shadow. The water surrounds us like a shroud that’s being ripped off a body that people realizes isn’t as dead as they thought. Or that’s the metaphor that comes to me. As I said before, not enough sleep.

The Crysian stirs, a great lumbering leviathan that brushes against us. I ask her how she’s feeling – I’ve been worried that *Galatea* would kill her – but so far there’s been no sense of sickness or growing weakness. She stirs, and I feel Francis’s body pressing against mine, even though we’re not touching. I can feel his hand on my shoulder, even though he’s several meters away, then it’s inside me, and then I’m thinking three thoughts at once, all of which blend into a single discordant thought.

### ***Where are we going?***

Space opens before us in a lattice of possibilities. I can see a planet of grey-white water, that suddenly comes alive with fire. I see T’Doroth and myself, our fingers paired and touching in the Vulcan cross of affection, staring up at a Vulcan sunrise, a *lirpa* axe-staff covered in green blood and a dead Vulcan man at my feet. I hear Kollo’s voice, crying incomprehensible words in the void. I see Greg Jensen, his body as naked as Francis’s, covered in warpaint that is set in shadowy camouflage patterns, firing a phaser rifle at a grey hulking husk of a Meskeen that’s twenty meters high. And I see *Galatea* destroyed by a single shot of plasma fire, and hear Burke’s death scream in my mind. There are dead redshirts everywhere when she dies, the decks are littered in them. I’m not sure what killed them.

***Do we always have to be so pessimistic?*** I think it’s Francis’s thought, but we’re all thinking it. That’s the way it works you know.

My mind focuses on Dido, of all things, and I see her, sitting on Tomarand's lap, as Tomarand sends a taunting transmission to Ivan Hazard. I'm not sure what he's saying, but I'm at Ivan's side, and I'm as angry as I've ever been in my life. But I'm not angry now, and I – that is, we – and I can get a clear fix on the stars. In our mind, we know where in the universe we're going to be, where they want us to go.

And then, like a pair of twins being shot out of the womb together, Francis and I find ourselves being propelled down the corridor, a jet of water from the Crysian's chamber providing us with a slick backwash along which to ride. Our hands reach simultaneously for our communicators, and we speak in unison as we broadcast the coordinates to the bridge.

"We never stop to enjoy the link anymore, do we?" Francis remarks.

"No one's kidnapping us and forcing us to spend time together." I reply.

"A pity. Maybe if asked..."

Although he's hesitant to accept my orders, Francis returns to his quarters where I *hope* he'll shower and put himself into more presentable garb. Me, I'm heading back to the bridge.

They've already processed the information, so the first thing I see when I reenter the bridge is the sight of Kollos's legs as she dangles on her back, working under the helm console. Everyone else is idle except Hazard, who's busy playing with some of the diagnostic functions. My guess is that he's trying to distract it.

"Are you certain about those coordinates?" Lars asks as he leans forward at his station. It's the sort of question people ask when they're both nervous and bored.

"No. I'm lying because I want us to be captured. I just can't get enough of being tortured by the *Tal Shiar*." I snap, then I shake my head. "Sorry, Lars. I guess I need some sleep."

"Apology accepted." Lars says, and there's enough sympathy in his voice to convince me he's sincere. "You always push yourself too hard when you're trying to prove yourself, Lieutenant."

"I probably do." I admit. "Captain, is there anything else I can do?"

"Yes." Latham says. "You will accompany Mr. Lars back to your quarters. Fail to cooperate, and I'll instruct Lars to drag you to your bed and hogtie you if you resist." I look around the bridge and spot a sea of unsympathetic faces. "Get some rest *now*, Lieutenant."

I throw up my hands like a prisoner, but before Lars can act on the order, the bridge rattles as if caught in an epileptic seizure. My first thought is of the Crysian and her safety, but my concerns are better placed elsewhere: simultaneous with the gravitic hiccup there's a flash under the helm control and a scream: Kollos spasms under the effect of kilovolts of electricity. Latham's hands immediately reach for the nearest medikit.

Kollos pulls herself into view and pokes up her head. Her face is blackened, and I can smell burnt flesh. "They're not making it easy, Captain," she reports with a wheeze. "They've anticipated what we're trying, but I think I can bypass... I think..." Then there's a second flash, and her eyes roll in their sockets.

"Kollos?" Hazard bolts from the science station and rushes to her side. Latham throws up a hand to keep him back.

"...Captain..." Kollos moans. "...I can finish this, but you'd better clear the bridge."

"Everyone out of here now!" Latham barks in a voice I've never heard him use; even Hazard and Lars are taken aback by it. "Now!"

*She's going to change forms.* The realization hits all of us, and it hits us hard. One glimpse of the true form of a Medusan is enough to drive anyone insane, even the most stable Vulcan. I've had enough bouts with madness in the last year to last me a lifetime. Hazard's frozen in place,

but I grab him by the arm and tug him out of his shock. “You heard the Captain!” I shout. “Turbolift, now!”

Hazard blinks, grabs my arm, and pulls me as if I was the one in shock. *Whatever works, my friend.* It only takes us a few seconds to reach the turbolift, except for Latham; he’s pulled out some translucent screens and is setting them around the nav console. “He has been trained to treat her in both her forms,” T’Doroth explains. I didn’t know that, but it doesn’t surprise me. I always liked him better as a Doctor than a Captain. The last glimmer we have of the bridge is the sheen of Kollos’s true form, whose refracted light, shooting through the filter screens, casts aurorae speckles on the ceiling. Like the face of Allah, even its reflection has an entrancing, terrifying beauty.

“Auxiliary control,” Hazard snaps an order into the turbolift. One thing I’ll give the first officer – he may be argumentative, but on the few occasions I’ve seen him get rattled, it doesn’t take him long to recover. “It’s a little cramped down at AuxCon, so I’d like Gbeji to go to engineering and link up to us there.” Gbeji nods, though she doesn’t look happy to be excluded. “Likewise Lars, you’d better make sure our teams are ready for a fight.”

“Agreed,” Lars says. “The Romulans won’t like it when Gbeji regains helm control.”

That leaves just T’Doroth, Hazard, and myself for AuxCon, which (unlike *Ark Royal* where it was practically a second bridge) is a tiny, confined space cluttered with displays panels and access tubes that lead into heavily juryrigged systems (I should know, since I juryrigged a lot of them myself during the early days of the shakedown). I’ve spent a fair bit of time here in the last four days, since AuxCon’s always a prime target for anyone invading a starship.

“What’s the status, Captain?” Ivan immediately uses his communicator to contact the bridge.

“Kollos has gone into the works,” Latham reports back after a three second pause. “She views it as a navigational puzzle.”

“She took a lot of voltage.” I note.

“She is more capable of taking it than anyone else aboard *Galatea*,” T’Doroth says. “I have no doubt that she will solve the problem within the necessary time frame.”

“That’s not very logical, Lieutenant.” Hazard notes.

“If you knew Kollos’s capabilities, you might reaccess that statement,” T’Doroth replies. She flicks a switch and activates weapons control and the external sensor net. “Weapons were depowered when the ship went to warp. I am attempting to compensate.”

“Let me assist you on that,” I offer, looking for ways to reroute power from unnecessary subsystems.

“Belay that, both of you.” Hazard says. “If Kollos is in the works, let’s keep the power systems as *stable* as possible.”

“Good point,” I acknowledge. Ivan looks like he wants to continue the lecture, probably reminding me that if I had had more than an hour’s sleep in the last twenty-four, I’d have realized that myself. But it’s going to have to wait. The ship shudders again, then a second time, then a third. The third tremor’s hard enough to knock us to the deck; T’Doroth lands on top of me, our faces nearly pressed against each other. If it seems like a moment from a bad romantic comedy, it is, though the situation is dire enough (and we’re both professional enough) that the idea of romance doesn’t enter into our heads.

T’Doroth rises to her feet and helps me up, then Hazard. Ivan’s bleeding from his forehead, and is wobbly enough that we both think ‘concussion’. But the Commander’s built tough, he fingers the inspection panel, and brings up the navigation display. “We’re dead in space,” he says

with a cough. “Emergency stop. Warp and impulse engines out, we’re running on battery power.”

“She did it.” T’Doroth says.

“Unfortunately, it must have triggered a shutdown sequence.” I surmise, and I turn my attention to the external sensors. “Oh... no...”

Hazard nods. “How many of the bastards are decloaking, Kenneth?”

“Six.” I answer. And we’re completely defenseless.

“We can expect a friendly visit from at least a half dozen Romulan boarding parties,” Hazard says; it’s the obvious Romulan plan of attack. “Lieutenant, can we get the Crysian to... well, augment you?”

“I don’t have a link with her up here,” I report. “If they board us, she may not understand what’s happening. You could put me to sleep and that’d almost certainly establish one...”

“You’re already halfway there,” Ivan notes.

“I would rather keep you awake so you could have a more coherent conversation with her,” T’Doroth says.

“You don’t appreciate a good delirium,” I remark.

“On the contrary, during my *kahs-wan*, I spent many days battling delirium in the deep deserts of Vulcan,” T’Doroth says.

“We’re wasting time. Go to her, Kenneth.” Hazard says. “Travel by tube, if you can.” He reaches into the emergency stores and pulls out a pair of phasers. “Take one, Lieutenant,” he says, passing one to me.

“Aye sir,” I affirm, and I open up one of the access tubes and begin to scuttle in. Hazard passes a phaser to T’Doroth – she stares at the weapon like he was handing her something beyond an obscenity.

“Take it, T’Doroth.” Hazard orders.

“Commander, please be aware that I will only use the stun setting.” T’Doroth offers the usual pacifist Vulcan warning to her commanding officer. You have to respect a culture that’s so totally dedicated to peace.

So the race is on. I’m *very* fast traveling down Jeffries’ Tubes. Just ask Greg Jensen sometime about how I handled my “test” when I first boarded *Ark Royal*. It’s not often that anyone ever got the upper hand on *him*, but I did. Francis says I’m so much at home here because I’m a sexually repressed engineer who likes to crawl around the “vagina of engineering”. Francis can be a disgusting pig. Still, I scuttle down the tube, and I *do* enjoy its claustrophobic confines; it’s like a return trip to home after too many years’ absence. Periodically I crack open access ports to get a view of the deck - most are empty, but at key junctures a pair of security officers are stationed, alert as Spartans, phasers drawn and held like swords. I pass the first couple of stations without incident, until I run into Ensigns Rigney and Roy, who’ve heard the scuttling sound in the tube and order me to show myself. They’ve got good ears; I’m normally pretty quiet.

“Don’t shoot!” I shout, opening the hatch and dropping my hand phasers to show both hands. “I need to get to the shuttle bay, Commander Hazard’s orders!”

“Fine, Lieutenant.” Thanks to my telepathic voyeurism I know that Rigney dislikes me, but Lars sets a high standard for professionalism. “This is a low priority station. Do you require an escort?”

“No, Mr. Rigney.” I smile. “Maintain your post, and Allah protect you.”

It's funny how such moments can bring back the old religious feelings. Rigney nods, seeming to be sincere in his good wishes. "You too, Lieutenant. Godspeed."

Mind you, the Arabic experience is probably less applicable than the Greek. Welcome to Thermopylae, my friends. And if anyone from security goes to their graves cursing my name for my part in Wirchenko's death, I'll certainly forgive you. The gods protect us all.

The quickest way to the shuttlebay is down the corridors a little way and then down the turbolift. Once I'm within three decks, I should be able to contact the Crysian, then we'll see what we can do about these Romulans. Of course it's a tall order even for a god: a Dreadnought, two heavy cruisers, and three mediums. Even with the Crysian on our side, what *can* we possibly do? I almost wished we had an Argos to give them, but I doubt Tomarand would let us leave Romulan space alive even if we complied. Of course, given what the Argos did to the ISC, it might be the perfect weapon to unleash against the fleet, but unfortunately (or fortunately, given its quirks) the Argos died along with Roger Price.

The intruder alert suddenly sounds, a loud cross between a beep and a gong that seems to echo forever in the Jeffries' Tube. I can hear shouting from the deck below me – I think they said there were six boarding parties, with the majority engaged in an assault on engineering. That's a fair ways from the shuttlebay, but once they gain control of the ship systems, they could jettison her out into space. There's no way I could live with that.

I try to tell myself this battle isn't doomed from the start.

I crawl out of the Jeffries Tube and sprint for the turbolift, the alert still blazing. I'm about five meters from the shaft – and that's when three Romulans materialize in front of me and I can hear more materialization sounds behind me. I instantly tuck myself, and perform a roll between a pair of them before they can train their phasers on me, and I tumble into the lift.

"Command override, shuttlebay!" I shout, fingers fumbling for the bar. But that's when I see the smiling face of Suria – and I know with complete certainty that this particular boarding party had no other purpose but to get me *personally*, and the phaser catches me in the shoulder. It's set to dematerialize. So I'm dead. My body experiences a millisecond of burning heat, hot as plasmafire, intense as a sun, and then...

*No.*

I smile as my shoulder burn heals in a instant, and the remaining phaser fire is harmless, it just warms my body slightly. The light hurts my eyes a little, but it's a very minor irritation. A big Romulan – I recognize him as Damask – closes with me and decides to see if he can restrain me hand-to-hand. What a stupid creature. I suppose the Vulcans got all the brains in the Romulan/Vulcan split. I grab Demask by the throat, lift him off the ground, and casually hurl the *sraes* ten meters over Suria's head and into the far bulkhead. I don't know if I've killed him, and at the moment I don't care.

"Extract us, now! Now! Now! Now!" Suria shouts, and the remaining Romulans beam out of the corridor before I can deal with them. I step into the turbolift.

"**Main engineering.**" I order. To say that I was feeling as powerful as a god would be trite. The Crysian rescued me from certain death, that would be more than sufficient to feel like a part of the divine. **Beloved, can you fortify those who defend the engines?** I ask.

*Burke is there. He shall defend them with my life.*

It's easier for her to augment those minds she's already touched. With that assurance, I feel a preternatural calm wash over me. I make connect with Burke's mind and feel the orgasmic gasp as he too becomes a vessel for the Crysian's power. But Tony is anything but calm. The air

around him smells like death – that horrible half-ozone, half-char smell that’s produced when multiple human beings are irradiated by phasers in close proximity – and his mind is a primal scream. I feel his fist go through a Romulan marine’s chest, shattering bones like sugar cane sticks – sticky, brittle, and sweet – and I taste the alkaline of the Romulan’s green blood as it splatters on his face. A berserker’s scream burns our minds, and then he kills a second Romulan, then a third, then a fourth... the Romulans don’t understand what’s hitting them. Unlike me, Burke has no compunctions about killing. And unlike Suria, these Romulans don’t retreat. Burke doesn’t give them time. I never dreamt that one man could kill twelve people so quickly. Even Greg would be impressed.

By the time I get down to the door in front of main engineering, the deck’s a charnal house of dead Romulans, who’ve been literally ripped to shreds. Burke presses hard against a wall, hyperventillating, drenched in green blood. I’m mentally linked to him, but his thought processes defy interpretation at the moment. There isn’t much in the way of security personnel left; of the ten redshirts who were stationed at engineering, only Burke, Costa, and Shotev are left alive, and Shotev’s badly wounded - the Crysian could only provide partial protection against the phasers for them. “Lars?” I ask.

“They vaped him, sir.” Burke says through a stare as dead as ice.

“Damn!” I snarl, kicking the wall. Now I know why Burke feels the way he does. Lars and I had our differences, but I liked him a lot. He was a *professional*; I’ve never known a man who was so capable of burying his feelings just so he could do the job right. The ability to suppress one’s ego is a rare and wondrous talent, one we don’t properly appreciate. And there’s not even a body, not even a face upon which to look down on to inspire an elegy.

I hate phasers.

Costa, the burly Venezuelan woman, is treating Shotev while ignoring the blood that saturates Burke’s grim reaper body. I stagger to the intercom. “Gbeji, you okay?”

“Thank God, Lieutenant!” Gbeji answers after a very long two second pause. “We’ve got a containment field over engineering, but the fighting’s been terrible...”

“I know,” I say. “Good work, Ensign. Could you lower the field and open the door? ‘Stephenson built a Rocket’.”

“Was it faster than a locomotive?” Gbeji gives me the correct countersign.

“*Nothing* is faster than a locomotive,” I reply, and with a click and a swoosh, the big red door slides open. Costa drags Shotev in first, I quickly follow, with Burke bringing up the rear. The big guy’s starting to calm down, I can actually feel something in his mind, though I fear he’s going to quickly settle into shock. Ten engineers, shakily holding phasers, are huddled at various stations. I nod at them, but I think the sight of Burke is going to counteract any encouragement they get from seeing me.

“They’ve were flushing neuro-gas into the life support, but we managed to filter it out of the system.” Gbeji reports.

“Well done people.” I say. Gbeji’s shaking, and I place a hand on her shoulder and smile. She hugs me enthusiastically.

“Just this once, Ensign, I won’t put you on report...” I smile, feeling her soft body press tight against me.

*What is it about Said that every woman aboard this ship wants to do it with this guy?* I hear Burke wonder through the link, a stray thought breaking through his grief and shock. I almost burst out laughing. Could he possibly be serious?

I get to the main console and try to raise the bridge. No response. “Sir, there were reports that the Romulan boarding party that attacked the bridge went mad and started killing each other,” Costa tells me.

“They weren’t expecting to see Kollo in her true form.” I say. I attempt to raise AuxCon. No response there either. “Ivan!” I shout, switching through channels. “Ivan can you hear me?” No response.

“He may be deliberately maintaining radio silence.” Burke wonders. I hear it simultaneously in my ears and in my head. Tony has a very forceful telepathic presence – forceful enough to give me a headache, especially when he’s just coming out of a berserker state.

“T’Doroth...” I say, trying to raise her communicator. No response. “Francis...”

“Thank God, you’re alright!” I hear Gable’s voice coming in loud and clear. “The Romulans sent a boarding team to exterminate anyone who might be hiding in their quarters, but I was... well, you know, protected. I’m still in our quarters. By the way, Dido bit a couple of them. You’d have been proud of her.”

“They didn’t...” I don’t think the animal could survive death a second time.

“No, I killed them before they could shoot her,” Francis says. “I haven’t needed to kill anyone since the General War. It’s been a long time, Kenneth, I really need a shower...”

“Francis, get down to engineering, now. Bring as many people as you can protect with you. We’ll make a stand here.”

“Okay... but I really wanted that shower.” Francis says, shutting down the channel.

“Idiot.” I say, but he does bring a smile to my face, even now. Next, I raise Sickbay, which is still under our control. Dr. Bradley reports that he’s there with five of his nursing staff, six members of the science department and an additional five security officers. I can’t raise anyone else.

So it's time to count. There's myself, Gbeji, nine engineers, Burke, Costa, Shotev, Francis, and the eighteen people who've barricaded themselves in Sickbay. That means of *Galatea's* crew complement of sixty-eight, I can only confirm that thirty-three are still alive. And one dog. And the Crysian.

“Mr. Said...” The next message comes over the ship’s intercom, I recognize the voice as Telegron's, the Romulan Sub-Commander we met on the *RIS Rhetoshran*. “Please respond to my message, Lieutenant, or someone will die.”

I don't have a choice. I tell everyone to back away from the viewscreen. Not that they can't use the internal sensors to figure out how many people are down here, but why make it easy for them?

“Five seconds, Mr. Said...” Telegron says.

“Said here, *erei-riov*.” I say, pressing the comm button. “I know that you Romulans like to hide in shadows, but I'd appreciate a view.”

A visual image appears on the tiny engineering view window. It's Telegron. He's on the bridge, which is blood-stained, and several Romulan corpses are visible in the background. Suria's standing beside the tall Romulan, playing with Latham's gift-saber. Dr. Latham is also there, hands tied behind his back, and arms splayed in an uncomfortable chicken wing position thanks to a painful looking steel yoke that's wrapped around his neck and arms; it reminds me of a medieval torture device. A Romulan *sraes* nudges T'Doroth and Hazard into view; they're wearing identical yokes to Latham's.



“You’ve fought very well,” I guess it’s Telegron’s job to act gracious in the face of near-victory; certainly Suria wouldn’t. “A man couldn’t wish for a better opponent. But even discounting the difference in our ships’ firepower, for each one of your officers, we have *thirty*. And the average Romulan, compared to the average human...”

“Just get to the point,” I snap. I could sit here and taunt him, but nothing succeeds quite like raw bravado at racking up a body count in a hostage situation.

“If you cooperate, Mr. Said, we will let *Galatea* go... If not, well, even a man with far less intelligence than yourself can guess the consequences.”

“Kenneth...” Latham croaks. But he doesn’t get to finish his sentence. Suria takes the saber, and runs Latham through. Our Captain falls to the ground in a pool of blood. He chuckles slightly. “Silence... thank God...” he rasps before he dies. Suria displays the saber with a satisfied gleam in her eyes. She doesn’t quite realize she’s done (or what the Doctor’s final words meant) – as a high level Starfleet Intelligence operative, he’d have been much more useful to them *alive*, having long incriminating conversations with Romulan torturers.

“Killing my Captain is not going to elicit my sympathy.” I snarl. I’m not a vengeful man, I’m really not, but I have to admit that there’s a big part of me right now that would gladly give my life - and the life of everyone else aboard this ship - just to watch Tashayl Suria die. And the less pretty the death, the better.

But I'm screaming with the voice of guilt. If only the Crysian had saved him... If only I'd asked the Crysian to save him... It's no excuse that neither one of us was expecting the viper to strike...

“I understand your anger, Lieutenant, but I’m afraid I have another gambit to play,” Telegron says, as he casually moves to the security control panel and places his finger on a large flashing button. “I believe I understand your control scheme.”

"No doubt."

"You have ten seconds to surrender main engineering to our forces, or I’m going to jettison the contents of your shuttlebay..." Telegron tells me. "Ten..." Telegron repeats, but I don’t need the countdown.

*Can you protect them?* I can feel her within me; I can feel her power, breathing as I breathe, reinforcing my limbs and will, dragging me on a telepathic tether to godhood. Perhaps she can do the same for them.

***My daughter, can be shielded, yes. But I can barely touch the other.***

Hazard. I knew this, I expected this, but still, I don’t want to put Ivan at risk. We’ve lost Lars and Latham...

“Let me speak to Tomarand!” I snap quickly.

“Five seconds...” Telegron states. “I won’t forget where the countdown stands, Lieutenant.” The screen mercifully goes blank, and Tamarand, sitting in his quarters on the *Rheto’shran*], peers at me with wide-eyes on his narrow face.

“Well?” he asks. The question has many implications.

The door behind me opens. Francis, dressed for once in his Starfleet Lieutenant Commander’s uniform, has escorted a pair of technicians to engineering. But I can’t allow myself to be distracted.

“I can’t give you what you want,” I tell the *Tal Shiar* chief of operations. “Your *Ivahi’Gemaen*, the Argos, no longer exists. It’s dead... as dead as Dr. Latham.”

Tomarand bows his head slightly. “I suppose my condolences would ring rather hollow at the moment. Still, it is a pity. He was a sculptor of merit, and for that talent alone he will be missed. But I know how Latham died. Would you care to tell me how the Argos died?”

“Do you remember the box that we tried to give Suria on Rakshasa?” I ask. Tomarand doesn’t even need to nod – the question’s just a set-up for the explanation. “As far as I can tell, the Argos was in that box, and it did die, weeks before the rendezvous. However, it somehow transferred itself into Roger. When you killed Roger... when Suria murdered him...” If there’s any justice, the blame will stick to the woman, “...you destroyed the Argos.”

Tomarand seems lost in thought for a moment. “An interesting story. But why would the Argos allow itself to die with Mr. Price?”

You know, that’s a question I *never* thought to ask myself.

“I haven’t seen any signs it’s reemerged, *khre-riov*.” I say, trying hard not to think of its implications.

“That tells me nothing.” Tomarand says. “You have Roger’s personal effects, if I recall. Perhaps a careful search would be in order.”

“Perhaps. I’ll need more than five seconds to conduct it, though.” I say.

“You have an hour.” Tomarand says – at least he’s giving me the courtesy of using a Terran time measurement.

“And your troops?”

“They will remain onboard, of course.” Tomarand leans back. “Be careful, Mr. Said. You risk overplaying your hand.”

“So you enjoy poker, *khre-riov*?” I ask, knowing that pleasantries can help diffuse the tension – and after seeing phasers being trained on T’Doroth and Hazard, I need to reduce it, for my own sake.

“A wonderful human invention.” Tomarand smiles. “Be careful, Lieutenant. One false move, and not only will Telegron jettison your alien...” *How much do they know about the Crysian?* I wonder. “But I have six ships that are ready to create one of the most spectacular concentrations of military firepower that this quadrant has seen since the Barrier Wars.”

The screen goes blank. Francis comes up to me, puts a hand on my shoulder, and whispers: “I know where it is...”

“Give me a minute, Francis...” I answer – I don’t know what Gable’s talking about, but I’ve got to set things in motion. I turn to Burke, and try to speak to him through the telepathic link. He still looks shell-shocked.

*Tony, they’re monitoring us through the security system, so I need to give orders without saying anything out loud. Can you relay my instructions telepathically?*

*Of course...* Although Burke still feels like he’s in a fog.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” I address the room. “We’re looking for evidence of a Class IV telepathic anomaly on this ship. I need to reconfigure the scanners. We’re going to need to augment our power systems to do it, so let’s get impulse back.”

“Sir, the Romulans?” Gbeji asks. “They may not want us to get our power systems back.”

“I’ll handle the Romulans,” I promise, wondering just where all this bravado was coming from. “I think as long as we don’t try to restart the warp engines, they won’t feel threatened.”

Meanwhile, Burke’s relaying my *real* orders to personnel, one at a time. *Our priority is to get impulse power back, and then make sure our shield grid is working. I want to be able to raise shields at a moment’s notice. Also, I need to know exactly where the Romulans are located on*

*this ship, so do work on the sensors, and try to make it look like that's your primary work assignment.*

The crew's a little surprised by receiving orders in their heads, but this is a good crew, so I don't think anyone alerts the Romulans through sudden, surprised movements. The crew already gets to work on the impulse engine restart sequence – as we anticipated, once Romulans took control of *Galatea*, the ship had completed its obedience to the Romulan instruction set. Francis puts his hand on my shoulder, trying to get my attention.

“Kenneth...” The tone is almost a whine.

I put my hand on Francis's shoulder and draw him close for an embrace. “There my friend,” I say, patting his back. “The worst is over.”

“Kenneth...” Francis whispers again, “I think I...” But the conversation is abruptly interrupted when a dead man who gave the correct password to enter engineering. It's Lars, whom Burke saw vaporized a few minutes ago in the firefight. Burke immediately draws his weapon.

“Stand down, Mr. Burke!” Lars says with a sigh, wiping a trickle of black Efrosian blood from his face.

“No sir!” Burke shouts in a voice that's more military than the regs, and he's screaming in my head that it's an infiltrator, a Romulan imposter. But as headache inducing as Burke can be, the most interesting sensation I'm getting is from Francis. It's always interesting being around Gable when he's actually using his brains, and those times when you're reading him empathically and he makes an intuitive leap, well, it's a euphoria I only experience on those rare occasions when I actually like... some poem I've written. There's no ecstasy quite like inspiration.

“Mr. Burke, stand down! That's an order.” Francis says. It's the first time I've seen Gable pull rank since our time back on *Ark Royal*. He loathes rank. That tells me – even if I hadn't felt him give a mental *eureka!* - that he's discovered something particularly interesting.

“I saw him *die!*” Burke insists.

“Don't be absurd, Mr. Burke. I wasn't even on the same deck as your boarding control party,” Lars insists.

I pull a tricorder from the emergency stores and run it down Lars's body – it's definitely Efrosian, and there's no sign of genetic tampering. Even so, Shotev also swears that he saw Lars die, and even if Burke wasn't reliable, you can't discount the testimony of two witnesses.

“Sickbay has instruments that'll verify his identity. Is the path clear between here and Sickbay, Mr. Burke?” I ask.

“I don't think that internal sensors are reliable yet, sir,” Gbeji interrupts.

“I'll escort Mr. Lars to Sickbay,” Francis volunteers. “I think I know what happened.”

“I'd appreciate it if you'd tell me, Francis.”

“All in good time, my brother...” Francis smiles. “But I'm surprised you haven't come to the same conclusion. After everything you told me about your experiences on *Candlejack...*”

That's an odd remark. Maybe I'm too tired for everything except the adrenaline rush of confrontation. Burke interrupts us. “Sir, I don't believe Mr. Gable is capable of successfully securing the prisoner...”

“You mean he's going to kill me the first chance he gets, and he'll succeed because he's either a wall of Efrosian muscle or a homicidal Romulan.” Francis spits back. “I know security-speak too. But you'd be surprised at how well I can defend myself.” I've seen Francis's self-defense training methods. He's *not* exaggerating. For one thing, he trained with Greg.

“Permission to accompany them,” Burke says.

“I’ll have to clear it with Telegron...” I say, knowing that’s going to be the only way to mollify the huge Italian. There’s no sense in sending Francis and Tony out to die in a firefight; they’re not just friends, they’re essential assets. Even Gable.

“Mr. Burke,” Lars says in a growl that indicates his temper has built to a slow boil. “Do you remember me telling you that if you ever used telepathy on me, I’d practice knot-tying with your intestines?”

“The real Commander Lars told me that several times,” Burke says.

“Well... just this once... I’m waving it.” at the moment, Lars’s speech pattern is almost comic in its intensity.

Burke concentrates on Lars, and the tension in the room rises to a highly uncomfortable level – like most Efrosians, Lars is empathic, though it’s a talent that’s most effective on creatures with a primitive, animal intelligence – but the interplay of psionic forces produces a psionic effect that’s much like the sound of a titanium rod scratching on duranium. Finally Burke blinks, indicating the telepathic dance is over. “The memories track,” he reports. “I’ve heard that Romulan plants are good, but I can’t imagine anyone being *that* good...”

“If they are, we’d better all start speaking fluent Romulan...” Lars says, and he turns to me, while bringing up deck plans on one of the side monitors. “Lieutenant, the Romulans have finished sweeping the ship and have consolidated their forces into five Praetorian teams.”

“Not Praetorian, that’s military,” I correct. A small point, but I don’t want to give the intruders a speck of honor. “They’re *rei’kalehsu*, Daggers of Empire.” An honorable Romulan would consider that an insult.

“Whatever you’d like to call them, Lieutenant, they’ve taken five positions: the bridge, AuxCon, rec room, security control and the corridors adjacent to the shuttle bay. Each *rei’kaleh* is composed of approximately twelve members. They’ve tried to take anyone who was wearing two or more pips alive, and they’ve...”

“Killed the rest,” Francis says.

“This is going to be tricky.” I say.

“Lieutenant, what about this Argos?” Gbeji asks. I suppose it’s the question on everyone’s mind. “It would be helpful if we knew what Argos was, beyond the mythological reference.”

“Argos is the Romulan attempt to develop a psionic computer.” I explain. “They call it the *Ivaht’Gemaen*, mind bridge.”

“It was one of a pair, artificial life created by cloning the brain cells of very powerful Romulan telepaths and putting them in a box wired to maximize its telepathic potential,” Lars suddenly interjects. “Its mate is on Ch’Rihan. The one that Roger Price called ‘Argos’ was supposed to be delivered to Romulan sympathizers on Vulcan. They would permit the *Tal Shiar* to maintain telepathic contact with them, in hopes of eventually destabilizing Vulcan and driving it from the Federation.”

“How in the galaxy do you know that?” I wonder aloud.

Lars pauses for a moment. “I was briefed, I guess, before I came aboard *Galatea*.”

I cock an eyebrow. “Even I wasn’t informed about that!” I protest.

“Need to know, I suppose,” Lars says. “And you’re sure it’s dead?”

“If it is, we won’t have a prayer of making them happy.” Burke laments.

I stop to think for a minute... Allah, I am so tired I’m surprised I haven’t collapsed. I suppose Argos might have found some way to sustain itself in Roger’s body, but the Crysian’s vision

indicated that's *parsecs* away, floating in space. "Never underestimate the power of a good diplomat. Especially when the resistance has been heavier than anticipated."

The last sentence was, of course, for the benefit of the Romulans who were watching us from security control, and is about as sincere as a Klingon peace offering. Like Sickbay and Engineering, SecCon has its own protective force field. We won't be able to take back the ship unless we lower it first. We can lower it from AuxCon, but we have to take that too, and from the looks of things, we've only got a handful of security personnel at our disposal. Furthermore, two people said that they saw Lars die. I don't care what Burke found in his telepathic scan, I'm not going to risk the safety of this ship on Lars. People just don't come back from the dead. Dogs maybe, but not people.

"Now Francis, what were you saying?"

"I'll tell you after I've tested my hypothesis." Francis says, and he chortles. "*Hypothesis*. It makes me sound positively Vulcan. Do you think I should cut my eyebrows in a Vulcan style. They're *sooo* erotic."

"Francis..." I moan. He'll never change. Allah, why did you make him so annoying?

"Sure. Go ahead and tell T'Doroth that her eyebrows aren't sexy. I dare you," Francis chides. I really don't have time for this banter right now. "And since you're always telling me to be more useful, I'm going down to the stores to scan your late friend's effects."

"Fine." I say, but it's a reflex; Francis's plan doesn't quite sink in until he's almost at the door. I respond to my realization with the plea: "Don't die, okay?"

Francis turns around and shakes his head sadly. "Don't kill me, okay?" he replies. That's as disturbing as anything anyone's ever said to me, because that's a very distinct possibility.

So things begin to fall into place. The impulse engines come back on line. Telegron growls, and promises me that T'Doroth will die if we attempt to raise the shields. To convince the Romulans that we're upholding our end of the bargain, we perform a deep scan around the ship. The deep scan does give me a nice idea of the location of every Romulan on this ship. And (with Burke's telepathic help), we slowly move a team of engineers and security out of engineering and station them in a security dark spot close to AuxCon, ready to move on my signal.

"You're planning something," Lars leans over to me and whispers. It's been a half-hour since the deadline and I've finished rerouting the transporter circuits to the main engineering board, the cornerstone of my plan.

"No." I deny the accusation.

"Don't you trust me?" Lars asks, still speaking *sotto voce*.

"No," I admit. If you're really Lars, I owe you that much.

"I don't blame you," Lars replies. "But putting my men at risk, and not letting me do a thing to help... well, it's tearing me up inside."

"For what it's worth," I admit. "I understand and I'm sorry."

I turn back to the task at hand. I'm turning to my favorite piece of technology, the transporter, for salvation. If I time things right, I can transport each group of Romulans into the ships' holding cells and raise the shields before the Romulan fleet knows what we've done. If we can do that, I've at least got some bargaining chips, and in the worst case scenario happens and they destroy *Galatea*, at least these murdering... I really want to call them 'bastards'... these murderers will die with us. Unfortunately, the boarding parties are so large that only the cargo transporters will be able to handle the load. Site-to-site transport is incredibly touchy with regular transporters. Cargo transporters will increase the difficulty.

“We’re ready,” Burke says. Lars, realizing that something’s about to happen, leans forward in anticipation but says nothing. I nod and transport the *rei’kalehsu* team from AuxCon into the cells. The strike team lowers the field at the security station, then we transport them too, then we get the ones outside the shuttlebay, then the rec room. I try several times to lock onto the bridge.

“What’s the problem?” Lars asks.

“There’s some sort of energy field preventing transport from the bridge.” I say. “We’ve got seconds before they notice what we’ve done. Raise the shields. Burke, you’re with me...” I begin to stride out of engineering. Lars follows.

“I didn’t give away your plan...” Lars says, as he matches our stride, all while he snaps his hand phaser into a carbine to increase its power. He adjusts it for a wide stun setting.

“Okay, I’ll trust you.” I say, failing to find any hole in his argument. “If we get out of this alive, I’ll offer a more formal apology.”

“I’ll either accept it or kill you, depending on how many more of my people you lose,” Lars says as we head into the lift.

“Command priority: bridge,” I state. The lift moves at emergency speed to the bridge. “Stay behind us, Lars. Burke and I are shielded. You’re not.” Lars nods, though I don’t think he quite understands what I’m saying.

“We’ve lost a lot of men, sir.” Burke reports.

“I know.” Lars moans. It’s the saddest thing I’ve ever heard him say.

The turbolift doors open. Burke and I step out, brandishing phasers. “Ivan, duck!” I shout.

Both Ivan and I rank in the top 5% of Starfleet in terms of reaction time – he hits the deck fast. The next few seconds are a blur of staccato motion, phaserfire, and blind panic. Two Romulans fire on me, while seven Romulans coordinate their weapons on Burke. I definitely feel it – the Crysian’s protection is slipping – and Burke screams and drops his weapon. Telegron, face as rigid as Romulan stone, presses the button to release the Crysian – and hundreds of thousands of volts shoot through the panel and strike him. He dances for a second, then his smoking body collapses on the floor.

Suria turns her attention to T’Doroth, but she puts the attack to good use – the Crysian protects her, but not the yoke she’s trapped in. Once free, she begins to dance through the Romulans in a flurry of nerve pinches, starting with the *daise frvihai*. In seconds, the Romulans are unconscious. Burke isn’t quite as lucky – he’s dead. Even the Crysian couldn’t shield him from that much concentrated phaserfire. His death thoughts scratch in the back of my mind, and I wish I could do more for him in his final moments. But the situation doesn’t allow me the opportunity.

“We’re being hailed by the Romulan flagship...” T’Doroth quickly heads to the control panel.

“Onscreen...” Hazard and I say in unexpected harmony. The viewscreen blinks, and I find myself staring directly at the angry face of Tomarand.

“Is this how you repay my generosity, Lieutenant Said?” the *Tal Shiar* chief operative doesn’t his displeasure, though the wounded façade’s phony.

“I guess it is.” I say. “Surprised?”

“Of course not.” Tomarand suddenly smiles. “Taking hostages is quite a provocation, Lieutenant. I’m afraid Romulan policy leaves me no alternative but to destroy your ship, hostages or not.” He leans back in a self-satisfied pose. “If you think I care a whit for any of the people you’ve taken, or that you’re negotiating from any position of strength...”

Ivan steps forward, arms still locked in the yoke. “Mr. Said does not speak for *Galatea*. I do. Your crew will be returned.”

“Ivan, he’s *Tal Shiar*,” I stammer. “This...”

“I’m now commanding officer, Lieutenant!” Hazard says. “Unless you’re planning on shooting me and taking command.”

Five nervous seconds pass. “Of course not,” I finally spit.

“Good.” Hazard growls. “We’re in the middle of their space, we’ll either have to release the prisoners or die - I know it, you know it, and he knows it.”

“Ivan, they systematically exterminated anyone under the rank of Lieutenant...”

“And they murdered the Captain. And they murdered your friend Price. And they tortured you. And they threatened everyone left in the universe that you care about...” Ivan recites the laundry list. “I know. If Klingons did the same thing to us, well, you’d have to keep me away from the helm because I’d want to ram the bastards. But we can’t win this way. I owe it to the crew to find a way to get them out of this in one piece.”

“There is a simple way.” Tomarand says, putting his hands together in a serene pose, though his brow is furrowed in impatience. “Give me the Argos. I fail to understand why this is such a difficult concept for you to understand. Humans are not stupid creatures, and you *do* have a Vulcan aboard.”

“Cut the sarcasm, *khre-riov*,” Ivan sneers. “We both know that if we had this thing and actually did give it to you, our life expectancy would be about five seconds.”

“You know what it did to those ISC ships...” I add. “If we did have it, we’d be using it on you now. Why else would you go to such an elaborate plan to disable us and board us, except that you were scared of the Argos?”

Tomarand’s face takes on a sudden twitch, almost a flinch. “Unlike the ISC, we do have some protections from Romulan telepaths. But whether you’d know that...” I can tell he’s looking for some sign.

“You also expressed concern that our actions would provoke an ISC response.” I state.

“True. If you were successful, they certainly would. But *Galatea* is wounded, Mr. Said. You’ll be proceeding through ISC space with a skeleton crew, and without the Argos as a weapon...” He pauses to consider the possibilities. “You’ll be dead before you can reach *Desskyie*...” he surmises. “If your attack fails, it may actually increase ISC confidence in their own security. The question is whether or not to take that gamble.”

“If you kill us, the Federation *will* learn about it one day,” I say. “You will pay a price. We have some pretty powerful telepaths aboard who have unbroken psionic connections with their homeworld...” I look down at Burke’s dead body – when he was wounded in the ISC attack, his family back on Earth knew it – and I wonder if what I’m saying is true. “You can jam our subspace transmissions, but you can’t jam *telepathy*.”

Tomarand isn’t smiling anymore. Good.

“I want Roger Price’s effects. Every last one. I am aware that you wanted to deliver them to his family in person,” Tomarand says, “and you haven’t been to Westminster yet.”

“The Argos isn’t in them!” I snap. Stealing from the dead is low, even by *Tal Shiar* standards.

“Actually Kenneth, it is,” The turbolift doors opened behind me, and I was too distracted to even notice. It’s Francis, and he’s holding Dido, both of his arms propping under her stomach. The Marshound looks confused. “Gentlemen, meet Argos...”

“I know you don’t like the animal, Francis, but this is going a little too far...” I say.

“Shut up,” Francis says. “Tomarand may be a homicidal maniac...”

“I protest...” Tomarand says, and though it’s meant to be humorous, the amusement is strained.

“...but he’s not stupid, and one of the things he said earlier about the Argos not allowing itself to be killed when Price died got me thinking. It made sense to me, and it got me wondering how the Argos would propagate itself.”

Tomarand is smiling again. The sight of Tomarand smiling after everything he’s done to us is unbearable; I begin to lift my phaser so I can shoot Francis and stop him from talking. *What on Earth are you doing, Kenneth Said!* The weapon slips from my fingers and clatters to the ground.

*Beware love.* the Tasting Prophets told me. *It will bring you pain.* I guess I’ve ignored their advice lately – when *doesn’t* love bring pain? But now, caught between grief for dead comrades, fear for my beloved Crysian’s life, and the fraternal love that I bear for Francis, it’s one of the most painful moments of my life. And that pain echoes in Gable, but like a good Starfleet officer, duty is preeminent. He continues his explanation.

“So Argos needs to reproduce itself. A telepath would want organic material – it’s the logical medium of transmission – so that leaves you and Dido as its likely hosts. Anyone likely to kill Roger would probably kill you too, and I haven’t felt any new alien influences in you, so that rules you out. Now let’s look at Dido. We’ve both noticed weird things from the beast... how many times has it gotten out of our quarters even when the doors haven’t been opened? How many times has it given people odd looks during the middle of complex conversations?”

“*Khre-riov.*” Hazard says. “The Federation may court martial me for what I’m about to do, but I don’t care. If we give you the animal, and we release our prisoners, and we omit any references to your attack from the log, will you let us go in peace, and without further interference in our mission?”

“We wouldn’t want you sending stray transmissions into ISC space,” I add.

Tomarand contemplates the bargain for what seems like days. We’re all impatient for his answer, but no one dares to breathe. “Offer accepted,” he finally says. I get the feeling the acceptance was probably predicated from the number of sweat beads that formed on my forehead.

So the dirty deed is done. The shields are lowered. Dido, along with the prisoners (and the dead Romulans), is transported back to the Romulan flagship. I don’t have the stomach to face Suria when she transports away, imperiously ordering the surviving Romulans to form an improptu honor guard around Telegon's body, as if playing the noble soldier will boost her stock with Tomarand. We also restore Kollo (who was trapped in the nav console and turned out to be the energy field that blocked the transporter access to the bridge) back to her human body. Far worse than any of these, we’re faced with the grisly task of cleaning up our ship and getting the warp drive back online. I suppose I could protest Hazard’s command – I was Captain before Latham – but Hazard deserves it, and given some of my decisions today, I’m beginning to think my judgment can’t be trusted. Although Lars does tell me that he doesn’t blame me for Burke’s death.

“You couldn’t have known the limits of your girlfriends’ protection,” he says. “And that was the task he was born to do.”

It’s hard for me to take my mind off him, and when I do, I invariably think about Latham, or Roger, or Suria, or Dido, who’s now at the mercy of the *Tal Shiar*. “What a horrible thing to do to an animal.” I say. It took us four hours to purge the system of the remaining heuristic



infection, but we've finally got the warp engines back, and we can't leave this system soon enough. The Romulans have recloak, but undoubtedly they've still got a watchful eye on us. "Poor Dido."

"Even I feel for her." Lars says. "And I hated the thing."

"And so the *Tal Shiar* wins," I say. "So much for my life being like a pulp novel. They get the Argos, and they'll use it to fine tune their artificial telepathy project."

"At least we know what they're doing," Hazard notes, leaning back in the command chair like he was born to it. Francis begins to laugh, and continues to laugh when even T'Doroth gives him a look that speaks of an intense need to wrap her fingers around his throat and watch his face turn purple.

"I left out one little detail in my explanation," he says. "Dido had one other quirk – she was obsessively drawn to Mr. Lars."

"My people have an empathic bond with animals,"

"Which made you a logical candidate to transfer the Argos to a new host." Francis explains, and once again, our jaws drop. "And then you were reconstituted from the dead, just like Dido was that one time..."

"Are you saying I've been resurrected and *infected* by an alien telepath?" Lars questions.

"Sorry Lieutenant," Francis shrugs. "Though it probably beats being dead."

That's a crisis for another time, and today's just been too much to handle. "Ivan, I've had no sleep..." I mutter.

"One question first, Kenneth." Ivan says. "Should I ask you whether you'd set a lethal charge on the shuttle bay jettison controls before the Romulans invaded, or after?"

"I wouldn't ask." I reply. At least he phrased the question in a form that allowed me to avoid another court martial.

"Fine. Go to bed, Kenneth." Hazard says. "That was Latham's final order, if you remember."

I can barely bring myself to get to the console. Francis sees me begin to stumble, rushes to my side, and props me up. "You were *this* close to shooting me, you know," he says.

"I'm *always* that close to shooting you." I laugh. In some ways, I suppose the relationship between me and Francis is not that different from the relationship I had with Roger Price – with me in Roger's shoes.

The crew (I suppose I should preface it with "surviving crew") nod at me as Francis drags me back to their quarters. Everyone's in shock at still being alive, but I think the brutal reality is sinking in for most. The final bodycount is twenty-nine out of sixty-eight dead. I don't care that we should look at survival as a blessing, an awful lot of good men and women are dead. And we really owe our lives to Francis Gable, and I'd wager a lot of credits that no one's going to thank him.

"That doesn't matter," Francis says, picking up on my thoughts. "The only real gratitude that matters is sex."

Now I remember why no one's going to thank him.

We reach our quarters... and suddenly stop dead in our tracks. My bed sheets are a bloody mess, blood coming from the severed head of Tashayl Suria that's been transported into the middle of the bed. As I fight a strong urge to vomit, Francis summons someone from security to clean up the mess. I stagger to a chair and collapse into it. Even with the adrenaline burst I got from finding the head, I'd probably fall asleep in seconds if it weren't for a flashing light on our

main computer console that indicates there's an incoming transmission. Like sand in the desert, the interruptions are endless.

“On... onscreen...” I moan. A familiar Romulan face appears on the viewscreen. It's Tomarand. He's holding my dog, though she's uncomfortably large for a lap dog. Despite his attempts to pet her, Dido looks profoundly unhappy.

“I don't always keep my word, Mr. Said,” Tomarand tells me. “But I am an art lover, and she had irked me more than once. I trust you appreciate the decoration.”

Appreciate? Unfortunately, he's right - I *do* appreciate it, and it makes me sick. “Let's agree not to meet again, *khre-riov*.” I finally say, reaching for the off switch.

“I can promise many things, but not that.” Tomarand interjects, stopping my motion. “What is the saying of your sub-culture when an unwanted event occurs? ‘If Allah wills it’? One may curse Fate, but even a man of my stature will not challenge its hegemony... Ow!”

Dido, tired of being rubbed the wrong way, suddenly rears and chomps down hard on the *Tal Shiar* operative's hand. “Good girl,” I smile, turning off the viewscreen.

## VII: Wounded Animals

They turn Burke's funeral into the galaxy's first Italian wake, but I make sure I'm at least three decks away during the proceedings. Sure I attend the services, but not the parties... it doesn't feel right to me at the moment. Most of the crew is in a mood to celebrate our survival and live life to its fullest. Me, I just want to find a portal and count stars for the rest of my life.

I don't even have a dog anymore.

Crew reassignments are a bear. When I was "demoted" to chief engineer, I had eighteen people in my department. The Romulans killed five of them, and my three strongest backs, Kendell, Suranak, and Wolka are going to receive a temporary transfer to security so we can give Lars a little more manpower.

What else? Well, Kollos is dying. She's got six days before she *has* to assume Medusan form again, unfortunately her human body is so weak it barely has any chance to survive on its own during the day of separation. Our medical staff is working feverishly to find a way to strengthen her. I really need to visit her, do something for her, find a way to help her live. Maybe that will help me live too.

The Crysian isn't in much better shape. She expended a lot of power defending us from the Romulans, and she's not regaining it very quickly, even with the ultraviolet emitters working twenty-four hours to stimulate her. Nobody tells me that she's dying, although the one marine biologist we had aboard *Galatea*, Lieutenant Vagura, was vaporized as she was sprinting for the open Sickbay door. That loss may turn out to be more serious than anyone suspects.

"Lieutenant," It's T'Doroth. They must be serious about ending my current fit of anti-social sulking if they've sent *her* out to talk to me.

"Do Vulcans appreciate the beauty of the universe?" I ask, pointing to a protostar forming in the dangling tail of a gaseous nebula, its trail lit by bright binary K stars about a half-parsec from our current position.

“You know we do. We govern our passions. We do not cease to feel.” T’Doroth answers, edging closer to me. I’m sure there’s a logical reason for that. “And – save for those few who undergo the *kolinahr* ritual - we welcome the development of our aesthetic self.”

“I guess you do, then.” I answer. “I just wondered if you appreciated the view as I do.”

“I do not,” T’Doroth says. “You appreciate it as an escape. I appreciate the intricacy of its physics, as a thing of beauty, and as a cradle for worlds that are yet to be. Emotion clouds your vision to the understanding that is a true aesthetic.”

“Back home, we’d call that snobbery,” I say.

“Sometimes I wonder if humans most greatly fear not diversity but complexity,” T’Doroth says. “So many of you seem to want to understand the universe in the simplest possible terms.”

“So? The universe is a tangled forest, and no matter what we do, it will never become a neat, freshly mowed lawn, so we should cultivate our love for forests...”

“That is another thing I do not understand, Mr. Said.” T’Doroth keeps her eye on the nebula. “Your need for metaphor.”

“That’s a personal quirk,” I smile. “It was Pratt’s personal quirk, actually – an old mate from *Ark Royal*. He was a true poet. I borrowed his love of poetry from him, tried it on for size, looked at it in the mirror... But the truth, T’Doroth is that I’m absolutely awful at it.”

“Usually, when humans disdain their own talents, they seek either judgment or contradiction.” T’Doroth is as accurate as a photon torpedo at five clicks. “Do not ask me for either. Poetry relies on semantics and tricks of language and emotion. I am not capable of judging such things.”

“So,” I say. “Emotion *is* capable of expressing complexity and nuance. Your logic tells you many ways to appreciate a beautiful thing. So does my poetry. Metaphors allow me to approach a subject at angles, forces me to make comparisons that brings me new insights.”

“Then I will concede the usefulness of the tool.” T’Doroth says, almost sighing. I can actually sense the subtlety of the Vulcan aesthetic in her voice, and in her mind. Sometimes her mind’s so subtle that even though we share an empathic link, I can’t tell she’s there. “But we both reach the same conclusion. The nebula is beautiful.”

“And we certainly wasted a lot of conversation to reach that conclusion, didn’t we?” I chuckle and change the subject. “How is it that every time a human and a Vulcan gets together, they turn a civil conversation into some world-shattering debate on logic and emotion?”

“I can only speculate,” T’Doroth tells me. “Perhaps because neither of our races easily abides contradiction?”

“That makes sense.” I say, and there’s a long pause. “Why does she call you ‘daughter’, T’Doroth?”

“When she first entered my mind, it was highly traumatic,” T’Doroth continues to stare at the stars, with newfound intensity. *Galatea* passes a DiTerrzi gas flare, which lights up the viewport for a fraction of a second. “Some trauma is not uncommon when people first meld. It is common in Vulcan children. Mothers often meld with their children at an early age, to prepare them for this trauma and strengthen their intellect. It is...useful in removing certain childhood aches.”

“So the Crysian saw your mother as a way to meld with you without doing damage,” I say.

“Clever.”

“I find she is capable of surprising subtlety, given her lack of social experiences,” T’Doroth says. “Now answer my question, Lieutenant.”

“It seems fair.” She’s certainly answered enough of mine.

“Why is she your ‘Beloved’?” T’Doroth asks.

Now there's a direct question for you. I bow my head in embarrassment. "Are you offended by the thought of someone loving something's that's *that* alien?"

"No," T'Doroth says. "Are *you* embarrassed by the fact that you love her?"

"No," I say, after several seconds of contemplation, of letting my emotions settle into the pit of my stomach. "She's a child, you know. Needy, sometimes spiteful, occasionally capable of moments of unimagined grace. I don't know why I love her – but I do."

"It is certainly not physical attraction." T'Doroth says.

"Maybe she's a mother to me too." I speculate, going where no man probably *should* go, the truth. "I'm not experienced in romantic relationships. I don't involve myself very much in the affairs of day to day living – for Heaven's sake, I let *Francis* take care of the laundry – and for those sorts of men, a mate who's a second mother is very attractive."

"I do not see it," T'Doroth says. "It feels like an attempt to return to the womb. Most illogical."

"Return to the womb," I say, drawing close to T'Doroth. She's a tall woman, barely five centimeters shorter than me, and we don't have to tilt our heads very much to make eye contact. "That's poetry."

Poetry. The word stirs something in her. She's looking at my face, and I can feel, even through the reluctant gauze of Vulcan training, an emotion. An attraction, a strong attraction. We take a moment to smell each other's scent – hers evokes the musky Vulcan desert, mine probably evokes the fact that I didn't shower this morning. Even so, she doesn't back away. *Like mother, like daughter*. I tilt my head to a more convenient angle, bend down slightly, place my hand on her shoulder. She accepts the touch, her hand goes to my arm, grabbing it gently. I smile, saying: "This is poetry too..." She blinks at the line, but she accepts it with pursed lips, ready to meet mine and...

...that's when the yellow alert goes off.

"Hazard to Said..." My communicator blares. I back away from T'Doroth. Hazard has been an extremely active Captain – and as his First, I'm seeing more of him than Francis these days.

"Yes, Captain?" I say.

"We have a situation. I need you on the bridge."

"Aye sir, I'm coming," I say, and I turn to T'Doroth. She's already moving away from me, but damn - damn the yellow alert. Jettisoning both caution and common sense, I grab her arm, and though she's surprised for a split second, she accepts it. I pull her close and she welcomes it. I hold her tight, and she leans into me. I caress her face, and she gives me such a look – and I can feel the look echoing in her mind. And then I kiss her, and she returns it. I taste the sweatness of her breath, and it moves me. It moves us both.

"We should go to the bridge, Lieutenant," she says; after fifteen seconds she pulls back from the embrace, unconsciously straightening her hair.

"Duty demands, passions comply." I say, tugging a wrinkle out of my uniform. "And the name isn't Lieutenant. It isn't even Left-tenant..." (an drunken engineer from Scotland once told me that 'loo-tenants' were people who guarded latrines, although he passed out before he could explain what he meant). "Kenneth. Please call me that when we're not on duty."

"I shall," she promises, and we head to the bridge together.

Ah, good,” Hazard says, rotating the con as we enter. T’Doroth takes over the helm – I always wondered how a Vulcan ever got to be weapons officer. “Long range sensors have picked this up...” he says, directing T’Doroth to display an image on the main screen.

“ISC sensor post.” I recognize it. “Likely unmanned. Has it issued a distress call yet?”

“Not yet,” Hazard reports. “*Galatea* has all this Concordium crap in her systems to fool things like this.”

“Yeah, but we’ll need to readjust our sensor profile if we want to keep fooling them.” It’s amazing how some of the insane design decisions that contributed to our shakedown hell actually started to make sense when we got wind of our mission. “If we’ve reached the border, we should be coming close to that base station the traders told us about.”

“No sign of it on sensors, but we’re probably still a few parsecs away,” Hazard answers. “Do you think we should slow down before we pass the post?”

“Yeah, let’s cut to Warp 4. Skip into the nebula a bit so it looks like we’re slowing for navigational reasons.” I say and I chuckle. “It’s going to be another long night for the engineers,” I smile, shaking my head.

“You just want to bury yourself in a Jeffries Tube for an evening,” Hazard says. “If you can find time for a break – and the alert doesn’t go red – how about letting me throw you around for an hour or so?”

Judo. But that’s the cover - Hazard’s true intentions are more transparent than a freighter full of triplex aluminum. *You need to be more social, Kenneth. You need to crack open that shell you’ve constructed around you like a walnut. Yes, the Romulans hurt us bad, yes, our workload’s a killer, but we need to live.*

“Sure,” I say with a smile. After all, he *is* right, and I could use the distraction. For one thing, I know that what’s happening to Kollo is killing him inside, and he needs the distraction more than I do. It’s the duty of wounded friends to lick each others’ wounds, isn’t it?

I return to engineering and coordinate the adjustment in our profile, which is a *major* operation. *Galatea* was designed to operate solely on ISC technology, including ones designed to fool ISC sensors into thinking we’re an ISC ship. We haven’t fully employed those systems – our shakedown was such a complete disaster that we juryrigged the place like crazy with Fed tech and considered ourselves lucky just to have a working starship – but as we’ve traversed through Romulan space we’ve slowly been bringing the original systems online. “Everyone has a hobby,” the engineers said, so we’ve dubbed the ISC systems “the ship’s hobby”. (Engineers can be just as obnoxious as security). But we haven’t dared to attempt to run the entire ship’s systems off its original spec.

As I said, it’s going to be a long evening.

We finish the conversion on the power systems in short order, and we’re proceeding to the much harder task of adjusting the sensor array. As requested, I take a break from engineering at about 2100 and head down to the rec room and get into my *gi*. Hazard’s there waiting for me. Usually, there’d be at least six off-duty personnel playing around in here. After the Romulan attack, it’s empty except for us.

“Yeah, I notice it too,” Ivan says, observing me as I scan the room.

We hook up. Ivan’s got the size advantage; I know what they say about people being able to use a big man’s size against him in judo, but it’s a myth. Ivan says he likes to train with me because I don’t quit and I’ve got great quickness and endurance, all of which are true, but there are other opponents with similar qualities.

“The best way to get to know somebody is to fight them,” he once told me. “To look into their eyes in the heat of battle. That’s when a person is truly naked.”

“You’ve never tried mind melds,” I replied.

Any expectation I had that Ivan would be too distracted to be competitive proves painfully wrong; Ivan pretty much mauls me. It’s not as bad as my match with Burke; in fact it takes my new Captain about twenty minutes to score a decisive pin in our first contest, and twelve minutes in the second. I can tell that Ivan’s still in the mood for a fight, but I ward him away with an outstretched hand, get a glass of cold water, and dump it over my head. He follows my queue and does the same, and we sit down on a bench together.

“Kenneth...” he says. “It’s good to see there’s still some fight left in you.”

“We’re both built like starships.” I say. “You can knock our shields down, but unless you break us into pieces, our shields will find a way to regenerate.”

“Spoken like a starship engineer, my friend.” Ivan tells me. “But, if you don’t mind me stealing your metaphor, we’ve both taken a lot of hull damage. When we were together on *Vespera*, I told you that your service record reminded me of my own, but you hadn’t quite taken as much damage...”

“Truth to tell, I don’t remember a lot about what happened on *Vespera*...” I admit, and I get to my feet and start to walk to prevent stiffness from setting in. I also rotate my arm to test the socket; I thought I heard something pop when my attempted *harai-goshi* throw went horribly wrong.

“Well, I was wrong. You’ve taken as much damage as me, in your own way,” Ivan says. “Usually a ship’s shields regenerate, but sometimes you can damage a ship so bad they can’t, and trying to take that ship into battle is dangerous.”

“In other words, if I’ve been damaged so badly that I become a threat to *Galatea*, you’ll make sure I won’t endanger the ship.” I translate the metaphor into English. For once, Hazard’s shocked into silence. “I do understand, Ivan,” I say, stopping his reply in his tracks. “The role reversal is complete.”

After the contest, I take a quick shower; once I’ve cleaned myself up, it’s back to engineering. It takes another fourteen hours of work to finish the sensor array and communications, and then we hook over the transporter systems. And then they restore themselves to Federation technology. We convert them again to ISC standard... and they revert again to Federation technology.

“Somebody shoot the heuristic,” Gbeji says. There’s something emotionally satisfying about seeing that even Gbeji’s eternal optimism can be deflated. In the end we just disable the thing.

Finally, after we’ve run the sixth simulation, and verified that we’re not going to be detected, I head up to the bridge and activate the systems.

“Nothing’s burning up or self destructing.” I report, giving the engineering board a stare that dares it to make me a liar.

“We’ll have the acid test when we hit long range scanner range. That’s in thirteen hours,” Francis, who’s replaced Hazard at the science console, does a quick calculation.

“Good. Is there anything else, Mr. Gable?” From the look on Ivan’s face, I know he regrets asking the question as soon as he says it.

“Sure!” Gable pipes up cheerily. “When do I get my turn to be Captain?”

Francis turns to him in the con, matching his smile with an icy stare. “When everyone else aboard this ship is dead, Mr. Gable,” he says.

Gable breathes an audible sigh of relief. “Thank God!” he shouts. Ivan and I trade a look – things here *are* desperate if we’re expecting Francis to function as a respectable bridge officer. From Gable’s perspective, he’s the highest ranking officer on this ship next to Hazard, and he’s been terrified of command ever since his days on *Ark Royal* (though there was a time when he wasn’t quite such a flake).

So we proceed toward scanning range of the listening post, thirteen hours that we spend pouring over ships’ systems. I know we’re in danger of overpreparing, but I’ve always believed it’s better to overprepare than be caught flat-footed. And the whole business with the Romulans exploiting the heuristics still irks me. I don’t feel guilty about it – they’d have attacked us no matter what happened – but I don’t want to go zero for two either. I take pride in my engineering and in my ship, despite the fact that the hybrid systems on *Galatea* makes this one of the most nightmarishly complicated vessels Starfleet’s ever built.

I visit Kollo, who’s lying comatose in a medical bay, and the hourly injections she’s receiving may as well be leeches and potions for all the good they’re doing her. I don’t have much to say – though I’ve felt a strong bond of mutual respect, we’ve never been close. Hazard wasn’t kidding when he called her the most beautiful woman aboard *Galatea*, but her energy form is much of an impediment to a healthy social life as the Crysian’s psionic field was for me. *Why didn’t I fall in love with her?*

T’Doroth told me that she views life as a navigational puzzle. I hope she can find some way to solve this one.

I also visit the Crysian. She welcomes me, embraces me, and surrounds me in water and joy, as if the emotion were a solid thing. I think she draws strength from me, so I stay with her. Her movements are slow; the host of red rays that make up her body sluggishly orbit me, and they keep their distance. The joy I’m experiencing is tinged by a profound colic, a melancholy that doesn’t fade throughout my time with her.

“I can sense you in my mind when I’m with T’Doroth,” I say. “Does that bother you?”

*No.* she says. *Once I thought you were a thing of my body and that you should not desire connections beyond my own. Do you remember?*

“I don’t forget.” I say. “But that was also a long time ago.” It seems longer than a lifetime to me.

*But I did not understand all the lessons of your teaching. As the parts of my body swell and ebb as the depths change, so too do the connections of souls. But to flow apart does not mean that one will never come together again.*

I’m not sure she quite understands how I feel about T’Doroth – odd, given that she was jealous of my bond with the Captain, and I’d hardly call that a romantic relationship. Perhaps she’s more frightened of those relationships that I have that she can’t share or understand. Or perhaps she’s just gotten wiser since Monoceros?

*I do not think so.* she tells me, picking up on the thought. *Were I wise, I would not be confined in a place where I cannot move, where I cannot vary the depths and the pressure and the taste of the sun and the tightness of my form, where I am surrounded by calm, simple emotions.*

“I will try to help you. The next Wash should be good for you...”



*Perhaps.* she says. *The saddest thing is that I now fully understand the wounds that I inflicted upon you.*

“Those wounds are ancient.” I suppose it’s a human quirk that the need to reassure someone increases as the hope of successful comfort someone plummets.

*What does time matter?* Her telepathic voice matters. *When I was young, and I first saw the sun, its warmth entranced me. I swam in the shallows for such lengths of time that your mind cannot encompass them. My form found new freedom, and I almost lost myself in the freeness of my pieces. I never thought I could piece myself completely together again. But in time, the pieces came back, and I was whole again. Centuries do not alter the essence of form. And wounds do not always heal.*

“You know, Ivan said much the same thing to me, just a few hours ago...” I laugh. As I told T’Doroth, different metaphors, same conclusion.

She says nothing, and so I decide not to press the conversation. I sometimes wonder what she’d be like if she had a better teacher. I don’t bring up the subject of Kollos – I know that T’Doroth has broached the subject with her, and I know the helmsman’s opinion of the Crysian well enough to know that she wouldn’t want her help unless all other hopes have faded. The Crysian shifts around me in ever tightening circles, periodically brushing against me in dull, poking motions that hurt when they happen hundreds of times in an hour. But it’s still hard to walk away from her company. It’s like waking up from drowning.

I head to engineering, then to the bridge. It’s another white-knuckle moment. Three minutes to sensor range and closing. Hazard even has the chronometer running on the main viewscreen.

“How was your meeting with the Guest?” Hazard asks me.

“Uneventful.” I report. I can be honest about that for once. The Crysian’s too weak to project her senses to the nearest star and use it to roam the universe.

“Two minutes...” Francis says. “But that’s pretty obvious with the countdown on the main screen, isn’t it?”

The two minutes pass in a blue shift nightmare of stretched time and nervous glances. I almost wish Francis would speak up, just to exercise his gift at cutting the tension. Five... four... three... two...

“No good,” Francis says. “I had the jammers working, so the signal didn’t get out, but we didn’t pass muster.”

I’m angry enough to spit. On the other hand, Hazard isn’t nearly as upset – he’s resigned to the ship performing below specs. “Lieutenant T’Doroth,” he sighs. “Load a plasma torpedo. We’ll fire it when we’re in range of the station.”

“Sir,” T’Doroth says. “You do realize that if we use plasma, they’ll think the Romulans destroyed their outpost, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” Hazard retorts. “That would be a real tragedy.”

“Captain, can we hold off on destroying the listening post?” I speak up. Hazard nods, but it’s to tell me that he’s listening. “If we’re going to advance further into ISC space, we need to adjust our sensor profile so we can fool their long range sensors. I volunteer to go into the listening post and raid its data banks so we can find out which failure conditions we triggered.”

“It’s a real risk, Kenneth.” Hazard’s brow furrows and for a moment he looks like a young James Latham.

“So that means I’m going, right?” I smile.

“Yeah, I don’t got a choice,” he says. I’ve taught the engineering department as much as I can about ISC systems, but I’m the only one here who has hands on experience with anything other than Federation replicas. “So you get your way again, you bastard.” Ivan chuckles.

“You know, Captain, calling me a ‘bastard’ on the bridge isn’t good discipline.” I say. I’m in the armory room with Lars and Hazard, a tiny closet space that’s adjacent to the transporter room, cramming myself into an environmental suit. The suit’s an unfortunate necessity. I’m going to have to enter the listening post in order to access its computers, and its current atmosphere is methane, built for the Q’naabians. I swear the ISC has more problems with mixed environments of its major neighbors than we do. But then, our quadrant has been described as populated by “hundreds of species of sapient foreheads attached to nearly identical bipeds.” Xenobiologists are too sarcastic for their own good.

“I thought we needed a more informal bridge, at least until we’ve recovered from what happened with the Romulans.” Hazard explains. “If it offended you... you can take it out on me later.”

“As you say... sir...” I moan in reply. I like Ivan, but I guess I’m much too used to Greg Jensen, who (even when we were close as brothers) conducted his command with what I consider professional dignity. Once again, *Galatea* reminds me far too much of my Academy days. It’s mostly because the crew’s so young – there aren’t a lot of seasoned vets to provide good examples of professionalism – but now I wish we had a Robertson Grudge (the old grizzled Captain on USS Fox) or a Malco Hen (the chief engineer on the Phillipi who tried to be my mentor, but decided that he’d never get me out of the Jeffries’ Tubes long enough to teach me a damn thing) aboard this ship. This ship could use more people over the age of 35. And despite my conflicts with Latham, losing him is just going to make it much, much worse.

“You’re zoning again, Lieutenant,” Lars warns me as he fastens his suit. He’s built so broadly that it’s hard for an environmental suit to fit him.

“We’ve got a lot to think about,” I say, employing the royal “we” as a shield.

We perform a suit check on each other, with Hazard serving as a redundant system and making sure we don’t overlook anything, then make our way to an escape pod. Unfortunately, when we converted the cargo bay and six cargo holds into a tank for the Crysian, we had to abandon our two shuttles on Monoceros. Escape pods are the only extravehicular craft at our disposal.

“They’re thinking about adding a Captain’s yacht to the next generation of dreadnoughts,” I point out. It’s idle chatter.

“They must think we’re heading into peacetime again,” Hazard notes. “What on Earth would a Captain do with a yacht in the middle of the war?”

“Maybe they knew you were going to be in command and they’re expecting a rapid increase in mutinies,” Lars jokes. I’ve noticed that Lars’s sense of humor only surfaces when he’s around Hazard, and only when Hazard’s nervous.

“Get the hell off my ship, both of you.” Hazard laughs, and so we head into the lifepod. I immediately head for the thrusters, while Lars straps himself in. *Galatea* is approaching the listening post at one-twentieth impulse, which is still a little too fast for my taste, but we’re worried about that *Galatea* might get caught flat-footed if we go to a full stop. We’re still close to the nebula, and there are plenty of good hiding places in there.

“These pods rattle quite a bit, don’t they?” Lars asks.

“Not this generation. Improved inertial dampening,” I inform him, flipping a switch to make subspace contact with the ship. “Life Pod Six to *Galatea*. Seals are positive, thruster systems are go. Do I have the green light for separation?”

“Affirmative, Life Pod Six.”

“Thrusters on...” I say. Believe it or not, you should always ignite thrusters *before* separation on a ship that’s traveling at decent impulse speeds. “I will disengage from the mothership in five seconds...” I slowly recite the countdown, and we see *Galatea* red shift and disappear from view in about one-tenth of a second. I snap on the rotational thrusters, and we’re heading at several kilometers per second toward the relay station.

“Six minutes to arrival.” There’s always some kind of a countdown going on around here; I suppose it’s one of the things that keeps the Big Black Vast from getting too boring.

“I’ve scanned it again with the pod’s sensors. No sign of weapons systems.” Lars adds.

“This could be a wasted trip for you, Lieutenant,” I note.

“I could use a wasted trip at the moment.” Lars states, and then he changes the subject. “Tell me about the Argos. Did he... take over... this Roger person?”

I was wondering why Lars had decided to come on this mission, after he told me he never wanted to be on the same Prime team as me again. “I thought I forwarded all my reports,” I say.

“I suppose I was hoping that a little conversation might uncover something new.” Lars says.

“I melded with the Crysian and relived the memories so they’d be fresh when I wrote the report.” I inform Lars. “Trust me, there’s no way I could do better. I *am* concerned about you, Lieutenant, despite our differences.”

“Differences?” he wonders. I should have kept my mouth shut. I suppose I could think up a good excuse. “Lieutenant, I thought we were on pretty good terms.”

“You don’t blame me for Wirchenko’s death?”

Lars pauses, and it’s a long pregnant pause. A direct hit. “Even if I did, the whole business with the Romulans makes it moot. Though I wish he’d been with us in that fight.” Lars draws a deep breath. “It may sound callous, but there’s a code in security. When we’re drawn into the arms of the Cold Maidens,” He invokes one of the Efrosian mythical death figures. “It’s better to do it as a group. It enhances the experience.”

“Do Efrosians think of death as a form of sex?” I wonder.

Lars laughs. “Equatorials like me do, though Polars have different beliefs.” Lars says. “Death is life’s orgasm. Sex is people working together, creating tension that builds to a moment of incredible release. And life is people living together, creating tension that builds up to the ultimate release.”

“I don’t think even Francis would find that metaphor appealing.” I say, my face twisting in distaste.

“I understand your point of view,” Lars doesn’t often wax philosophical, but he’s more than capable of deep conversations – occasionally I saw him engaged in ferocious debates with James Latham. “When you strip life down to its basic patterns: desire/fulfillment, hunger/satisfaction, etc. the patterns that drive us are both familiar and predictable. They’re as basic as drawing breath.”

“If they’re so basic, then why is life so damn complicated?” I ask.

“We make it complicated,” Lars argues. “Because we’re so determined to separate ourselves from the rest of the animal kingdom that we have to dress up the basic patterns to make them seem complicated.”

“That’s a little too facile for me,” I say. “The Federation is composed of a trillion individuals, each with their own agendas, each alive for one, two, sometimes even three centuries, exploring a vast expanse of space. Even if the basic system of life is simple, when you get that many people together, complications should be expected.”

“We’re approaching the listening post,” Lars warns. I think the conversation's reached its conclusion.

“I see it. Docking ring is targeted. Adjusting thrusters to docking velocity,” I say. They’d better adjust to docking velocity, or the Meskeen will be able to scrape us off their listening post and use us as gravy for their next tadpole roast.

Lars contacts *Galatea* and asks for confirmation that they’re standing by with tractors in case the thrusters misfire. It’s standard procedure, and turns out to be unnecessary. The escape pod docks without incident. There’s no airlock on the escape pod, but the environmental suits should make that unnecessary. The listening post is constructed from an ominous black metal: a treated duranium-tritanium alloy that the Federation has only just begun to reverse engineer. The door, a circular hinge, has edges that protrude from the hull to automatically hug our docking ring. How accomodating of them. On the other hand, the electric blue force field that’s standing between us and the door is much less friendly.

“Problems?” Lars doesn’t have a clear view of the force field, but he can see me hesitate.

“Force field.” I report. Lars begins to rummage through his supply of explosives, like a golfer looking for the right club. “Hold off. There’s a control panel.”

“How do you expect to access it?” Lars asks. It’s the obvious question, when you haven’t quite gotten the hang of ISC technology.

“Telepathic impressions,” I answer, extending my hand. “When the shields are raised, the controls are designed to respond to telepathic contact that corresponds with the appropriate hand motion – a purely ISC response to a design problem.”

“No wonder the Romulans are straining their pointed eyebrows trying to develop their own telepathic technology.” Lars mutters.

“The ISC is forcing everyone to get more inventive,” I reply, trying to direct the computer to think of me as a (confused) friend. Undoubtedly every command code I learned onboard *The Lasting Peace* was erased months ago, but I’m willing to bet the user-friendliness of ISC technology will make it possible for me to slip through their defenses. The ISC is incredibly advanced, but their internal security has some *serious* problems. I guess that’s what happens when no one seriously threatens an empire for over two centuries. “If we can ever put a stop to this war, we could do some *very* interesting things with this technology.”

“Maybe we could infect more people’s brains with it.” Ivan snarls. He’s not handling the Argos revelation very well, not that I blame him one bit. “By the way, the tricorder can’t scan for telepathic defenses...”

Lars is distracting me, but the fact that the system fails to accept my entry codes on the first seven attempts is much more frustrating. “They wouldn’t use them here, this is a minor listening post on the far reaches of their – AAAIE!”

So much for exposition. On the eighth attempt, the controls again fail to respond to my tampering – then I experience one of the sharpest pains I’ve ever felt, a knife to my temple. I fight the urge to black out; it’s so bad that Lars has to prop me up. “What is it, Lieutenant?” he asks.

“Eye of the Lamb... 22H23K788... Shackle of Tranquility... 348A98B1... Friendship... V2S1P6246...”

It's a stream of gibberish, but something tells me I'm not going to get these words out of my head until I take out my tricorder and commit them to a written record. With trembling fingers that have to work hard to pry the tricorder from my hip, I start the recording. After reciting twelve different name and number combinations, the headache subsides, and the gibberish stops. “Oh...” I moan. “By Allah, that was a headache for the ages.”

“Are you okay?” Lars asks. “Was that some sort of... telepathic trigger?”

“I... I think so...” I say, still wincing from the headache. “That felt so weird. Too weird.”

“Do we need to pull out?” Lars asks. I shake my head.

“I got the distinct impression that the message was waiting for me.” I say. “That someone was expecting me to do this.”

“Do you know what the odds are?” I nod. “I *really* don't like the sound of that,” Lars says. “If there's a trigger, there's a trap. Let's pull out.”

“It didn't feel like one.” I say. I crane my neck to stare directly at Lars's face. “I won't force you to be part of a mission if it makes you this nervous. Too many people have died. I'd like to finish the mission, but I'll let you make the call.” Yes, I outrank Lars, but far too much has happened on *Galatea*. Ivan is right about the need for friendship to supercede rank for awhile.

“We need that information. Let's go.” Lars decides after about fifteen indecisive seconds, then holds me back with a strong hand on my arm as I rush for the door. “Let me scan it again to see if anything's changed.”

I nod, let Lars scan the door with a tricorder. “No sign of weapons,” he informs.

“Good. If anyone fired a phaser in there, they'd see the explosion all the way back on Romulus.” I mention. But I don't need to tell Lars how dangerous phasers can be when they're fired in a pure methane atmosphere.

I finish working on the hatch, which opens with a hiss, and I crouch down and begin to enter the listening post. This is one of those rare situations where I'm too tall for my environment; Q'Naabians are not quite as “scrunched” as Hydrans, but on average they're at least twenty centimeters shorter than I am. The actual station is one of the most impressive technical arrays I've ever seen; a panoply of lights and displays that reminds me of a cross between Christmas lights and old pictures of 20th Century fission power stations. But once again, the programming's bending over backwards to help me. Why couldn't *our* heuristics be this friendly?

“Have you secured the data?” Lars calls over the comm link.

“I don't just have the data,” I marvel at what I'm seeing onscreen, “the computer's already doing an analysis for me.”

“What!” Even Lars can't believe the sloppiness of their security. “That's just embarrassing!” I scan the data with a bit of a skeptical eye. “Assuming we're not being buffaloed, the borrowed freighter ID code that *Galatea* has been transmitting to fool them isn't valid this close to a military installation. In addition, the listening post isn't just scanning our power systems and sensor arrays, it's scanning our navigational deflector profile. It practically screams 'I am a Federation destroyer.'”

“Navigational deflectors? The sub-shielding that sweeps aside cosmic dust particles? How?” Lars wonders.

“Deflectors roughly follow the ship’s forward contours,” I explain. “And we all know the contours of a Federation ship is very distinctive. It’s going to be a trick to change them so they’ll read as one of those ISC flying bats.”

“And you poor sods down in engineering who have practically been killing yourselves for the last week get to have one more sleepless night.” Lars notes.

“Your sympathy is appreciated,” I say.

“Actually it’s harder to guard someone when they’re dropping over dead from exhaustion,” Lars adds, and though I’m not facing him, I’ll bet he’s grinning. “Anything else?”

I’ve finished the data extraction, so it’s time to go. “Nope,” I say. “Time to return,” I say, squeezing myself into the pod. I seat myself with a heavy sigh, and shut the door. “Separation in ten seconds.” I announce.

“Good work, Lieutenant,” Lars would probably have slapped me on the shoulder if it weren’t so cramped. The pod separates from the post on schedule and quickly accelerates as I activate the thrusters. Lars hails *Galatea* and asks her to come in with her tractor beam and pick us up.

“I have one question, Lieutenant.” Lars asks me.

“Sure.”

“When you were with the Crysian and the others, and they were all inside your head, how’d you cope?”

I take a deep breath. “Honestly? I didn’t cope. I was melded to four other people, and my will had been pretty much broken by the three weeks I’d already spent bonding with the Crysian. I was so happy to submerge myself into the meld that I lost my individual identity in seconds.”

Lars blinks, which for an Efrosian, comes across as more fierce than comical. “How’d you escape?”

“Greg Jensen was responsible,” I say. “Just before he gave into the meld, he planted the thought inside the Crysian that the meld would alter me in ways that she didn’t expect. That I would cease to be the man she loved. And then it happened. The five of us were changing into something new. And when the Crysian tried to reach me, she found something else in my place, the gestalt. It frightened her so much that she finally realized that what she’d done to me was killing me. So I woke up aboard *Ark Royal*, as close to my normal self as the change allowed. I was altered, of course.”

“It must have been very frightening.”

“If there’s a place beyond frightening, I was there,” I say. The first few weeks after the meld, I was autistic. They figured I was gone forever. Of course, when I just started to recover, Starfleet decided to court martial me for nearly killing six people with my bare hands when the Crysian initially took control of me.” It hurts to even remember it. “Greg saved me again, pulled strings with Delta-Theyvo, had one of the best legal minds in Starfleet, a pretty middle-aged lady woman named Areel Shaw, represent me. After I won the case, Starflint moved me into a medical hospital. That was the worst part, by far. They treated me as a vegetable, or like I should be. And they got offended when I didn’t act the part, when I tried to assert any independence.”

“I’d sooner be dead,” Lars says.

“Me too. I’m sure that if I’d stayed longer I would have committed suicide, but then Greg saved me a third time; he brought me back to *Ark Royal*. It did wonders for me, though I began to get numb again toward the end of that tour.”

“So did Greg Jensen save you a fourth time?” Lars asked.

“No. The ISC did,” I smile, and Lars gives me an absolutely horrified look. “I look back on my torture sessions with Dr. Luiif, and I realize he did the one thing I needed more than anything else at the time.”

“He tortured you?”

“Yes, he did. But he also respected me. He treated me like a human being, a competent, capable, human being, someone who mattered. That’s something only Greg and Teller and Latham and a few others aboard *Ark Royal* gave me. By torturing me, Luiif saved me.” I almost laugh. “The universe is a complicated place, isn’t it?”

Lars leans back in his chair to brace himself against *Galatea*’s tractor. “It sounds like you and Greg Jensen have quite the intense bond. You do know that some of the stories about him aren’t very flattering.”

“Those storytellers can go to Hell. Lars, there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for that man,” I say. “He – and Francis, and Nagura – they’re my family. They are inside me. Whatever our differences, (and with Francis, the differences are pretty much all-encompassing) I love them with such intensity that I can’t truly express my feelings without opening myself to mockery.”

“The Crysian did horrible things to you... you were glad to escape from her... yet you still have a bond with her?” Lars wonders.

“Most people thinks she exercises some sort of telepathic control over me. but they’re mistaken.” I say. “I couldn’t hope to explain how I feel about her in a million years, but she is a passion that can swallow me at a moment’s notice. I know you people joke about it – ‘I swim with the fishes’, and all that...”

“Sarcasm’s part of our lifestyle.” Lars nods in recognition at the comment. “Pay no attention to it, Lieutenant. Just as long as you don’t endanger the ship, I wouldn’t care if you dressed up as a green Orion Animal Woman and enacted sexual fantasies with Francis Gable.”

That’s definitely one of the most repulsive things that anyone’s ever said to me. “I guess it’s official, Mr. Lars,” I say. “You must really, *really* hate me.”

We return to *Galatea*, to yet another long, sleepless night, this time spent adjusting our navigational deflectors so they’ll appear to follow the contours of an ISC ship on a long range scan and *still* be able to do its job and protect *Galatea*. It’d be a shame if the most important mission in the Federation was sidelined by a dandruff-sized spec of dirt. But we succeed in making the adjustment, though we’re not going to be able to exceed Warp Six with this configuration. We’re also not exactly sure what we’re going to do about the ID signal problem. We’re broadcasting a signal that Starfleet bought from a respectable Cromarg merchant Captain, but it’s not proving adequate to the task. And Hazard views the fact they had a signal waiting for me with alarm. Nonetheless, we’re still proceeding toward Androthaxis Wash, where we hope to regenerate the Crysian and use her for the raid on the ISC capitalworld. There’s a part of me that wants to engineer some way for her to stay there forever, and is at war with the part of me that still respects my Starfleet duty.

I deal with the conflict by concentrating on my responsibilities. Once the engineering team has finished with the deflectors and collapsed in their bunks, I pull a double shift to allow Gbeji take a break (I leave a Jeffries’ Tube empty for Gbeji in case she and Rigney need privacy; she once told me she likes to feel the warp engines throb when she’s intimate with someone). I’ve also been given the task of handling Latham’s affairs. I’m almost ready to write a eulogy for him, though it’s threatening to become a eulogy for everyone who died aboard *Galatea* that day.

Part of this duty also involves cataloguing James Latham's sculptures and ion fountain projects – some of the most intricate and beautiful I've ever seen – so we can deliver them to a Federation museum should we ever return from Desskyie.

And that brings us to the problem of the ISC capitalworld. Desskyie itself presents a genuine mystery – we read it as a radio source, our sensors detect a gravity wobble in the radio signature that indicates there's a planetary system there, but we haven't detected a speck of visible light from the location. Even an Organian couldn't cloak a sun. And while I've heard of worlds that orbit black holes, habitable ones seem like a real stretch to me.

"Mr. Said, to the bridge, please." Hazard announces. It's been thirty hours since we left the listening post, and I'm so wobbly that I'm counting the minutes before I'm safely allowed to collapse. "There's something here you need to see," he adds.

The first thing that greets me when I hit the bridge is one of the most despondent looks I've ever seen on Francis Gable's face, and I can sense his mind in absolute turmoil. My first thought is that Earth's been attacked, or the Federation's been forced to surrender to the ISC. I walk over to him immediately and put my hands on his shoulders. He says nothing, but his lip quivers.

"Kenneth, you'd better sit down for this," Ivan says, offering me the con. Something more than exhaustion nearly kicks my legs out from under me, but I successfully stagger into place. "The latest ISC propaganda piece," Hazard says. "Onscreen."

"Peace is the true final frontier for the peoples of my quadrant." It's another defector, this time in a Starfleet Captain's uniform; he stands behind a row of neatly uniformed Rovillians who hold themselves with such an unexpectedly military bearing that even a Klingon would be impressed. "When the Organians first intervened in the conflict between the Federation and the Klingons, it is said that one of the greatest starship Captains in Federation history, when told he wasn't going to be allowed to fight his enemy, threw a temper tantrum worthy of a petulant child. The Organians asked him if what he wanted was war... and that's the question that shocked him to his senses.

"If peace is what the Federation really desires, does it really matter if some outside forces help us achieve it? So what if they're in the Neutral Zone – our treaties don't allow us to enter those places in the first place! What does it matter if there's a neutral party on our borders – they're more trustworthy than the neighbors we've got! We fought the Klingons and the Romulans and the Lyrans for close to a decade in the General War - how can the ISC be any worse than that? And we've had plenty of fights with the Gorns and the Mirak throughout our history. Isn't it time that we stopped losing the best people the Federation has to offer by the shipload? My bondsmen should be poets, explorers, and engineers; they should come to Desskyie in friendship. If the ISC guarantees respect for Federation borders, what do we lose by pursuing a policy of peace?"

"I stand here not as a traitor, nor as a speaker of platitudes. I'm not wearing an ISC uniform. But I do honor the shared conviction of our two cultures. And I offer to go to Desskyie as a mediator for this conflict between the Federation and the ISC." He draws a phaser, and throws it down. "I promise that I will never touch a phaser again. I just hope the gesture turns into a good first step in the quest for peace between our cultures."

The Rovillians applaud, and someone nudges the Starfleet officer's forehead in a gesture of affection, and he smiles back while still maintaining a stolid, spartan dignity. It's Greg Jensen.



## VIII: Planetfall

“I see,” I say, examining the image on the viewscreen. I’m wondering if one of the Rovillians might be Luiif, but I don’t spot him.

“You’re not very upset,” Ivan’s surprised by my reaction. I guess he was expecting a powderkeg.

“This is Greg Jensen,” I shrug. “Either this is a trick he’s playing on the ISC, or this is temporary and he’ll break free of their control and set things straight.” It’s obvious I’m the only person who feels that way. “As long as I know he’s alive, I won’t worry.”

“People just don’t become traitors so they can play tricks on the enemy!” Lars insists. “And you were the one who mentioned just how good the ISC brainwashing can be!”

“Kenneth... you know how much Greg hated espionage,” Francis manages to speak up.

“Well, he may have hated it, but he’d be very good at it. Heck, even though I *loathe* spycraft, Latham told me that he thought I’d make a first rate intelligence officer.” I turn to Ivan. “When the Crysian’s health has been restored, I should be able to reestablish a telepathic link with Greg and verify what’s happened. Unless you’d like me to maintain telepathic silence, Captain.”

“Silence might be wise. Let’s see what the situation is like when we reach Androthaxis,” Hazard ponders, and then he nudges me on the shoulder. “I’ll have my chair back now, Mr. Said,” he says.

Androthaxis Wash is a five-day trip at Warp 6.5, the maximum safe speed for *Galatea* under our current deflector configuration. Most of us are worried about Kolloos, who’s regaining a little bit of her strength, but whether it’s going to be enough to survive the next change is anyone’s guess.

The Crysian, on the other hand, is doing a lot better; her spears, the rays that make up her body, had been a sickly silver-brown color after the Romulan attack, but they’re slowly regaining

their natural color, crimson red like a spawning salmon. I still can't wait to get her into deep waters, though. I persuade Ivan to make a slight detour so we can do a close approach on a star (a red star classified as RSC-J2789 on the Romulan star charts we picked up from the Cromarg trader; we dub the star "Juniper Berry"). We're going to put the Crysian's recovery to the test. She wants to spread her wings, and Allah willing, I'm going to make sure she does it safely.

The Crysian spreads herself to the edge of the tank, her attaining as much separation as she can, and then she, Francis, and I concentrate together. It's become easier for me to meld with Francis; to say that I was uncomfortable with our mix of attitudes would be a serious understatement, but lately, the differences don't seem important. I've spent a lot of time around T'Doroth, and she's shown me some basic Vulcan meditation techniques, and we've also discussed aspects of Vulcan philosophy. Becoming one with Francis may put the IDIC principle to the test, but it's a test that we're passing. Francis's virtues – his loyalty, his compassion, his crazed genius – are worth putting up with his quirks, but then I've always known that. The mix between us gets better every time.

And more important, whenever we're together, and the Crysian couples with our mind, I can feel her getting stronger. We're healing her, sustaining her, and for a few minutes, she actually becomes *happy*. On *Galatea* she's caged, confined in the darkness, kept warm only by the meager scraps of energy provided by the warp engines, but when we're together that no longer matters. She sings to me, and I sing back, however awkwardly, in tune with her inner voice. That harmony, the shared happiness of broken souls, is the only really good feeling I've experienced since the Romulan massacre.

"Kenneth." Ivan communicates to us from the bridge. It's very odd to be called Kenneth because, at the moment, I'm not him. But Ivan is a dear little man, handsome as dilithium and tough as tritanium, so I can overlook that mistake. "Do you see anything?"

"We watch the star," I say, knowing the *we* isn't quite appropriate, but pronouns are as bad at expressing gestalt states as verbs are at indicating temporal paradoxes. "Our senses bend around it." It's an old trick, using the star's gravitational field as a lens.

"Okay Kenneth, do you see anything yet?" I vaguely sense that the Captain worries that something bad will happen to me, or at least the part of me that is Kenneth Said. The bond between them is stronger than either of them quite realizes.

"The water is brown... dirty brown... the sky is faint blue, almost white. The world is larger than Monoceros Wash, three times its size. The gravity is more burdensome..."

I can sense Ivan on the bridge, making quick amendments to the star chart as my comments come through. "What about the air?" he asks.

"I'm breathing it," I say – of course I'm not, but I sense that I could without any problems – "And there's a warm wind." Odd, there was no wind on Monoceros. "I'm looking into the water... scouring it for life forms. There are protein threads, a thick something that might be growths – no I think they're geological."

"Geology? There shouldn't be geology on a comet wash. The place should be all be water!"

Ivan is correct in general, but not in the particulars. "It isn't. I'm standing on a beach, a gritty brown beach that's composed of burnt basalt sand. It's somewhere near the South Pole. The world is spinning very fast, but because of the season there's only a few minutes of twilight, no night. There's a lot of bacteria in the water. I can tell it's not native to the world." The ability to examine minute details, the microscopic world, is one of the odder benefits of the link.

"Perhaps it was left by an ISC expedition?"

“Perhaps. I’ll walk back in time and check,” I can sense Ivan gasp in shock – I’ve told him we could do this, but I don’t think the reality of timewalking has ever set in until now. So we project ourselves back in time... one century... two centuries... five centuries... until we corner our quarry. “They’re Q’Naabians,” I say, identifying the craterfaces. They must have an interesting homeworld. “It’s an exploration mission, They landed about eight hundred years ago, and I can tell they’re unhappy... the sand is clinging to their suits, clogging their filters...”

Hazard’s saying something, but the temporal difference makes his words difficult to understand.

“They’re cleaning their filters... and the bacteria that clung to their suits spreads out on the sand...” I try to concentrate on any unnoticed details, and the world begins to spin. “Are you alright, Beloved?”

***I have not the strength to tarry here. ‘When’ taxes me, though ‘where’ does not.***

“Then let’s go back to ‘where’,” I say.

So we return back to our time, and again we walk the beach, stare up into the blue-white sky, feel the red sun warm our naked skin. The motion of my body begins to strobe, lines tracing my movement and wrapping themselves around me like a cloak. Again I worry that the Crysian’s health is failing, but she assures me that we’re making a minor adjustment for the temporal difference. I ask her how she feels about this world.

***Its size daunts me. If I dive too deep, I might become trapped. It has happened before, when I failed to mind the weight of the water. It will be more dangerous here, I fear.***

“I will protect you,” I vow, not caring if Hazard hears it or not.

***And I, you.*** she returns the vow. And that promise is the end of our session. She’s tired, and I don’t want her to tax herself any further. Francis and I, shaken and stirred by the waters (and by the experience of walking through both parsecs and centuries) stagger out of the hold, the wall parting to facilitate our exit. We can’t walk any further, so we sit down in the corridor together, arms touching, as our minds slowly disengage from each other, and our telepathic meld changes into mere empathic sharing, soft and comforting.

“Is everything okay?” Hazard is a good fit for the nervous mother hen role, isn’t he?

“Just a minute... I need to remember how to breathe,” I admit. “I lost contact with you for a few minutes. Did you get everything we said?”

“Yes. Though your voice sounded quite strange.” Hazard notes. “Do you have any idea where that continent came from?”

“I’ll field that,” Francis says, staring at me as we both struggle to handle the sudden loss in adrenaline. “I’d speculate it’s a stellar core fragment, “burped” during the sun’s expansion cycle after the Wash was formed. I’m more of an astrophysicist than a geologist, but I have to confess that I can’t wait to take some core samples.”

“You sound more like a scientist than usual, Mr. Gable.” Ivan says.

“It’s Kenneth.” Francis smiles at me. “He’s a really horrible influence on me.”

I can almost see Hazard fighting the urge to laugh. “I’ll let you two get some rest,” he says.

“You’ve earned your pay for the day, gentlemen. You can take the next shift off.”

“I think I smell a bribe,” Francis says, in such a deadpan that I can’t tell whether or not it’s a joke, and then the communication cuts out. He looks at me with a concerned face. “You worry about her too much, Kenneth.”

Her. The Crysian. “Of course I worry. Who else has she got, Francis? Everyone else aboard ship is scared to death of her.”

“Yes they are. And guess what - they should be!” Francis answers. I can’t believe he said that – after everything we just experienced, how could he betray her? I shake my head, get to my feet, and stomp back to my quarters. “That’s the problem, Kenneth!” Francis shouts, chasing me with his voice and not his feet. “We can’t walk away from her!”

It takes an hour for Francis and I to get back on speaking terms, which may seem like a short period of time, but it isn’t; when you’re constantly connected with someone’s mind, it’s as hard as anything to stay mad at them as it is to lie to them. The additional rest we’ve been given is welcome – everyone’s been forced to put in a a lot of overtime and take on extra duty shifts to cover our losses, so it’s good to get a break. The voyage is quiet until we’re two days away from Androthaxus, when our long range scans detect an ISC echelon about three parsecs away, moving from Veltressa to that base station we sidestepped after we destroyed the listening post. Ivan hopes they’ll ignore us, but they don’t. I’m on the bridge when they hail us, only a few minutes after we make the initial sensor contact.

“Freighter *Ivilma*, you are assigned to the border reaches,” It’s another Meskeen, a toadface with a mottled brown skin texture that makes him look different from the other Meskeen I’ve encountered. “You are well beyond your allotted territory. Explain yourself.”

We’re ready for this – with the help of our computers, Ivan’s set up a fake image of himself as a Cromarg, a radiation scarred dwarf; they’re a Klingon subject race, mostly stuck on a desolate homeworld near the Klingon-Romulan border, though a lucky few have managed to escape Klingon control. “Ten thousand apologies, Great Captain...” he says in a half-mutter that will be perfected by the computer – the obsequiousness that comes through reminds me more of a Zoolie than a Cromarg. “We merely seek new opportunities.”

“You must apply for permission to “seek” through the proper channels,” the Meskeen *Al'traes* snarls.

“Yes... yes... of course,” Hazard says. “Forgive the enthusiasm of an old Cromarg. You promise to take Klingon *bat'leths*, beat them into sheet metal, and make keys out of them to unlock the shackles of my people. You offer medicine when the Klingons would rather spit in the faces of our sick and dying children and curse their "weakness". Surely I must do everything within my power to assist your people?”

“Perform your assigned task, and leave *us* to prosecute the injustice of your oppressors,” the Meskeen says.

“Of course, noble *Al'traes*.” Hazard promises, clasping his hands together to better impersonate the role. “We have a refueling stop to make on Androthaxus, then we shall return to Beka.”

“At warp six-point-five, your fuel expenditure must be quite remarkable,” the Meskeen notes. He’s much too suspicious for anyone’s liking – even T’Doroth looks like she’s heavily perspiring. “You’d be much better off going to Kamara.”

Wherever that is. “Kamara is prohibited to us.” Hazard blurts nervously. I can tell he’s hoping that this isn’t the lie that will unravel the façade. Everything – our mission, the Crysian’s life, Greg’s redemption – depends on the outcome of this conversation.

“Why draw the line at Kamara? This entire sector is prohibited to you,” the Meskeen counters. A few long seconds pass without comment – Hazard begins to moan nervously and rock slowly from side-to-side. Again, that seems more like a Zoolie affectation – they’re the most docile of the Klingon subject races. “Stop that!” the Meskeen snaps.

“Sorry...” Hazard chirps like a barely penitent child and bows his head.

“If you wish to be useful to us, you might mention whether there’s been any sign of a small Romulan fleet in this area? One of our listening posts was destroyed five days ago...”

“We have heard nothing. But it seems unlike the Romulans to be so blatant.” Good Ivan... that little bit of denial may make your performance more convincing.

“There are reports that Rolandus is getting both bold and stupid.” The Meskeen refers to a Pro-Consul who’s one of the *Tal Praiex*’s finest military commanders. “If you can confirm his activities, I would be more forgiving.”

“Well... I have heard *rumors*,” Ivan says. Hazard probably knows next to nothing about internal Romulan politics. “Not of ship movements – those are cloaked in more ways than one – but...” He adds a little self-satisfied gravel to his voice to cap the sentence, “... they do not hide their politics so well.”

“That is much less useful to me, but go on.”

“A little warbird tells me that the *Tal Shiar* is worried that Rolandus’s military successes will force certain senators to reject *Tal Shiar* political positions, and they have used Rolandus’s arrogance to drive a wedge between the Praetor and the *Tal Praiex*.” The Meskeen Captain places his hand behind his back in a ponderous pose. “However, *khre-riov* Tomarand sees things in a much different perspective. He fears that *you* are the greater threat, so he attempts to bridge the gap between Rolandus and his enemies.”

“That sounds... unlikely,” the *al’traes* muses.

“I do not understand Romulan politics,” Hazard protests. “Now Klingons, they are easy to understand. If you upset them, they will slip a knife in the belly, and that will be the end of it. Clean. But Romulans are a different matter. They smile when you upset them, then they proceed to cut you a thousand times, pausing each time to consider the consequences of the previous slice, pondering where the next stroke should go. They are insane.”

That observation seems to most please the Meskeen. “You may proceed to Androthaxus,” he relents, “but if you are not within approved boundaries in ten days, we will send a patrol ship to punish you.”

“A thousand fragrances on your offspring!” Hazard peppers his comments with idiot enthusiasm. “You have... our dearest and best wishes... to the achievement of your just and noble cause!”

With a barely audible snort, the transmission is cut. Hazard wipes his forehead. “So what’d you think of my performance?” he says, like an actor waiting nervously for his reviews.

“I thought you acted more like a Zoolie than a Cromarg.” I mention.

T’Doroth nods in agreement. “It was, I believe the correct term is... ‘over the top’. Although I do not understand the derivation of that term. Perhaps one day, someone explain what exactly is being topped.”

“I haven’t a clue,” Ivan says. “But when you’ve seen one obsequious Klingon subject race, you’ve seen ‘em all. Or that’s what you might think if you’re one of the all-powerful Meskeen, Avenging Toad Terror of the Cosmos.”

“I’ll bet you were a lousy *Flash Gordon*,” I smile. “But, getting serious for a moment, it was probably an adequate performance. I’ve encountered a few Meskeen in my time (and they make my skin crawl), and to a man, the more flattery, the better.”

“Do you believe the ISC would actually commit a ship to hunt us?” Lars asks, addressing the bridge in general.

“The ISC is not given to bluffing,” T’Doroth notes. “Though one must account for the habits of individual commanders.”

“I think it’s safe to assume we’re now on the clock,” Ivan says. “Let’s hope our guest gets well in time to handle whatever they throw at us.” He takes a long look at the helmsman’s chair, currently occupied by T’Doroth – though we all know who’s supposed to be sitting there. “Let’s hope for a lot of things,” he adds.

Two days later, we enter the Androthaxis system. Our first job is to launch a probe at the Wash. In addition to what I saw, there’s also a small moon, a large comet about one hundred kilometers in diameter that doing a fast, close orbit of the planet. The seas do have an uncomfortably high alkaline content, produced by elements from the solar chunk that formed the world’s polar continent, but the atmosphere is oxygen-rich. The probe even detects iron and a few trace elements in the Wash’s core, which generates a tiny magnetic field.

Before she was murdered by the Romulans, Lieutenant Vagura told me that the Crysian could probably thrive in a lot of variations of Monoceros Wash, but my gut tells me she was being overly optimistic. Each new revelation of the Androthaxis system makes me nervous as an Andorian cat. Nothing must happen to her. The magnetic fields and tides must not confuse her thoughts. The alkaline taint of the water must not burn her flesh. She must feel the depths and the pressures she misses so much, her spears must be able to spread themselves in the shallows, spread themselves into a sheet five times the size of *Galatea*, and drink in the sunlight.

***I will let you know if this place is wrong, Beloved.***, the Crysian tells me. I’ve spent at least two hours with her every day during the last week, and while we haven’t tried to explore the universe together, I can provide still comfort for her.

“I fear it’s not going to feel much like home.” I note.

***There is no home anymore***, the Crysian replies, and for a moment, the grief almost overwhelms me. That’s when I get a signal from Hazard – I notice he never leaves me very long with the Crysian. “Said here.”

“Kenneth, the continent checks out. I’m giving the bridge crew a few hours of shore leave on one of the beaches that overlooks the northern shelf. You’re on first, so grab some waterwear and come on down to the transporter room.”

“But I...” I’m not much in the mood for shore leave.

***Go Kenneth***, the Crysian replies. ***Test the waters. I shall come to you soon. I have nowhere else to go.***

The walls open, the water sweeps aside to make a path for me like Moses crossing the Red Sea, and hesitantly, I walk out of the hold. “Everything will be fine. I promise.” I vow again.

***You cannot see the future***, the Crysian sadly says. And then I wonder, when she had melded with Burke, whether she had been able to employ his prescient gifts. That’s a disturbing thought. If she could, if she had been able to use them to look into some deeper tragedy that is yet to come... no, I don’t want to think about that. Let the future be, for now. For now. Now that’s a paradox.

“Okay, Lieutenant,” Hazard flashes an odd smile as he draws a circle with his foot in the sand that’s twelve strides in diameter. “Prepare to be smoked like a photon torpedo striking an asteroid.”

Bravado. It fits Starfleet Captains like a rack of uniforms with four pips on the shoulder... but because I’m not in a playful mood, I don’t appreciate it. I’ve never been one for fun and games,

especially fun and games that require me to run around in public wearing a pair of skimpy swim trunks that makes me look only a little more overdressed than Francis Gable. Still there's a look in Hazard's eyes that gets my competitive juices flowing, so I walk into the center of the sand circle, grit clinging to my toes and the balls of my feet, clutching a weighted volleyball like I held the galaxy in my hands. I think Hazard's waiting for me to make some sort of sarcastic response.

"Which rules do you want?" I ask, stymieing his attempt to cultivate a friendly rivalry. "I've played several forms of gravball."

"Want to go for standard lunar rules?" Ivan says, hands on his hips. The sun's already beginning to bronze his skin, making him look even more like the stereotypical Starfleeter who has a woman in every port and a near-perfect record in barroom brawls. For someone who grew up in the science service, Ivan sure loves to strut.

"The gravity's close enough, I guess." I agree. It's about half-moon normal, one-eleventh that of Earth's, which gives us a great lift. Gravball's only fun when the gravity's low enough to make it feel like you're flying. "Let's see if I remember this right. One of us serves, we try to hit the ball straight up. If one of us connects with the ball three times without stepping outside the circle – and the ball stays inside the circle – they win the point. If someone steps outside, they lose their touches, and has to start all over again. If they touch the ball and it lands outside the circle, the opponent gets the point."

"That sounds like a variant to me, but I'll go for it. That'll make it a more physical game than what I'm used to playing," Hazard smiles.

"I figured you'd like it." I remark. "Remember, we can't start our jumps until the ball starts to descend, there's no physical contact except during jumps, and even then, only body blocks are allowed. First one to eleven points wins." This is starting to sound like a cross between Volleyball and Fizban. "Have I missed anything?"

"Only the most important rule," Hazard says. "Don't embarrass yourself while the women are ogling you," Hazard smiles, pointing to T'Doroth, Gbeji, and Costa, who are sunning themselves on the beach.

"Don't worry about that," I shrug. "Next to you, I'm not particularly ogle-worthy."

"Oh my God!" Hazard says mockingly, bending over and placing his hands on his knees for support. "For once in my life, I actually agree with Francis Gable!"

"Huh?"

"Kenneth, you have eyes with which to see, and yet I have never met anyone who was so totally blind!" he laughs, clapping me hard on the back while I stand there befuddled. "If there was any more ogling going on here, we'd be forced to name this planet New Janeiro."

"I wasn't talking about us and our fixation with Gbeji's bikini," I smile, refering to the three tiny straps of tiny cloth and string that are currently being worn by my assistant engineer. "Or that T'Doroth," I point at the Vulcan weapons officer, who's sitting next to Gbeji and coping with her attempts to hold a conversation with her by staring into the water, "is making Vulcan meditation robes look good."

"We're definitely a very fit crew," Hazard says, limbering and practising a few vertical jumps to get a handle on the local gravity. I do the same. After about a minute of preparation, Hazard flashes me the signal. "Now on to business. Your serve, Lieutenant."

I could dispute the serve – it's a minor disadvantage – but I've never been a compulsive arguer. So I give the ball an underhand volleyball serve to send it skyward as high as possible,

then Hazard and I crouch, circling under the ball to anticipate its descent. The ball begins to descend. I give a quick deke in an attempt to trick Hazard into jumping prematurely, but he doesn't take the bait; instead, he circles around me, and draws my attention to his motion when I should be concentration at the ball. Then he's off his feet before I can even react – like mine, Ivan's reaction times are incredible – and he reaches a height of three meters before he connects with the ball with a perfect hard fist. It goes flying almost out of sight. I come up under Hazard and we connect hard at the two-meter mark, tangle, and tumble to the ground together. The sand is gritty, almost glassy. One wrong landing, and you could give yourself a real nasty cut.

"One touch," Ivan says.

"Way too hard," I smile, and we get to our feet to anticipate its descent. As I expected, he knocked the ball well out of bounds. I win the first point.

"I made the circle too damn small," Ivan grumbles.

"Point for the subtle guy," I smile, clapping Hazard on the back, getting into the spirit of mocking camaraderie. I may as well enjoy my moment while it lasts; Hazard's a much better athlete than I am, he's twenty kilos heavier (most of it muscle), and he's more competitive than a Tellarite in a shouting contest. I can expect to receive some serious bruises in this match.

Now it's Hazard's turn to serve, but a sonic boom draws our attention skyward. Something is coming down from the sky – smaller than a shuttle, though on a controlled descent. It's probably not the ISC, praise Allah.

"That's one of our escape pods," Ivan squints to analyze the contrail.

"If we're going to keep using those things as shuttlecraft, I need to make a few modifications to make them more useful," I say, mostly to myself.

The pod dangles a large airfoil out of its top starboard section, then gracefully glides to a landing site about five hundred meters from our position. A cloud of black dust rises around it when it lands, settling into place like something out of a slow motion film, a trick of low gravity. Shore leave is cancelled for a few minutes as we sprint over to the landing site. We get there just as the hatchway opens. The first person to exit the craft is Doctor Bradley, our surviving medical officer. He's not alone; Kollos shakily leans on him as they walk toward us. At least she's managing to walk. It's better than being in a coma.

"Shouldn't she be in Sickbay?" Hazard looks like he's almost ready to hit the doctor, he advances on him with a slightly clenched fist and he talks with a bit of a bull snort in his voice.

"It was my idea..." Kollos protests – I think she's as surprised as I am by Ivan's sudden fury. "If I'm going to lose my human form, I would like to do it under open sky..." She tries to smile – I guess she's a bit of a claustrophobe. "And this is the only sky available that isn't pitch black."

Kollos always did have a nice sense of irony. "How long until the change?" Hazard asks.

"Six hours. Maybe longer." Kollos answers. From the expression on his face, Ivan probably feels like shooting his tongue with a phaser for asking such an insensitive question. "I think I would like a better view of the water." Gbeji gets next to her, and helps the Doctor support her as she walks toward the beach.

"You can set her next to me and Gbeji." T'Doroth calls out. "If the sight of two healthy young human males jumping and competing to hit a ball does not adequately distract her, Gbeji will. She always has much to say."

Ivan suddenly looks nervous as we walk back. "You okay?" I ask.

"Why wouldn't I be?" he mutters. It's at least a half-rhetorical question.



"I can think of a few reasons, but we did come here to have fun, so let's try to keep this as normal as possible. Okay?" I say, handing him the ball.

Hazard takes the ball and holds it like a softball. "Normal means handing engineering yet another humiliating defeat," he smiles, throwing the ball upward.

So the game continues. Ivan manages to keep the half-Medusan out of his mind long enough to muscle his way to an 8-4 advantage, and I take a particularly hard tumble (with Ivan's hundred and five kilo bulk crushing squarely into my solar plexus).

"You're getting off your game, Said," Ivan goads. "C'mon, give me a challenge."

"Maybe if you tucked in your elbows and played fair," I reply, but it's not meant to be a serious complaint. But is *is* time to change tactics and play more of a positioning game, so I spend more time on the ground where he can't foul me, and I vary my strokes with soft taps to force Hazard to make mistakes. This works much better for me, and I fight to bring the match up to 10-9. We stop to catch our breaths; geologically speaking, the Wash hasn't had time to lose its atmosphere but the air is still thin. And it's hot too. Black sand clings to our bodies, making us look like warriors from some ancient tribe.

"You can go home, Lieutenant. This next point is mine," Hazard smiles. I shake my head, poised for the leap, but Hazard gives the ball the slightest tap on the serve, then interposes his body to block my attempt to get to the ball. It's a dirty trick, but it's also quite legal, the equivalent of a bunt in baseball. I dive under him and manage to connect with the ball in a diving volleyball stroke, but I hit it too hard and at too low an angle, and the ball bounces out of the circle. 11-9. My comeback was too little, too late. Ivan offers me his hand to pull me to my feet. I resist the urge to throw him.

"Lord, it's been awhile since I exerted myself when the air's this thin. I couldn't build up any good momentum," Hazard complains; he looks like he's about to collapse. I guess we both do.

"That street runs both ways," I reply, and we walk (well, it's more like a hop in this gravity) back to the spectators.

"It's good to see the Captain work up a sweat," Gbeji remarks as we come within earshot. Like me, Hazard's perspiring so heavily that he's glowing; at the moment there's something positively angelic about both of us. He shoots her a look of mock disapproval. "I mean, sir..." she corrects herself.

"I trust we didn't bore you," Hazard ignores Gbeji and addresses Kollos, who's lying on her back, doing her best to be aware of her surroundings despite the drugs that are running through her system.

"Mr. Said played extremely well," Kollos says, deflating Hazard's ego. "Excellent adaption to an adverse situation. His sense of tactical placement is extraordinary intuitive."

"Uh... yeah," Hazard squeezes my right shoulder in a gesture of friendship. "The Lieutenant is a challenge and a half. Thank God he's on our team."

"Yeah, good game." I say, shrugging. *Except for the elbows*, I might have added. I turn to Kollos. "Is there anything I can do for you, Commander?"

"Yes," Kollos says, smiling faintly. "You can leave us alone while you take Lieutenant T'Doroth for a walk." T'Doroth looks extremely uncomfortable at the request. "You promised a dying friend, T'Doroth. Do not back down now."

"Emotional blackmail is unseemly, Lieutenant." T'Doroth answers. What's she so upset about?

“Lieutenant, why don’t you and Mr. Said scout those slopes on the north side?” It sounds like a suggestion, but from a Captain’s mouth, a suggestion is always more than a suggestion. T’Doroth gets up and does her best to walk a dignified stride. I attempt to mimic her pace, though we frequently fall a few steps in front or behind each other while we talk.

“What exactly was the nature of Kollos’s request?” I ask.

“She wished me to express my true feelings for you, Kenneth.” T’Doroth says.

I gulp hard. “Which are?”

“That I am in love with you, Kenneth Said.” T’Doroth says calmly. “The scent of your sweat, which should repulse me, stimulates sexual attraction. My thoughts roam to you at unexpected moments. Your feelings inside my mind, which should bring me grave discomfort, are instead very welcome.”

“I... I have deep feelings for you too,” I admit.

“I have only one problem with our relationship.” T’Doroth states. She stops in her tracks, and I stop too. She looks out at the water, perhaps searching for guidance in the ripples that reflect a rose-tinted dove-grey in the Wash’s twilight.

“It’s because I’m human.” I guess. A long-expected nightmare is finally coming to life.

“No!” T’Doroth’s voice is insistent. “The problem is that I do not believe in our relationship. Given all of the forces that are involved in our lives, it is not logical to trust my feelings.”

“Aside from Vulcan discomfort with emotion, why don’t you believe them?” Then, a truly terrible thought occurs to me. “You don’t think I’m manipulating you through the emotional link, do you?”

“No.” T’Doroth’s voice is tinged with unaccustomed emotion. “I do not believe either of us is in control of this relationship.”

“Pardon?” I ask.

“The Crysian truly loves you, yet she knows she cannot provide you with... physical love. If I am correct, she has placed these... emotions... in my mind so I will couple with you and serve as her sexual surrogate.” T’Doroth speculates.

Wow. This thought never occurred to me. Why didn’t it occur to me?

“So you think she planted those feelings in you when I first melded with you?” I wonder. She nods. “It’s possible, I suppose. But you know, I did feel something for you a long time ago, when we were fighting for our lives on the Rovillian cruiser. I never quite understood how deep those feelings went, but they *were* there, I know it.”

“Perhaps. Or perhaps she altered your mind so you are imagining there was a connection where none actually existed. Either way, Kenneth, although I love you without hesitation or equivocation, I cannot accept an attraction that might be a lie. Therefore, I must decline any social or physical relationship until I am certain that my feelings have not been imposed on me. However, a friendship may still be possible.”

*Well Kenneth, you've been dumped by a Vulcan. Damn.* There are only three credible responses to rejection for the human male. The first is foolish denial, an unwillingness to acknowledge the conversation took place. The second is a childish tantrum that makes him appear like a fool but which may (or may not) temporarily salvage his pride. The third is licking his wounds and attempting to withdraw with some dignity, even though “some dignity” usually comes off as pathetic. My natural reaction is the third option, but it’s the first option that comes out of my mouth.

“What if you discover the Crysian has nothing to do with it?” I ask.

There's an unbearably long pause as T'Doroth stops to consider the question. "Then you would be a desirable partner, at least in the short term. Except that I do not believe that I am foremost in your affections – your love for your former Captain supercedes me..."

"That's not the same thing," I insist.

"Perhaps not, but your feelings for me are also dwarfed by your feelings for the Crysian," she adds. "While all partners must coexist with the passions of another, it is unwise to form the partnership when the feelings run as deeply as yours."

"Despite your feelings for me?" I ask.

T'Doroth turns to me. "My greatmother once told me that of all emotions, the rarest of them all was a deep and abiding form of love that can lead two people to a bond that can last centuries, and that this love was so rare and so precious that not even Surak would bade one to shun it. But she also told me that such love must never be one-sided, for when it is, it destroys everyone it touches."

"That describes half the literature of my planet," I say. It's my way of agreeing with her.

"If my love for you is genuine, Kenneth, then I believe that it is the love of which my greatmother spoke, a passion beyond *ponn farr*." I'm not sure what *ponn farr* means; Vulcans are more silent than a Vispean monk about their sexual practises. "But it would be a serious error in judgment to embark on a relationship unless I knew you felt the same."

"I don't know anything right now, T'Doroth," I confess. "I'm so worried about the Crysian that I'm not thinking about much else these days. But when I do think of you, I know you're important to me." I draw close to her. Her trembling fingers wipe a trickle of sweat from my face. "I was told by the Tasting Prophets to beware love, but it's the one thing in the universe I don't seem to be able to avoid." I look at her intensely. "I promise to give you the time you need to decide, T'Doroth."

"That is the real problem, Kenneth." T'Doroth says. "Time may be precious to us. Already we have endured crippling losses, and more loss is to come. I have had long talks with Kollos, whose analytical gifts would put all but a handful of my people to shame. We have considered the factors, and we have come to one inescapable conclusion – we do *not* have time. *Galatea's* mission will *not* succeed. Even if we successfully heal the Crysian, she does not possess sufficient energy to augment us to a level that will ensure our success. Any hope that she will be able to force her will upon the Organians is pure madness; she does not possess such strength."

"I'm... I'm scared of that too..." I haven't dared to openly admit that fear, not even to myself.

"If we go to Desskyie, death is almost a certainty." T'Doroth says. "So, Kenneth, when I look at the larger scheme, my concerns for the honesty of our feelings may be irrelevant..."

"No!" I insist, rubbing against her, my fingers involuntarily drawn through her long Vulcan hair, touching her ears. She bristles, but once again she does not resist. "Your feelings are very relevant. And so are mine. You know, if we're going to die soon, maybe we should damn what might be, and act on what matters to us *now*. Save our regrets for another day, T'Doroth. There may be hatred, or anger, or even a deep and abiding resentment of what feels like a violation of our innermost selves, but given a choice between that, and not having a chance to love you..." There's a look of unchecked longing on her face, but she composes herself, and it vanishes in an instant. I suddenly feel more foolish than I've felt in years. "No. James was right. I must sound like the sappiest poet in the quadrant right now..."

"That thought did not occur to me," T'Doroth says.

“Well it should,” I say, suddenly feeling the momentary passion evaporate. Everything she said about the Crysian could be true, and that’s no way to treat someone. I take a step back. “I’m an overly Romantic little ass. You deserve better.”

“‘Better’ may be difficult to find, Kenneth Said, and certainly not on *Galatea*.” T’Doroth offers me rare Vulcan flattery, and that’s when I know she’s probably right – her feelings, her desires, may well be the Crysian’s well intended “gift” for me.

“I’ll find a way to wait,” I promise. “To respect you as you deserve.”

“Kenneth Said, you are a gentleman,” T’Doroth says, also stepping back, though she doesn’t look embarrassed.

*Gentleman*. Noun. English. Definition: "someone who's destined to die of a compound broken heart because he lacks the courage to assert himself with women". I’m sure all my brothers would be shaking their heads and calling me an idiot if they could see me right now. "Thanks," I say, my face reddening.

“I will not forget this...” T’Doroth adds.

The communicator begins to beep – at least it didn’t interrupt the core of the conversation, that would have been an excuse too cheap for words. “Captain?”

“Hold your position, Lieutenant. Kollos can’t hold back the change, so the rest of us will head your way.” As it did for the Romulan boarders, the sight of Kollos in her Medusan form would drive us insane, if we were foolish enough to stick around to watch the change. “Also, the environment’s checked out as safe for the Crysian. We’re going to be bringing her down in less than an hour.”

I could always return to *Galatea* and get an aerial view of the Crysian’s descent, but I’d rather watch from the shore. T’Doroth and Gbeji have returned to the ship, Costa is setting up a small command post, leaving me and Ivan alone to fend for ourselves. Ivan and I have constructed a crude mound of sand (to use in place of stone) and we’ve phasered it so we can use the hot sands as a sort of bonfire. Ivan wants to pan-fry some *tynderlung* while we’re staying down here. These small boneless fish smell quite good when they’re cooking in butter, and they’re definitely tasty. Ivan’s brought along several cannisters of herbs and dried onions and potato strings with him: not sauce for the goose, but great garnishes for the main course.

“So are you a chef too, Captain?” I ask.

“I dabble in a lot of things,” Ivan answers with a smile, then he sits down next to the fire and invites me to do so. “How was your walk with T’Doroth?”

“Walking on a low-g world never quire works out the way people plan.” I reply, a little bitterly. I sniff the air. “I’ll bet nothing’s ever smelt this good on this planet in its entire history.”

“I like to watch things sizzle.” Ivan says; he turns the fish, then stretches out like a tired, well-muscled lion.

“How about you and Kollos?” I ask, and he suddenly sits up again. “Look Ivan, while you guys were laughing about me and T’Doroth behind my back, we’ve been laughing at you and Kollos. You’ve got some feelings for that woman. And you must be going through hell right now.”

“I took over a ship that lost half its crew, of course I’m going through hell,” Ivan suddenly lets the mask drop. “My best friend came back from the dead with something alien inside him, and my other best friend *may* be under the spell of *another* alien, and the woman I care about – well, she’s dying – and as for the mission...” He shakes his head. “I suppose the only real

comfort I've got is that I'm going to die with four pips on my shoulder." He takes out a cannister of something that smells foul. "I'm heading for a Captain's grave, Kenneth."

"So I'm now 'your other best friend'?" I ask. It's best to steer the subject away from sensitive areas. "When did I get the promotion?"

"I don't make friends easily, Kenneth." I guess that's his way of telling me I shouldn't be offended. "In fact, I can't think of anyone who does a lousier job of it. It's like gravball – I'm not supposed to be throwing elbows and dishing out shiners, but that's what I do to people who get close to me. A few years ago, they stopped getting close."

"It's what I tend to do too." I say. "Just look at the way I treat Francis. I know no one else on the ship likes him, but..."

"Well, if the man would put on some shorts once in awhile..." Hazard quips, getting up to stir the potatoes. "Actually I'm surprised Gable and I haven't become friends. The nudity's not an issue – hell, I knew people who were a lot stranger than him growing up in Nova Scotia, and a lot sicker too. He's definitely got a first rate intellect. The man could teach some of my old Vulcan professors a thing or two about astrophysics."

"He drove the science officer on *Ark Royal* nuts," I mention. "And that's hard to do to a Cygnan." Of course, Cygnans are such monumental show-offs that it's good to hear about one of them getting hoisted on his own petard. (I think that means "hanged from his own rope"... or was I thinking of Lenin?)

"Maybe that's it!" Hazard exclaims, he's practically wearing an epiphany on his head like a hat. "I've had scientific discussions with him where I ended up feeling like a rank amateur. That hasn't happened to me in *years*. Makes me wonder where else I'm lacking. No wonder he bothers me."

"Ivan, I think you're okay," I say. I try to be reassuring, but it's hard to hide my own bitterness. "It's the universe that's lacking. On this voyage alone, I've witnessed a lot of good people die... while one very bad person got a free pet."

"You did get a head out of the deal," Ivan points out.

"Ha!" I exclaim, "Doctor Bradley examined it. The head wasn't even Suria's. Tomarand just made it look like hers."

"Now that's low!" Ivan exclaims, and then we get interrupted by Lars, who's communicating from *Galatea*'s bridge. "Go ahead," Ivan says. "If T'Doroth thinks it's ready, we'll make preparations here, and then you can bring her down." He puts the communicator down. "So much for cooking," he remarks.

"She's coming." It's a statement, not a question, though Hazard nods. Even though *Galatea* is still in orbit several thousand kilometers above us, I can already feel her excitement all the way on the surface. I'll bet people are getting a lot of headaches back on the ship.

"We'd better move away from shore. Tractoring her down is liable to create some waves, especially in this gravity."

"There's high ground about six kilometers that way. Shouldn't take us long to reach it. What about Kollo's?"

This is the first time I've seen worry lines form on Hazard's face. "Her energy form won't need to worry about waves," he says. "Doctor Bradley can use a gravsled to move her physical form." He consults a tricorder, looks at the topographical map of the continent, and after a few seconds, points to a high spot eight kilometers from the beach. "Not much of a climb, but thirty meters above sea level should be a fun little leap in this gravity." I pack up my tricorder,

communicator, and a pair of trinoes, and stuff them into a backpack; Ivan does the same, and he pulls a cloth out of the back pocket of his trunks, pours the butter out of the pan, tosses the mostly cooked food into it (I get the impression Ivan wishes he had more time to fry it, though it already looks quite tasty), and we begin our trek. As we travel, large hopping leaps that dot the black landscape, we spread sand and dust like smoke in our wake.

We must look like a pair of mythical warriors from Malaysian picture-fiction, or heroes from twentieth century American costumed muscle-fantasies. Ivan keeps the pace slow enough that I can keep up with him; I guess my company is about the only thing that's keeping his mind off Kollo's. Six kilometers in this gravity is like six hundred meters on a normal world, except that the thin air gets to us about halfway through the trek. I guess there's some satisfaction to be had in noticing that I've got much better endurance than Hazard, though my thin footballer's build is better built for long trials than Ivan's muscle-laden, rugby player physique.

"Get your *gi* on, Captain, I'm ready for some judo right now," I laugh as we hit the base camp, and Hazard's clearly ready to collapse.

"Bastard." Ivan puffs. "I've never backed down from a fight in my life. If you had the guts to wrestle me, I'd still pin you."

"No. I'll save you the trouble of a match." I say, slightly amused by his reaction. "Though anyone who doesn't know when to back down from a fight is an idiot."

"True enough," Hazard says, already starting to get his wind back. "And I've been called *that* plenty of times." He pulls the communicator out of his pack. "Hazard to *Galatea*. You may now begin a slow descent into the atmosphere. Try to keep to subsonic velocity."

"Aye Captain," I hear Lars reply. Hazard puts back the communicator in time to see Kollo's body coming up the slope, the gravsled supporting a long bier. Kollo's face, absent her soul, bears an inhuman serenity which reminds me of an ancient Egyptian statue.

"They beamed down the portable medical bay. Good." I note. We've been worrying that Kollo is about to die, but Bradley has a more hopeful scenario; if Kollo can't reintegrate with her energy form, they can at least keep the body alive on life support. Although the only people that anyone knows who could reintegrate the forms would be Vulcan mind-priests; T'Doroth says that not only is that ritual extremely dangerous (and completely untested on half-Medusans), the Priests would almost certainly be driven insane before they could complete the operation. Not to mention that by the time we could get her to Vulcan, Kollo's energy form might become so accustomed to living in that state that there'd be no chance at physical reintegration, even if all of the other problems weren't a factor.

"Hang on, Kollo..." Hazard's barely audible prayer, spoken on a black sand dune in the midst of a sudden wind, reflects the feeling of everyone aboard *Galatea*.

It's not hard to spot *Galatea* as she descends, the bastard daughter of Federation and ISC technology, cutting in an ISC anti-grav field tech to slow her descent to a manageable speed, still leaves a distinctive contrail. When she stops, three hundred meters above the water and thirteen kilometers away, she's barely visible, best marked by the sun that gleams off her hull.

"Come on down," I quip. "The water's fine."

*Galatea* lights up as the tractor beam ignition sequence briefly generates an auroric nimbus around the ship's hull. A green beam shoots down, striking waters beneath it – I can only imagine the ripples it's generating – priming this world for the arrival of its new goddess. I grab a pair of trigoggles from the pack to get a closer view.

"Have the bay doors opened yet?" Hazard asks.

“They’re just opening now.” I reply. “She’s coming... spears shining in the sun, a red rain falling...”

“Well, let’s hope this place suits her.” Hazard says, wishing he’d brought his own pair of trinos. “Let me know when the procedure’s over.” Hazard makes the whole thing sound like a medical term. The tractors have been programmed to gently allow the Crysian to descend; she’s said that when she takes too hard a shock, or when her body achieves too great a separation, her consciousness weakens – it’s like a stroke to her. Thus the tractors are being as gentle as possible. The first swells begin to batter the coastline, sending foam trails several kilometers up the black wash. It reminds me of spilt beer.

Finally, fifteen minutes after the procedure’s begun, the red rain stops. I concentrate on the Crysian, but I’m too many kilometers away to share up her thoughts while I’m still fully conscious. I try to attune myself to her mood, but I can only sense faint emotions: trepidation maybe? Hope?

“You hearing sirens, Lieutenant?”

“No... maybe... yes, that’s her...” I don’t mean to give Ivan misinformation, but I’m beginning to hear something, a strange, glorious sound. It’s singing, faint singing; the Crysian celebrates the open sea like an ancient terrestrial mariner, as one who knows it’s blessing, sustenance, and death all wrapped up in a capricious package. And that’s when I know that she’s very happy here... no, not just happy, delirious with joy.

“Lieutenant?”

I strain to get a glimpse of her with my naked eye, but I can only see the sun gleam off *Galatea’s* hull. I think she’s now fully in the water. The song’s fading, but I can still sense a playful, childish happiness in her mind. Happiness – and strength. She got a lot stronger within minutes of hitting the wide water.

This is the place where she belongs, not caged on *Galatea*.

“The waves are dying down.” Hazard takes his turn on the trigoggles. “We’re dressed for swimming, and we’ve still got a few hours left before our shift.”

The basalt grit that’s clinging to my body is really starting to bother me, and a swim would be a good way of removing it. “Sure,” I say. Perhaps being in the water when she’s there will better connect me with her thoughts.

Sixteen local days pass on Androthaxis, which, on this world, equals about a day and a half in Earth time. Summer at this altitude, close to the southern pole, means that there’s a few minutes of twilight separating a few hours of day. The grit, which blew on my sleeping body, covers me like a second skin. I wake up and cough the sand out of my lungs. Then my thoughts go to her, but it’s too late, I’m already too conscious to experience a direct link. But I can still feel her joy; it, like an unintended dose of nitrous oxide, leaves me with an involuntary smile on my face. I get up, dig into my pack, and bring out a communicator. “Said to *Galatea*. Who’s idea was it to leave me alone on this planet?”

“Captain Hazard’s, sir.” It’s Lars. “You apparently got very tired when you were swimming. Then things up here went crazy, and you got lost in the shuffle.”

“There was a crisis and I wasn’t informed?” I ask; not to sound like an egomaniac, but I did think I was a *little* more important to my ship. “How much of my shift have I missed?”

“You’ve missed two shifts, Lieutenant,” Lars informs me. *What?* Captain Hazard felt you shouldn’t be disturbed, But you’d better beam up.”

I grab my pack, and wait for one of the engineers to race down to the transporter room and beam me back (unfortunately, the Romulan incident left our transporter room unmanned). I step out of the transporter room, leaving a trail of sand in my wake. Shower or bridge? I brush myself off as best I can in a corner of the transporter room, and head directly to the bridge. People cast dire looks at me when I enter, and not just because I'm underdressed. Ivan's not at the con; Lars is sitting there.

"Situation, Mr. Lars?" I ask, relieving him of command.

"Sir, I regret to inform you that Lieutenant Kollois failed to reintegrate with her physical body. At 0920, Stardate 8261.1, Dr. Bradley officially pronounced her "physically dead". Given the complications, we have not decided whether to hold a service."

"He took it hard, didn't he?"

"Very hard. He's in his quarters. I would strongly advise that you do not disturb him." Lars says. I can sense, within T'Doroth's mind, that she agrees with Lars. A pity our link isn't more clearly telepathic.

"I'll just have a couple words with him. He does need to know I'm back," I say. Lars shoots me a "you've been warned" look. Fine. He's still my friend.

Since the Romulan attack killed nearly half the ship, most of the crew have gotten their own quarters. As executive officer, it was my duty to decide who'd be moved to new accommodations. Naturally, I put the Captain's name at the top of the list (I also had a chance to break away from Francis, but I still need to keep an eye on him, so we remained together; I'm sure that decision probably made quite a few tongues wag.) The Captain's now staying in small personal quarters on Deck 3, close to the turbolift to the bridge (as opposed to mine, which are located as close as I could get to engineering which, during the shakedown, seemed really important).

I ring the door and it opens. Ivan greets me at the door, dressed in Captain's formal dress. There are several empty bottles of Saurian brandy on the table, and a bottle of Rigilian whiskey. His breath stinks of it, and the room smells of vomit, though I suspect he's cleaned most of it up. I haven't seen his quarters since he moved – those he shared with Lars were very much a shrine to Efrosian customs, but Hazard's actually put his own touches here. There's a big Manet reproduction of the Venetian canals on one wall, and a reproduction of a 20th Century three-masted schooner is sitting on a table. The plaque on the bottom reads "Bluenose". That's a very strange name for a ship, perhaps it was named for a species of tuna?

"Captain," I say.

Hazard gets up to his feet in a rigid, overcompensatory motion. "Good. You're back. That's how it should be."

"I wanted to inform you that I had returned, and to see if there's anything I can do..."

"Well... Probably not... No, I can't think of anything..."

Hazard's face is perfectly rigid – if it weren't for the smell, I probably wouldn't think anything was wrong. I don't enjoy being here; I hate the smell of alcohol, especially when it's been vomited, and the look in Hazard's eyes suggests the fuse is just about to ignite. Even so, I really don't want to walk away, and I suspect he doesn't want me to walk either. "The offer stands as long as you need it," I say.

"Sure. I understand. I'll probably not take you up on it, though. I don't really need it..." Hazard smiles, and there's a long pause. "Thanks for *not* saying you're sorry. They all mean well, but... you know."

"Some things don't need to be said, right?"



"You got it," Ivan says. "Though I feel like saying a few of them. That is all right with you, isn't it? Come on, sit down." He pauses his rapidfire patter and invites me to sit down in a chair.

"Nice boat," I say.

"The world famous Bluenose," Hazard explains, spreading his arms like a galactic carnival barker. "Undeclared in... well... uh... a lot of races, maybe two dozen or so. I think it raced for two or three decades, and not even God could bring about its defeat."

"A good ship, then?"

"Good? It was a legend, Mr. Said, a genuine legend. I can just imagine her sail over the dark Atlantic waters, during the days when the cod stocks were so thick that they slowed the boats."

"I've never heard of her." I confess.

"Every kid in the Maritimes was brought up to look at this ship like it was something out of legend. Canada's Flying Dutchman, with victory substituting for death. Canada doesn't like tragedy in her legends."

"Tragedy is overrated, sir," I try to reassure him.

"Of course, the rest of the world has no clue that it ever existed, and even if they did, they'd probably just shrug and say something stupid, like 'it's only just a boat'. People just don't understand how important local mythology can be. You ever notice that?"

"I'm not religious, but I always invoke the name of Allah," I say.

"See. That's just what I mean, Mr. Said. You understand. You're seeing every side of the hologram at once. It's one of the reasons why you and I... well, you have a gift for making people like you, even though... well, would you like me to run down the list of your imperfections?"

"If it'll make you feel better, sure," I say.

"You don't like to drink..." Hazard starts, and then he loses himself. "You don't like to do a lot of things, do you, Lieutenant?"

"Is there anything I can do for you?" I shouldn't repeat the question – it's only going to irritate him, maybe even provoke him, but it's the only words that come to mind at the moment.

"I don't know." Ivan says. "I just wish... well... I don't want to panic you..."

"I don't panic easily, sir," I say. "Just tell me what's on your mind. What do you wish?"

"I wish I could find an excuse to give up this mission and return to the fleet." Hazard spits. "To a real starship duty, not playing nursemaid to some alien telepathic entity with the power of a damn god but who still can't tie its own shoelaces. Does that make sense to you, or am I too drunk?"

"You want normalcy. This mission is as far beyond normal as they get. I understand." I reply. "As for you being too drunk, you probably are."

Ivan smiles broadly. "You know what your biggest gift is, Kenneth? It's not your poetry, it's the fact that you can be so damn honest, and yet you still don't make people feel bad about themselves. That takes real talent, you know."

I nod and get to my feet. "Get some rest, Ivan. I'll be on the bridge if you need me."

"Oh. Okay." Ivan looks like a little kid who doesn't want his parent to leave for work. At least he doesn't try to manhandle me.

"Get some rest. That's a friendly order." I smile as I leave his quarters. I wonder about the things that Ivan said to me, pondering what hidden truths might be buried in the ramblings of one very drunken man.

“So how was the Captain?” Lars asks me as I return to the bridge: shaved, showered, and in uniform, no longer an embarrassment.

“Poor Ivan. Apparently I caught him at the tail end of his binge. Just from the smell of his quarters, it must have gotten pretty bad.”

“It did.” Lars says with a nod.

“You didn’t put him on report, did you?” Getting that badly drunk while on duty is a serious offense, whether or not you’re a Captain. Of course, when you’re alone and hundreds of parsecs from the Federation border, it’s really easy to sweep these things under the rug. Which is exactly what’s happening here.

“He relieved himself of duty, and I’m willing to use that as wiggle room.” Lars tells me. “In spite of what dozens of security officers might testify in court, I’m not married to the regs.”

“I told him to get some rest, but – provided you two didn’t come to blows earlier - this might be a good time for you two to talk,” I say.

Lars’s face is stonier than usual. “It would be a good idea if he rested,” he says.

“Kenneth, you’d better see this.” It’s Francis, sounding more professional than usual. He’s at the science station, wearing a pair of antique spectacles on his face. I ignore them. “Sensor analysis of the water around your friend. Congratulations, Kenneth, it’s a boy.”

“What?” I shout.

“Just kidding,” Francis grins, “Or half-kidding. Minutes after she entered the water, the rays which compose her body began to spew a protein gel into the water, which was quickly spread by the currents.”

“The currents can be wicked,” I state. “Like most low-g waterworlds.”

“The protein clusters have begun to combine into simple bacteria – bacteria identical to many of the primitive organisms on the Monoceros Wash,” Francis continues, pointing out an increasing complex chain of biochemical reactions, which he’s projecting on the small science station screen above his head. “I think she’s trying to recreate her old native environment.”

“She’s building a home.” I say and a broad smile appears on my face. Lars gives us a penetrating stare, while T’Doroth doesn’t visibly react.”

“If I’d done more than a third year study of biology, this would be *really* fascinating. Also, there are signs of cell division in her spears. She’s definitely reproducing, Kenneth.”

“She’ll integrate the most compatible spears into her body. The others will be allowed to grow into their own organisms,” I note. *Like the one that killed Wirchenko, I suppose, those arrowheads could have been Crysian outcasts.* “Have we seen any increase in her mass?”

“Yes, nearly 20% in just the last thirty hours,” Francis says. “We have no idea how much of it she’ll keep. If the data from Monoceros is reliable, she always loses a fraction of a percentage when she goes from deep water to shallow...”

“But if she keeps growing, we’re going to have a problem when we bring her aboard.” Lars notes, and he turns to me. “Did you know she was pregnant?”

Francis intercepts the question. “I may joke that the new spears may all have little Kenneth Said faces, but she’s not pregnant in *our* sense of the word, Lieutenant. The biological process is more reminiscent of eating, sweating, and defacating than mammalian reproduction. She may not even be consciously aware of what she’s doing.” Francis shakes his head. “She always did have a hard time understanding the importance of good sex.”

I roll my eyes. Even T’Doroth lifts an eyebrow. “I just wonder how we’re going to fit her into the hold.” Lars grunts, shaking his head.

The next day, our second day on Androthaxis, Ivan comes out of his quarters, sober but smelling like a sweaty pig, still wearing the formal dress uniform, and he gets everyone out of bed to hold a meeting of the ship's senior staff. Only one question is the focus of the discussion, and it's a simple one: should we hold a funeral for Kollos?

"I think we should do something, even if we don't call it a funeral," the ever-diplomatic Gbeji says. "Something to remember her, even if we don't quite sever the ties."

"A ritual should never have half a meaning." Lars states. "I vote for no funeral."

"I believe a continuing prayer vigil would be more appropriate," T'Doroth says. That suggestion surprises me; from what I remembered from our one mind-meld, T'Doroth isn't religious (her family has mercantile roots with little affiliation with Vulcan's priesthood or its government, and although she does maintain a regimen of meditation, she considers spirituality a personal quest that should not be imposed on by a formal religion).

"So, Mr. Said?" Hazard chides me. "Kenneth, what's your take?"

Damn, I've been letting my mind wander. I'm not really very good at these meetings, and Kollos deserves better. "She's not really dead. Her mind's alive. Her body's held in stasis," I say, recovering my composure. "I don't mean to sound callous, but she's been crippled, not killed." Hazard looks at me like he wants to deliver a good right cross to the bridge of my nose; instead he taps the table hard in a fit of pique. "Our challenge is to find a way to save her."

"We only have one doctor," Lars says. "However, there is the Crysian..."

"Who cannot touch her mind in her energy form. The entity told me she had problems with Mr. Kollos." T'Doroth informs us. This doesn't surprise me, but the spirits of everyone at the table sink – the Organians are energy beings too, and if she can't touch Kollos's mind in that form, then any hope we had of using her against the Organians was gone. "Nor would Kollos desire her help," T'Doroth adds. "She felt it would be a mistake for *Galatea* to become too entangled with her."

"And what do you think, T'Doroth?" I ask. If she were human, I'm sure she'd offer the next sentence with a regretful, perhaps wistful, sigh.

"I think our fates were bound together from the first moment you came aboard," she says.

"Oh," I say.

"I think we've reached a consensus that we'll encourage prayer and other thoughts for our comrade's recovery," Ivan ends the meeting abruptly – it must be getting too painful. "Thank you very much, people." We get up to leave. "Oh, Kenneth..." He addresses me, but everyone stops in their tracks. "Your friend appears to be enjoying the water. Have you spoken to her since she made planetfall?"

"No sir," I say. "I think she's been rather busy." But it's an excuse, and everyone knows it.

"Try to talk to her tonight, if you can. Get a progress report from her perspective." Hazard's tone is so numbingly professional that I can't help but think he's *overcompensating* for his drunken bout of the previous evening. Drinking binges were listed several times on Ivan's permanent record, though no Starfleet doctor ever labelled him an "alcoholic".

But, despite orders, the Crysian doesn't speak with me. I go to sleep, trying to contact her with the last fleeting thoughts before I descend into slumber, but she's not there. I try again on the next night, and the next, and the next... and there's no reply, except for a brief sensation of

happiness, tinged with apprehension. It's the latter that tells me she's avoiding me, and I don't like it. She's never done that before.

On our third day at Androthaxis, after duty, I pass Kollos's quarters and decide to go into the room to pay her my respects. Ivan's there. He's kneeling at the box that contains her energy form, and he's babbling something incomprehensible. It's obvious he's drunk again, even before I get close enough to smell his breath.

"I'm off duty..." he snaps, defensively. "I don't need to hear it."

"You want me to take you out of here?" I ask. I'm worried that in his drunken state, he might attempt something suicidal, like opening the box. He pauses for a minute to consider the question.

"If I don't leave, you're going to do something, aren't you?" he asks. I say nothing – sometimes it's better to just stare a person down. Finally, he sighs, and (grumbling) picks himself off the floor and staggers back to his quarters. Fortunately, they're on the same deck as Kollos's, a few doors down, so no one's around to see him. At least that shred of dignity's been maintained.

"Kenneth, I think you're the best person on this ship," he tells me as we wobble in front of his quarters. "One of the finest officers I ever met. One of the best things about being drunk is that you can tell people this sort of thing and get away with it."

I wonder if he's expecting a compliment in return? "You get a good night's sleep, Captain," I say. "Call me if you need anything."

The doors close with a thud, and as they close, a dozen scenarios play out in my head, about the Captain, about the Crysian, and about the fate of *Galatea*. I have to remind myself that more than one great man in human history was an alcoholic who could perform his work brilliantly when the time came: Winston Churchill, Ali Muamar Mohammed, Ulysses Grant, Dylan Thomas. I also have to remind myself that as a non-drinker, I need to avoid the trap of the self-righteous.

The doors open again. "By the way, Lieutenant... I know that doing this twice in three days may make it look like it's a problem..."

"I'm trying not to come to premature conclusions, sir."

"When you were in command, you ordered us to relieve you of command if we ever saw the Crysian affecting your judgment," Ivan says. "Well, the same goes for me. If you ever see that I'm unfit for command, I want you to relieve me of duty. That's an order."

"Certainly, sir." I say, and the door closes again. I turn around and I see T'Doroth standing there. I didn't even feel her in my mind, though once I make visual contact, I can feel her. She's in a thoughtful, philosophical mood.

"Some members of my race believe that humans should show more emotional control, and they are often correct," she says. "But I have observed that it is also dangerous for humans to control their emotions too much."

"We call it repression. Taken to extremes, it's a dangerous form of dishonesty. So you don't think we're ready to be Vulcans, yet?" I ask.

"Such a wish would be... unwise," T'Doroth says. "Vulcans should be Vulcans. Humans should be humans."

"And Klingons should be Klingons?" I wonder.

"There *are* limits to even the most sound principle." T'Doroth says. "Captain Hazard may be the most archetypal human I have ever gotten to know. He combines magnificent virtues with character flaws that invite almost assured self-destruction. Even a cursory look at human history

leads to the logical conclusion that your race was bound for glory or for an apocalypse. I believe that, to use those metaphors of which you are so fond, that those are the two same possible fates that await the Captain.”

“Except that *Galatea* will not survive its mission.” I say. “That’s what you and Kolloos told me. So once we leave orbit, we may as well set course for Apocalypse at Warp 6.5.” She raises an eyebrow. “That’s what we call dark humor. We sometimes using inappropriate humor to shock our systems into easing emotional burdens.”

“Humor, employed like alcohol.” T’Doroth observes. “Interesting.”

“I suppose so,” I mutter, and I finally turn to the question that’s been bothering me for days.

“Has she talked with you? Since we landed on the planet’s surface?”

“She appears to be preoccupied with the acclimatizing of her world.” T’Doroth notes. “I have attempted to mentally contact her, but she has resisted me.”

“Okay, that does it!” I snap. “I don’t know what she’s doing, but I don’t like it. I’m going to beam down into the ocean and talk with her directly.”

“That may be ill-advised. If she is giving birth, she may have a legitimate reason for isolating herself from emotional contact,” T’Doroth cautions, getting close to me. “She may not be acting like the creature we know.” She touches my left hand with a pair of outstretched fingers. “She might even be dangerous.”

“Not to me.” I state confidently. “Never to me. But we’ll keep a transport lock on me at all times, just in case.”

I could always wait until morning and get the Captain’s blessing for the mission, but Ivan’s not in any shape for it. Lars is cool – to say the least – to the idea, but I’m his superior officer, and there’s no one to contradict me. I change into one of the watersuits we used on Monoceros, and then head to the transporter room. The Crysian’s resting place is pretty deep, so they’re going to use the transporters to create a small air pocket for me, then beam me into the middle of it before it closes around me. It’s a bit of a trick, and having all those metric tons of water suddenly crushing you when you materialize is *not* fun. But I’m Starfleet certified for specialty transports, and so were Greg and Pratt. I can do this.

“Lieutenant?” One of the older engineers, an Alpha-Centuran woman named Lieutenant Coyvers, is operating the transporters. “Let me know when you’re ready, sir?”

“As soon as you’ve got reliable sensor data, we can start,” I say, stepping onto the pad. Coyvers nods and talks to the bridge. The wait’s longer than I anticipated – I perform three suit checks while we wait for Francis to send us safe coordinates for the beamdown. I worry that my roommate thinks this mission is as ill-advised as T’Doroth, but no... Gable sends the coordinates. He knows that I have to do this, though I end up in Hell at the end of the journey.

The world blackens, and then reappears as a dimly lit labyrinth of gossamer splendor. There are protein strands everywhere, forming curtains, webs, cages... they shine in twisting Gothic patterns as my light swings around and illuminates them. Clouds of bacteria swim through the current like brine petals, whipped by a fierce wind. There’s life everywhere, even in the deeps. The Crysian has been very busy.

“Are you here?” I shout into the undertow – there’s no sign of her spears, but I’m too deep to get a good view. “We’ve seen you grow. I’ve felt your joy – it’s been the one redeeming thing in my life in the last few days – but you’ve been so silent, and we didn’t exactly know what this planet would do to you....” I’m really struggling for words, and it’s silly for me to do so; words are

a clumsy way to converse with her. And she *is* here. I can feel her in my mind – it’s a frighteningly strong mental pulse, the leviathan heartbeat, pounding with an intensity I haven’t heard since we first met. “Please... I need you so badly... They don’t understand how badly...”

*I’m sorry.* I hear the voice say, but I can sense a deeper meaning behind them. It’s a lamentation that carries worlds of regret in three simple syllables. For a few seconds, language is the devil. *I have missed you, yearned for you, longed to wrap myself in your thoughts...*

“I’m here now,” I say, trying to reassure her. “So, for awhile, everything is perfect.”

*For awhile. Awhile. Alas, that is the problem.* she says.

I begin to see her form swimming toward me in the distance; the sight of the surging mass, its red spears gleaming with protein filaments like sweat, makes me nervous to the point of paralysis. *I love you, but that love is not sufficient for me to leave this place. The journey from the cold waters of my home to these warm waters was a horror I never imagined possible. The next journey will be worse. I will not endure it, not even for us.*

“What?” I exclaim.

*I will always care for you. One must know a person’s heart to break it, and ours are both in pieces, my Kenneth.* Did I teach her that poetry, when we were together, when we explored the stars together? *But there has always been a piece of your heart that has been beyond my reach. It will sustain you.*

“But... I love you...” I gasp. There are those simple words again, that oft spoken monosyllabic truth, which opens worlds and hearts – sometimes, so they may be mortally wounded. “I *would* protect you from anything. When you were dying, I came to you...”

*And I shall be grateful for that until these waters run cold. I shall carry your memory within me like my first sight of the stars, when I wondering what lights beckoned me beyond the cold, in a place beyond breath. You gave me the answers to unthought questions. But an end has come, my Kenneth. There is a new world now, for both of us. New stars will shine for me, though I cannot see them yet, and as for you, Beloved, there are always new stars...*

“No!” I insist. “No!” My heart starts beating in my chest like rifle rounds. “I need you! Don’t talk to me about stars, and poetry, and the trappings of true love like they were some gentle romance! Don’t speak to me like I’m Heathcliffe from Wuthering Heights, that I’ll be okay if I just brood for awhile! I won’t be alright! I’m not strong, I’ve never been strong, in fact I can’t believe that I’ve managed to fool so many people into thinking I’m strong!”

*You know this isn’t true.* she says.

“The hell I don’t! If I were strong, I wouldn’t have even come here! I’d have been able to move on with my life! If I were strong, every night when I drift to sleep, I wouldn’t be thinking of...”

*Good-bye, Beloved. Do not come again. Do not seek my thoughts. And tell those to whom you owe your fealty that I shall not come among them again.*

That’s it. It’s over. I’ve been rejected by the goddess, dumped like an awkward schoolboy by the queen of the class. And that’s when I’m transported back to *Galatea*. Sobbing.

Past, present, and future; legacy and destiny; choice and fate; they’re all coming together now. Three days after the Crysian said good-bye, three days after they pried my blubbing body off the transporter pad and carried me, gentle as glass, back to my quarters. Three days of comforting words and Francis watching over me like a brother on a deathbed vigil, three days of experiencing emotions that would harrow a Klingon’s soul, and then I finally rise out of my bed, and return to the world like the prophet Jesus in Christian myth. I suppose I should count the

friendships as a blessing: T'Doroth, Francis, Gbeji, and Hazard have all been Atlases; yes, even the Captain mustered an emotional second wind so he could serve in the role of Greg's surrogate, my big brother. I guess that's what Ivan's been to me ever since we first met, a more human, fallible version of Greg Jensen. That's why I like him so much. But I can't tell them about what the Crysian told me, nor about the coldness I felt in her, the casual dismissal. I can't tell these people that the mission is dead, and that nearly half the ship died for nothing. I can't even warn them not to disturb the Crysian, not to use their tractors to once again lift her spears into the hold.

Nor should they. It's madness to try to cage the god, or to wield its spear with mortal hands.

With each step I take, I feel my sanity return, my thoughts attain clarity, my focus restored. If *Galatea* attempts to take the Crysian by force, we will not just fail militarily, but morally. Victory through kidnapping, coercion; that isn't the Federation way, it's the opposite of every principle of our Starfleet oath. Maybe I'm just trying to justify what I'm about to do, but wouldn't the justification be harder if this action was so wrong?

I enter the turbolift, avoiding the security guard's face, and head directly for engineering. It's late. *Galatea* is mostly idle. Good.

Something tells me that I need to think about this further, but every thought reminds me what's at stake: principles and lives. Ivan, T'Doroth, Kollo, Francis, and the rest, they'll probably die if I don't take action. Yes, and the Crysian too. She *should* have her own world, where she can live in peace without worrying about the petty conflict between the Federation and the ISC, which is almost certain to be resolved within a few relative heartbeats of her nigh-immortal life. We should take pride in helping to save her life, not priming her to be used as a weapon against the ISC and the Organians. There are always other means to achieve our goal.

I walk down to engineering, where I relieve three engineers of duty. I'm allowed to do that, it's my department.

I stare at the blue-white consoles, their flashing buttons and quixotic screens; it's now an instrument of celestial music, and I'm tempted to crack my fingers. *This is the answer.*

"Computer," I start. "Create program 'Said Emergency Tractor Override One'."

"Program creation confirmed," the computer says.

If I destroy the tractors - our means to retrieve the Crysian - then we'll have to cancel the mission. We'll cut across to Gorn space, take a safe passage to the Federation, head at maximum warp back to Vulcan and save Kollo's life. And I'll take the blame for everything. Yes, this *is* sabotage, and I *will* spend the rest of my life in a Federation prison, but it will be worth it to save Ivan, T'Doroth, and the others. It's a Captain's duty to sacrifice himself so his crew might live, and I *was* the first Captain of *Galatea*...

....and then I feel something jab into my arm, hard and blunt, and I hear a hissing sound, and my legs turn to jelly in a matter of seconds. Falling, I catch sight of Lars, holding a hypo in his hand; it may as well be a bloody dagger. On the computer screen where I was working, a bridge override command is erasing my program. I've failed. I underestimated the ability of my friends in security. They even knew enough not to stun me, which might allow me to contact the Crysian; they've hit me with a muscle relaxant instead.

"Gotcha, Lieutenant," Lars says, wearing a big smile on his broad Efrosian face.

## IX: Broken Chrysalis

*I am undone.  
Now I live in a cage that's three meters cubed.  
I thought I was clever, but I'm the rube,  
What I sowed I reaped, I'm a farming fool,  
I'm so undone...*

*Even pity has become a bitter drink,  
Even the stars make my spirits sink,  
I stared down the darkness, but then I blinked.  
I became undone..."*

"Can we still the beating of your poetic soul for a few minutes?" Lars asks, entering the holding cell, setting a tricorder beside us. It makes a low whine as it begins to record our words, while Lars fumbles for a hypospray.

"I didn't think my next dose would be for a couple of hours," I state. Lars shakes his head and injects me. "You do realize that interrogation and forced sleep deprivation are a very problematic mix, don't you Lieutenant?" This particular chemical's designed to keep me awake, to prevent me from contacting the Crysian when I'm on the verge of sleep. "It'll compromise any testimony I give here, and it'll look bad on your record, Lars."

"And you wouldn't want me to look bad, Mr. Said?" Lars replies. "You'd sabotage my ship on my watch, but you don't want me to look bad? That's very funny, Kenneth."

"I concede your point," I say. "Nonetheless, you know I'm right about this. I've confessed to my crime, I'm safely in the brig. Anything else that you do to me between now and the time you can put me in front of three flag officers is a waste of your time, unless you want to do the smart



thing and take me to Sickbay and put me in stasis where she won't have a chance to influence me."

But Lars doesn't want to make any concessions to me whatsoever. Typical interrogation; he may not be torturing me, but he's got the rest of the mindset down pat. "Let's go back to the start. State your full name."

"Kenneth Ali Michael Ibn Said. Lieutenant, USS *Galatea*, chief engineer, Starfleet Serial Number..."

"Answer the questions as I ask them, please," Lars says. "Let's skip the identity. What actions did you take upon your return to *Galatea* from the planet's surface on Stardate 8264.2?"

"I was writing a program to sabotage the ship's tractor beam assembly when I was intercepted and neutralized by the ship's chief of security."

"What was your purpose in writing this program?" Lars knows the answer to every question he's asked me – I'm waiting for the twist, the unexpected question which will catch me off guard.

"I wished to prevent *Galatea* from retrieving the Crysian." I state.

"Who instigated this action?"

"I was the sole instigator." I answer.

"Did the Crysian coerce you in any way?"

"To my knowledge, no. I performed the action of my own volition. No other individual or entity influenced the decision or aided the action." After a few interrogations, it's not hard to boil the answers down to their basic components.

"Did the Captain influence your decision?"

"He did not directly influence it, he had no knowledge of it, and he did not assist in any way."

"Why do you say 'directly', Mr. Said?" Lars finally picks up on a quirk of my wording.

During the first three interrogations, he refused to even entertain a deep discussion of my motivations – personal anger at me, I suppose. When you think someone's a traitor, you don't want to give them any opportunity to get on a soapbox – especially a colleague, that's double treason. I think we've all seen so much footage of brainwashed ISC victims that we're not really willing to give them the benefit of the doubt. No, I don't blame Lars.

"A person gets impressions of his fellow officers on their vessel. My impression was that the Captain – and the majority of the officers – felt the mission was unachievable and would welcome it if I could find a way to end it that didn't disgrace the crew..."

"So you did it for *us*?" Lars spits sarcastically. "You're unbelievable."

"You can call me deluded, or call me a traitor, but please do not call me a liar, Lars." I snap. "I've been more than forthcoming with my answers. If you don't question me about my motives, the court martial will. You'll look less foolish if you ask me those questions now."

"Again, how kind of you." Lars's temper is really starting to boil, but he composes himself.

"Mr. Said, did anyone at Starfleet Intelligence ask you to perform this action?"

"No," I say. I suppose there's an *outside* chance I might be working for Starfleet Intelligence. Of course if I was, I *would* lie to him without a second thought.

"Did anyone from Starfleet Command?"

"No."

Of course, Lars then ignores that last answer and confronts me with a list of possible accomplices: Gable, T'Doroth, Jensen, Nagura, Dalta-Thayvo. I just answer the question honestly.

“Were you attempting to sabotage us with the purpose of weakening us in battle?”

“Absolutely not!” I insist. “Given that we’ve got excellent warning of approaching ships, the damage that would have been done would have been reparable before the ship was put in danger. My main motivation...”

“Just answer the question, Mr. Said.” Lars says.

“I thought I did.” I say. I like Lars, I understand him, but I’ve finally had enough. “Of course if you were as actually interested in getting answers as you are at exerting your authority...”

“You’re standing on very thin ice, Mr. Said. Stop pounding at it with a sledgehammer.”

“There is no ‘ice’, Mr. Lars. I am standing on *nothing*. I am a saboteur, which makes me a traitor, and given that this is wartime... well, most people would consider a life sentence in a prison camp to be lenient.”

“Mr. Said, you’re not standing on nothing,” Lars says. “You’re standing on our goodwill and your past service to this ship, both of which is *much* more than nothing.”

I shake my head. “Lars, I’m also standing on *your* sense of duty and honor, which won’t tolerate such an offense. Dozens of good people gave their lives for this mission. In one stroke, without anyone else’s input - without any seeming regard for their opinions – I attempted to undo that mission. Some people would view that as spitting on your subordinates’ graves. I’d bet my life that you’re one of them, and it’s killing you inside that you didn’t accidentally break my neck during our last judo match.”

Lars inhales deeply. “Partially, yes.” he admits, and the anger that he’s trying to suppress in his voice is as palpable as if we had an empathic link. “But the emotion is not pure.”

“Lars, I could tell you that I respect your point of view, I could say that I’m sorry. But neither expression will have very much meaning until I have a chance to tell you the full story.”

Lars turns his back, lowers the force field. “You arrogant son of a bitch,” he says dismissively, and he talks to someone who’s lurking out of view. “He’s all yours, Captain.”

With slow deliberate steps, Ivan Hazard walks into the cell. “You made a real mess of things, Kenneth,” he says.

“You’ve never been given to understatement before,” I reply.

“Here’s what’s going to happen.” Hazard announces, his voice even colder than Lars’s. “You’ll be put on report for performing actions that endangered the safety of the ship. We won’t specify exactly what you did. You will remain in the brig until we’ve left the system, to minimize contact with your aquatic friend.”

“Ivan... don’t...” I say.

“Don’t you *dare* tell me what not to do. You will be stripped of all technical privileges and accrued commodations. You will be stripped of the position of Chief Engineer. And you will be demoted to the rank of Ensign.” He pauses, still fuming. “Don’t thank me.”

“I’m not.” I reply. “This is wrong. It’s sick. I *should* go to prison.”

“Of course you should. But I need every hand I’ve got, so you’re not going to be confined, Kenneth.” Hazard says. “You’re going to have to work with – and look into the faces of – everyone you let down.”

“Don’t you mean, ‘betrayed’?” I ask. “Let’s call it what it is.”

“I am.” Hazard says, sitting down next to me. “You know, Kenneth, I’m an expert in being betrayed, Kenneth. Trust me, I’ve seen galactic experts in action. My back’s is just covered in scars. But what you did... it was just amateur. Did you really think, after the Romulan just

happened to electrocute himself by triggering the jettison on the shuttlebay, that we wouldn't be monitoring you?"

"I wasn't thinking that clearly." I admit.

"I'll say. Not only were you caught, you could have claimed the Crysian coerced you and everyone would have believed you. I would have believed you."

"I can barely live with myself now, Ivan. If *I* had lied..." I say.

"Well, if I thought you were lying, we wouldn't be talking. Lars would have beat you to a pulp and we'd be stranding you down on the planet with your girlfriend." Hazard says. "And don't you dare think I'm joking about this. There is precedent. Several precedents, in fact."

"She's not my girlfriend." I moan. "Not anymore. She's abandoned us, Ivan. She's not going to come with us. She's refusing to be caged again."

"Oh." Ivan says. "Then we've got more of a problem than we thought." A pity Lars didn't listen to me when I tried to tell him what had happened. "So much for true galactic love. I guess that can drive a man crazy."

"No, that's not it at all. Our orders don't give us any room to maneuver." I say. "And yet... I know this is war. This is a fight for our survival. I'm not *that* naïve. And yet I'm not willing to throw aside my principles. Our orders would require us to abduct the Crysian by force. And then when I looked at our chances of actually succeeding at this mission, and especially with Kollo's life at stake..." That's when I see a look of realization appear on Ivan's face, and I can't continue.

"Oh, Kenneth." Ivan says after a long pause. "My God. You made two huge mistakes, my friend. First, you took the entire burden on yourself. You didn't have the right to exclude us from making that choice."

"I didn't want anyone else to take the consequences."

"Tough!" Hazard says. "We're adults, Kenneth. We make choices, and we live with them. Together! As a crew! So damn you!" Hazard gets up from the bench and starts pacing. "We don't need you to be our sacrificial lamb Kenneth, we need you to be our shipmate! You're one of the best shipmates I've ever seen. But as a goddamn martyr... you're really pathetic."

"Okay, that's the first mistake." I note. "What's the other one?"

Ivan picks up the pace, stomping across the room. "It wasn't your mistake, it was mine. Dammit!"

"Don't be absurd, Ivan, I..."

"Kenneth, just listen. You know as well as I do how a Captain's supposed to act. If I'd been doing my job instead of wallowing in grief..."

"You had every reason..."

"...you probably wouldn't have had the chance to get yourself into this mess." Ivan says.

"Ivan, the last thing I want is for you to start blaming yourself." I insist. But the words are about as effective as a pea-shooter against a heavy cruiser. Ivan pivots, goes to the door, and signals for the force field to be lowered.

"Come with me, Lieutenant," he says. I notice that he's using my former rank, and it bothers me, but I say nothing. Hazard stops in front of the comm button and composes himself so he can muster the perfect Captain's voice. "All senior staff, report to the briefing room in three minutes," he announces. "And anyone who's late gets keel-hauled."

Yes, I'm invited to the meeting. The looks I receive include curiosity from T'Doroth, shame from Gbeji, disapproval from Dr. Bradley, and (no surprise) unbridled hatred from Lars. Suffice it to say, it's really hard for me to look at them directly in their faces.

"A Captain has to take responsibility for the actions of his crew," he says by way of introduction. "So I take full responsibility for Mr. Said's recent actions. Kenneth, you're now restored to full rank, duty and privileges as a member of this crew. I know you – or anyone else in this room – will not disappoint me again. I'm ordering everyone..." he looks at Lars, "to put whatever quarrel you have with the Lieutenant behind you."

"But sir..." I beat Lars to the punch. Hazard shakes his head.

"I'm going to make sure that you don't disappoint us." Hazard says. "Because you're not going to even consider the possibility of failure. We've all been thinking that this mission is impossible. I've thought it, you've thought it, everyone in this room has thought it, even Lars." He trades glances with the big Efrosian. "But let's think about what we've accomplished so far. We've beaten off the ISC's attack; we managed to get this impossible ship into fighting shape, we even survived the *Tal Shiar* and now we're farther into ISC space than any ship from our quadrant has ever gone. But as Mr. Said put it in his quaint little poem, we found ourselves staring into the darkness - the challenge ahead - and we blinked. *I* blinked. You should all damn me for a fool, because that's no way for a Captain to run his ship."

"But sir, an objective evaluation of the situation is not foolishness," T'Doroth says.

"But underestimating the ability of this crew is," the Captain counters. "We're a damn fine outfit when we're in top form. Instead of worrying about the situation, and bemoaning our hapless plight, we need to put our efforts into *solving* the problem and *succeeding* at our mission. Forget failure."

And that's it. That's the turning point, and everyone in the room knows it. "So let's start now," Hazard says.

"Sir, even with the Crysian, *Galatea* cannot defeat an entire echelon." T'Doroth again objects.

"Who says we'll be facing an echelon?" Hazard smiles. "Everything we've seen of ISC defenses indicates they've sent the majority of their fleets into our quadrant, or they've got them fortifying the borders. They haven't fought a war in centuries. As Klingons say, *their underbelly is soft*."

"Klingons have also tried to penetrate ISC space," Lars notes. "All that accomplished was one of the quickest trips to Sto-Vo-Kor by a Klingon fleet in recorded history."

"But our systems give us a huge advantage over the Klingon suicide tubs," I state, trying to get into the swing of things. "On long range sensors, we're just a big freighter or a transport to them. They have no reason to send their echelons after us. They shouldn't even know we're not who we say we are until we reach visual range, and by then we're right down their throats."

"There's only one problem. Our systems may be imperceptible, but we don't have the right codes..." Lars growls.

"We would need to board a military installation without being detected," T'Doroth says. "Perhaps if we were to capture an ISC freighter and use it to conduct a boarding action..."

"Codes..." I mutter out loud, trying to get my thought processes working again. Given all the stimulants Lars pumped into my system, that's not too hard... Maybe as one final gift, I could use the Crysian to give us the codes. Or I could contact Greg telepathically; if Greg's infiltrated the ISC, as I'm *sure* he's done, he might know the codes. Hell, knowing Greg, he's probably already sent me a message...

And that's when I start to laugh. Lars gives me a graveyard stare, but I could almost kiss him. "I've got it!" I shout, bubbling with such unrestrained joy that I could almost kiss Francis.

"Uh... Lieutenant..." Gbeji says.

"That's it! I am *such* a fool!" I shout, turning to Lars. "Remember when I touched the listening post and got the telepathic message?"

"It is hard to forget any mission where I served with you," Lars clearly still hates my guts, but hopefully we can resolve our differences later. "Just why would the ISC give *you* the codes?" he asks.

"Good question. They didn't. But Greg did." I'm so excited, I can't even stay in my seat. I get out of my chair and start to do a circuit of the briefing room. Lars looks like he wants to restrain me. "He and Dr. Luiif, they sent me a code that would let *Galatea* get through the ISC sensor net." It's hard to keep my laughter in check. "*Allah akbar*, why didn't I think of this earlier?"

Hazard crosses his arms and ponders the situation. "You mentioned to me that you had some vision of seeing Jensen on some secret mission in ISC space." I nod. "Let's assume that your old Captain hasn't been brainwashed, that he's pulling off a deception. From what you told me, you didn't even get a chance to even say hello to him. How would he even know that you were coming?"

"From Delta-Thayvo." I answer. "The Admiral knew our mission specs, and the capabilities of this ship. And she'd find a way to tell Greg. They're very tight."

"That would explain why she left Starfleet," T'Doroth notes. Both Lars and Ivan nod.

"You mentioned several codes." Lars says. "I take it they're names we're supposed to investigate?"

"We don't need to." I say, as all the pieces suddenly click in my head. "In his message to the ISC, Greg said that his bondsmen should be 'poets, explorers, engineers' – Greg's called me his bondsman before, and I'm a poet and an engineer."

"A coded message." Lars says.

"He said 'come to Desskyie in friendship', Friendship was one of the names I picked up from the telepathic message at the listening post. That's the one we need to use."

"That's a stretch," Lars wonders. "I want to see that recording again." I suppose I can't blame him for his skepticism. "But there is another problem. The Crysian's growth rate has risen far above projections. We're going to have to tear apart half the ship to contain her current mass."

"No we won't," Ivan answers. "We're not going to complete this mission by fighting. Even with the Crysian at full strength, we can't outfight an echelon. So we're going to leave her here, and we will complete the mission without her – through brains and stealth, not brute force. Who needs a damn *deus ex machina* anyway? This is our fight, not hers. And we can win it without her."

Now there's a statement that causes jaws to drop. In the silence that follows, I recognize that it's a statement worthy of a great starship Captain – provided he can pull it off. T'Doroth's opinion of Hazard - glory or apocalypse - practically screams in my ears.

"The Klingons would call this a glorious mission," Lars says, still flashing me a nasty, distrusting glance. "For the first time in my life, I wish I was a Klingon."

Everyone but T'Doroth chuckles, when a message comes through the comm channel for Hazard. "Oh Captain..." It's Francis. "If everyone has finished crucifying Kenneth..."

"I'm afraid we're doing a lot worse than that to him," Ivan jokes in a deadpan. "We're releasing him from the brig and we're forcing him to stay with you."

"Wow." Francis says. "Uh... thank you."

"He's still on probation," Hazard tells him, really addressing the comment to me. "So what's the message?"

Francis's voice takes on a cheerless tone. "An ISC heavy cruiser has just appeared on long range scanners." he tells us, "It's fifty-three hours away, and it's on an intercept course..."

"I see," Hazard says. "Call a yellow alert, Mr. Gable. It looks like the first challenge has come sooner than we expected."

The meeting is adjourned, but Ivan asks Lars and I to stick around for a brief chat. I don't know why he wants us to do that - perhaps the sight of two people glaring at each other like mortal enemies entertains him. "I know there's been a lot of conflict between the two of you," he says. "I'd like you to shake hands and put it behind you." The request makes me very uncomfortable - like it or not, by interrogating me, Lars added himself to a list of very unpleasant people - but I tepidly offer it.

"I will not do this." Lars insists, almost turning his back on me. "And don't even think about ordering me to shake it."

Hazard's face is positively grim. "We need you both on the same team," he says, controlling his words to his best ability.

Lars brushes the back of his forearms together, an Efrosian gesture of discomfort. "The only way I could ever work with Mr. Said would be if he were to agree to become my *glika*."

"What!" Hazard spits. "You can't be serious!"

"*Glika*?" I wonder out loud. It's one of those words that confuses the universal translator. I get the vague impression of the word 'adversary', but it doesn't quite fit.

"It means 'enemy'." Ivan informs me. "It means that you will be involved in a formal feud with old 'silverbrow', probably for the rest of your life. And (if they're really unlucky) so will your offspring."

"Humans *never* understand *glika*," Lars moans. "Yes, in a certain context, it means we're enemies. But unlike humans, Efrosians value and respect their enemies. You would be required to challenge me at every turn, to insult me, to humiliate me whenever I show weakness or foolhardiness, and force me to consider new perspectives and improve myself. A good *glika* is even more valuable than a good cupsman. Having a famous *glika* is one of the highest honors an Efrosian can have."

"So you'd be required to humiliate me at every turn too?" I ask. Lars nods "Would this be for the rest of our lives?"

"Not necessarily, if we both agree to end it." Lars says. "Occasionally *glika* end up as the best of friends. You and the Captain were undeclared *glika* for quite some time. I don't think you'd be as close as you've become if you had not started as enemies."

Ivan looks a little embarrassed, but I'm going to avoid pushing him on it, or do anything that might raise the discomfort level in the room beyond its already toxic level. "We wouldn't be required to fight duels, or anything like that?" I ask.

"Please. Efrosians are not Mirak," Lars doesn't hide his contempt for the question. "The purpose of having a *glika* is to challenge each other, not kill each other. And frankly Lieutenant, you need a *glika* to keep you from taking stupid actions like the one that nearly landed you in prison."

He may have a point. "And what about judo?" I ask.

“It will make it much more interesting,” Lars says. “But most important, I would be able to shake your hand, if only to prevent the embarrassment of having my *glika* appear more noble than me in front of my Captain.”

Now that’s a very strange code, almost Japanese. What is it that they call it, *giri*? I wish my memories of Nagura’s Japanese culture courses were a little clearer. “This does explain the answers to some questions that have bothered me for a long time. *Glika*. So I take it that’s why you let Burke and Wirchenko go at so much?” I ask.

“Of course,” Lars answers. “Had they both lived, I’m convinced they would have become two of the finest Captains in the fleet. Unfortunately, they had to die. I suppose I should take comfort in the fact they didn’t die alone,” he adds pointedly; we both know who was with each of them when they died.

“He’s not your *glika* yet,” Ivan warns him.

“My apologies, Captain,” Lars responds.

“We’re wasting time,” Hazard says. “*Glika* yourselves, shake hands, and let’s figure out a way to deal with the crisis.”

I extend my hand, and Lars shakes it; he has the most sour look imaginable on his face. “Stop looking at me like you just ate rotten fruit,” I smile. “And by the way, that has to be the limpest handshake I’ve ever felt. If you offered something that insulting to a Klingon, he’d shoot you.”

“Very good, Lieutenant.” Lars says, grinning broadly. “This will be interesting.”

“Okay,” Hazard says as we reenter the bridge; I take Gbeji’s station – she quickly nudges herself away from me, I guess the ship’s gossip engine about my attempted sabotage has gone past Warp Nine – and I get my first glimpse of the engineering board in days. It’s a surprisingly therapeutic feeling. “Mr. T’Doroth, move us out of orbit and gradually take us to Warp 5 on a heading of 352 mark 17.”

“Aye sir.”

“Captain, the planet would be a better place to make a stand,” Lars informs us. I pretty much had the same thought. We’re no match for a heavy cruiser... we could probably count the amount of time it would take for it to destroy us in seconds. Would the Crysian help us in our stand?

“Let’s see if it notices us.” Hazard leans forward in the con. “If it changes course to track us, then we’ll head back to Androthaxis. Otherwise, we’ll keep on going and change our identity codes to the Friendship’s when we’re out of their sensor range. Mr. Said, get Dr. Bradley to give you something that’ll let you sleep. That’s an order.”

I shake my head. “Do you ever get sick of hearing the words, ‘aye sir’, Captain?”

“Not as long as the alternative ‘Go to Hell, Captain’ exists.” Ivan jokes. “Go to sleep, Lieutenant.”

“You probably just want to talk about me behind my back...” I grumble. I meant to say it under my voice, but no, I’m tired, so I just had to give it enough breath that everyone could hear it. I *hate* sleep deprivation.

Seven hours later, I’m awake again. I probably should have slept for ten, but it’s hard to flush all those stimulants out of my system in one setting. Francis is meditating in our quarters, moaning some Vesperan mantra that my double-greatmother would consider a shameful obscenity as he meditates. Come to think of it, I’m not very fond of it either. I hurl a pillow at him (which bounces off the side of his head), then stretch out of bed and stagger to the mirror.

“That was very rude, Kenneth...” Francis says, getting behind me and giving me a friendly hug. For once I don’t flinch. “Welcome back, my brother,” he whispers. “I was worried.”

My face had begun to accrue some serious stubble over the last few days, so I run a sonic shaver over it and lather it with a coat of folicide gel to keep it from growing for the next month, all while ignoring Francis’s overfriendly python grip. “Francis, where are we?” I ask.

“Androthaxis. The heavy cruiser changed course to intercept us. They know we’re here. We’ve been running over our options...”

“I can guess what the consensus is...” I mutter.

“Yep. While the You-Know-Who doesn’t want to be our passenger anymore, we’re hoping she might help us fight one last pitched battle. It’d be repayment for not leaving her to freeze to death on Monoceros.”

“I don’t know. She was so different last time.” I say. “It was like the pretty skin had peeled off her, and I couldn’t recognize what I saw beneath...”

“And that’s what sent you into a minor nervous breakdown?” Francis replies. “We talked about that too. You’ll find you’ve pretty much been forgiven about the tractor incident...” I sigh heavily. “What’s the problem?”

I shake my head. “Once again, in deep space, the space cowboys sweep that silly thing called ‘the law’ under the rug. As we’ve done for God knows how many years!” I sigh hard. When did Starfleet turn into a pack of Roger Princes?

“I really don’t understand you,” Francis says. “As long as you’re not running around sabotaging things like a half-crazed idiot, it’s in Starfleet’s best interest to keep you aboard. You should be glad they’re as flexible as they are.”

“I got away with it because people like me. Allah knows why.” I mutter. “Speaking of which, Francis, I’m not a big fan of either Klingons or ‘Cling-ons’. Detatch yourself please.” Francis, mouth making a shocked circle, lets go. It’s a good thing too – that’s when Ivan decides to visit my quarters. Francis is embarrassing enough without an audience.

“Is the Lieutenant awake yet, Mr. Gable?” the Captain asks through the speaker.

“No,” Francis says, “although something that acts like a much grumpier version of Kenneth Said has attained ambulatory status and is currently staggering around these quarters like a zombie, leaving unholy destruction in its wake.”

“That’s a ‘yes’, Captain.” I sigh. Hazard enters the quarters, smiling. “Mr. Gable’s one useful function this morning has been to give me an update of the situation. How many hours until the I-CA intercepts us?”

“Forty-six. We’d like you to have a talk with the Crysian.”

“I figured you might.” I say. “Unfortunately she said good-bye, Ivan, and I think she means it. I tried to reach her when I was falling asleep last night, and she completely ignored me.”

“We could beam you into the middle of her spears.” Hazard suggests.

No. Not that again. “Why repeat a mistake?” I snap, a little bitter. How *do* you get the attention of a goddess?

“I take it from the phrase ‘ignored me’ that you still have an empathic link with her?” Ivan speculates.

“She hasn’t been able to sever it,” I answer. “I still feel her. Francis does too.”

“Unfortunately, the Crysian cares for me about as much as a tribble cares for an empty grain compartment,” Francis suddenly plops onto his bed like a pole-vaulter landing on his back. “So once again, I’m useless except for my superb sense of comic timing.”



“He’s delusional.” I add.

Ivan nods. “So she can still sense your emotions? If she still cares about you, maybe we can use that to make her care about *us* again, But we’d need to do something out of the ordinary to attract her attention.”

“Well you could always put me in physical danger,” I quip. It’s not meant as a serious suggestion, but I can see the proverbial lightbulb go off in Ivan’s head.

“Or a prolonged combat situation. Something that combines physical pain and stress,” Ivan’s got a brainstorm and is running with it. “Lieutenant, you ever box?”

“Three of my meldmates did. First, there’s Francis...” I say, looking over at my bunkmate. Believe it or not, he was very good. “Nagura took a bronze in woman’s Golden Gloves at the Academy. And of course Greg mastered so many forms of unarmed combat he made Klingon champions look like stumblebums. The guy knocked out a Mirak.”

“He cheated,” Francis contradicts me. “Sorry, I love Greg too, but I always hate it when people get away with telling that story.”

“Captain, I can handle myself.” I say, looking as determined as possible (at least as well as anybody can five minutes after they’ve woken up).

“Good,” Ivan says. “If there are any issues between us over the tractor fiasco, this might resolve them.”

“So I get to punch the daylights out of you?” I smile. “Just what every first officer wants to do to his Captain at one point or another!” I haven’t used my weekly quota of jokes yet.

“Uh... Kenneth...” Francis grimaces. “Far be it from me to get in the way of the expression of repressed sexual attraction...” We both shoot him a *very* dirty look. “But you wouldn’t mind if I pointed out a couple of trivial details, like the fact that the Captain outweighs you by at least twenty kilos, most of which is muscle that’s concentrated around that powerful hundred-fifteen centimeter chest, and those scary, bulging forty-six centimeter biceps? Or that he’s got a reach advantage of at least five centimeters?”

“Thank you Francis, but if we’re going to get the Crysian’s attention, this is going to have to be painful.”

“And a legitimate fight.” Ivan says. “You’re going to have to do your best to hurt me too. All combat emotions must come into play.”

“Agreed.” I say. “After all, Lars put me through a lot of stress in the interrogation, and the Crysuan didn’t intervene. We have to push this one as hard as possible, so we fight until one of us goes down for the count.”

Francis laughs. “Isn’t there a creature on Cestus V that feeds off the testosterone of the people around it? All the ISC needs to do is release one of them aboard this ship, then sit back and watch the fun.”

“Ha... ha...” I don’t bother hiding my contempt for the “joke”, then I turn to back to Ivan. “You’ve asked us to see how we perform when we’re overmatched. Any computer analysis says this fight should be a massacre. You know how I like to beat the odds...”

“We’ll set up in the rec room,” Ivan says. “It should be a real show...”

Four rounds of pain, blood, and sweat later, I wake up in a medical bay, a pungent scent wafting in my nostrils. My first sight is that of Dr. Bradley (he’s younger than Latham) standing over me and shaking his balding freckled head. My face feels like a piece of raw meat that’s been chewed by a Mugato, and my sides are a living bruise. For a very brief moment, I’m glad

that Latham's dead, because I hate to imagine what sort of lecture he'd give me if he were still living. *Kenneth, stop trying to act like an Academy freshman who's desperate to impress a senior classmate. Kenneth, please remember why you chose to enter engineering, not security. Kenneth, please remind yourself every time you look in the mirror that you aren't Greg Jensen and you are not obligated to act like him...*

Of all the people who have died on *Galatea*, I miss James the most.

"Congratulations, Kenneth..." Ivan limps over to me; the dermal regenerator's sealed the cut I made over his eye, but he hasn't wiped away the blood. "Four ribs cracked. You're one hell of a body puncher."

"And you –" I snarl. "What's with all that hitting and holding? It wasn't supposed to be a wrestling match..." I spit back, a bloody gob of spit accidentally striking him in the face. I remember reading that was a custom of ancient earth bullfighters, spitting in the bull's face when they were wounded. It doesn't seem inappropriate now. "Sorry." I say.

"Don't be. In a fight, the nastier it gets, the worse I cheat. It's my nature." Hazard smiles. "No word from the Crysian?"

I could almost sob, except my face hurts too much. I guess if I can see the read-outs dance on the medical bay, I'll live. "Apparently, all we did was entertain the ship and help Dr. Bradley practice some of his basic patchwork techniques."

"Boxing is a very primitive sport that should have been banned centuries ago," the Doctor scolds the Captain. "You're lucky I didn't get into the spirit of the game, because I was half-tempted to use stitches on both of you instead of the regenerator."

"Now *that* sounds painful," I say. The bridge crew – all of whom were watching the fight, except Gbeji – are gathered at the Sickbay entrance, within listening distance of the medical bay. "Unfortunately Captain, it appears that the Crysian isn't concerned about anything that happens to me."

"Well, we still have forty-four hours to think of something else." Hazard says.

T'Doroth walks next to me and subtly brushes my arm with paired fingers. "Captain..." she says, "I believe the Lieutenant is mistaken. May I speak with the two of you in private?"

"Use my office," Bradley says, pointing to a small, sealed room that may as well be an enclosed cubicle. "Though I can't guarantee the *spook* didn't bug it."

Hazard helps me me out of the medical bay, and nearly has to drag me into the office, supporting me as I sit down. I finally take the time to unlace my bloody gloves. "Souvenir?" I say, asking Ivan if he wants them back.

"Save them for the rematch," Ivan goads.

"There will *never* be a rematch," I smile, letting them fall to the floor. Cumbersome things, designed to let you hit someone all day. "Kid Arabia has fought his last fight." I think that's the style of name they used in those old 20th Century movies, isn't it? T'Doroth shuts the door behind us, then seals the shutters to ensure our privacy.

"So what's your idea, Lieutenant?" Hazard asks.

"Captain, since my mind meld with the Lieutenant put me in contact with the Crysian, I have experienced an increased... attraction toward the Lieutenant. I believe that this feeling is a product of the Crysian's interference."

"I see." Hazard says. I can only guess at how many responses he's biting back.

"I suspect that sexual intercourse between the Lieutenant and myself might attract the Crysian's attention..."

“Hold it!” I object.

“I would be willing to participate in such an act, provided my privacy is protected.” T’Doroth states.

Ivan painfully props himself against a wall. “As a Captain, I’m not even allowed to comment on this, despite the potential benefit to the ship. However, speaking *solely* as someone who cares very deeply for both of you, I gotta wonder... You’re a Vulcan, and this is an area of intense privacy to you. As for, Kenneth, well, I think you have some intimacy issues. Why else would you be so close to a man like Gable, who constantly flaunts sexuality in its most vulgar and unappealing form?”

“You’ve had problems with relationships, too.” I say.

“I have problems with sapient life in general, Kenneth.” Ivan snaps back, probably savoring the memory of those rabbit punches he landed on me a few minutes ago. “But I’ll tell you what, I’ll weigh in on your relationship now, and I’ll give you both a free pass to critique my sex life later.”

“This is a day for really strange bargains,” I comment. “Go on.”

“Humans and Vulcans aren’t usually a good romantic match, but I’ve watched you. You two might definitely be one of the exceptions. On the other hand, if you go through with this, you’re going to be fast-forwarding through some very necessary stages of any successful relationship, and you are also sacrificing one of the most special moments of your lives for the good of the ship...” Ivan pauses, scrutinizes what he’s about to say for just the right words. “I just hope you don’t resent it later.”

“It is a price I am prepared to pay,” T’Doroth says. “Would it be so bad for you, Kenneth?”

I smile slightly. “The ‘gentleman’ in me wants to politely phrase something that means ‘yes’. But the truth is, every other part of me is screaming the word ‘no’ so loud that I can’t hear anything else.”

Hazard can’t suppress the smile; in fact, it’s one of the biggest grins I’ve ever seen on his face. “Let’s find the two of you some privacy,” he says, clapping us both on the shoulder.

Once Bradley finishes using the dermal regenerator on my face and implants a tooth replacement (how’s that for the beginning to a romantic evening?) I’m ready for action. T’Doroth and I find some empty quarters on Deck 3, previously occupied by a pair of now deceased lovers, so the bed’s big enough to accommodate us. We disrobe and apply sweet oils to our arousal zones – she has nerve clusters on her cheekbones and forehead that makes facial contact much more intimate for Vulcans than it is for humans. We discuss our cultures’ ideas of pleasure, keeping it as dispassionate as possible. I am, as always, the consummate engineer, viewing even sex as a simple interaction of systems. Apparently Vulcans are more difficult to bring to climax than humans, and the moment doesn’t last quite as long for them. T’Doroth wonders if this will make her more of a challenge.

Once I’m ready to proceed, I experiment with music. Spanish guitar best fits our shared taste, so we lie together while Segovia’s gentlest ballads serenade us. I crack open a bottle of non-fermented Andorian nectar – it’s the best taste I know that it isn’t alcohol, which neither of us is willing to touch. The oils that we dabbed on each other’s bodies, stirred by body heat, provide a plethora of rich senses and tastes for our initial sexual contact – Vulcan senses, much more aware than human, respond very strongly to that sort of stimulation. And we both respond. She

constantly strokes the hair on my chest, making playful swirls and patterns with her fingers, while I play with her ears, first with my fingers and then with my tongue.

As arousal grows, all sense of time is lost, and we begin to get more animalistic. We caress, stroke each other, trade shots of nectar between each kiss, which sweetens our breath and encourages us to prolong the intimacy. Then, everything happens. A curtain is drawn around the world; the only thing that matters is us. We couple, and we pleasure, and we take all that the other is willing to give, without hesitation or regret or restraint. And feeling her moment in my mind makes it all the more special. I've had sex before, but this makes those experiences feel like tainted mockeries.

***So this is the sensation you have long dreamt of, my Kenneth?*** T'Doroth moans as I lie on my back, breathing like I'd just climbed a mountain.

"It is." I recognize the voice, the intonation, and I turn to her. "I wanted to see you, but... I wish you hadn't have used her like this. You see, I... I really care for her – and this is only going to make things more complicated." I'm still looking at her face, though I don't recognize T'Doroth in it. "It would have been nice to get to this place on my own... actually... on *our* own."

***I feared I would never get a chance to know this. It seemed so important to you. Both of you.***

"That's probably true. It's just that this – well - this isn't sort of post-coital talk I was expecting."

***Then shall I leave you to my daughter, and bid you one final farewell... I shall leave you in love, in the hope that it endures.***

"Don't!" I shout. I'd almost forgotten what it was I need to say. "I need... we need... your help one final time. An enemy is approaching *Galatea*. Without your help, we're going to die. You do remember what death is, don't you?"

***I do. And you are certain that death is coming for you?***

"Look, I suppose we could resist... that we could attempt to trick it... but realistically, the result will be the same. It's much bigger than us, and it's coming after us, and it's not going to give up until we've been 'pacified'."

There's a long pause. ***Kenneth, recently I felt the Shining Ones, the Organians, occupy your thoughts. As I grew on this world, I became curious, so I embraced the star and bent my mind to seek them. Eventually I found them. We spoke long together.***

"Starfleet is going to love hearing about this..." I mutter.

***Kenneth, there is much you do not know. There is also much your enemy does not know. The sadness of the Organians dwarfs any emotion I have ever felt, even the pain of my confinement is pale in the face of their grief. What they are doing now violates everything that is holy to them. They have darkened themselves forever.***

"But why do they do it?" I ask. I almost feel like screaming it.

The Crysian says nothing, but I sense such a palpable fear that my thoughts abandon my body, and I briefly share Nagura's mind as she quakes in a padded cell on Elba II.

***Show me that you love peace, Kenneth, and if it becomes necessary, I will help you in your battle. But you must prove that you have not lost your way.*** the Crysian says. ***I can no longer help you without condition.***

"But how will we show you?" I ask. "What if I abandon my ship, leave me crew for you?"

***It is a shared test, my Kenneth, for you and those who share your life. A sacrifice may be required, but I would not ask to steal your freedom. I have stolen a precious moment from my***

*daughter. I now know the injury I have done her - I will not hurt one of your kind again. But pass or fail the test, I will always love you, Kenneth Said, though our paths become lost in the dance of time and cosmos.*

And then she's gone. I'll probably never hear her again. T'Doroth takes a deep breath, and rises to a seated position.

"T'Doroth..." I say, touching her hand. Her eyes, brown as a Vulcan desert, focus on me and I try to calm the sudden panic of her mind. She sees that I'm upset as well, and she responds to comfort me. Our thoughts nestle together until we've reached a shared tranquility, and then our bodies do the same. And that moment, as we touch each other gently, and do not hide even a Vulcan smile, that's when I realize that we're going to be together for the rest of our days. It's the happiest moment of my life.

Who can rest on this ship? There's always "one more job" to be done in engineering, and this time it's making sure that our weeks of hard work trying to get our PPDs functioning without initiating an accidental plasma torpedo launch doesn't fall by the wayside. This is the last major system glitch we haven't managed to hang with our juryrigging, but T'Doroth, the engineering staff, and I have spent an awful lot of work-hours trying to get it operational. Eighteen hours before they're in range, we head to a small comet on the outskirts of the system to test our labors.

"Do you think it'll work?" I ask T'Doroth. She fires the weapon, and a cascading wave of plasma suddenly envelops the rock from all sides and crushes it into sub-atomic particles, except for a small pocket of ice, which breaks off and shoots away in a spectacular geyser when the plasma ignites a pocket of trapped gasses. It's one of space's hidden surprises, like us.

"Yes," T'Doroth answers. "It works. Barring catastrophe, the PPD should function for at least thirty thousand firings."

"Okay, we've got twenty-six hours until the ISC-CA shows." Hazard says. "The Crysian wants us to demonstrate our peaceful intent. Does anyone have any idea how we can accomplish this?"

"I definitely believe we should rule out surrender," Lars says.

"After seeing the last six ISC propaganda reports, I'm inclined to agree," Ivan says, turning in the con to see Gbeji holding up her hand. "Go ahead, Ensign."

"Suppose we decide that we're not going to fight?" she suggests. "Suppose we were to ask the Crysian to make us invisible to the ISC's sensors, and to make our hull watertight, so we could hide under the water, out of sight of the ISC? The CA comes in, scans for awhile, doesn't find anything, and eventually it leaves." Gbeji almost expects everyone on the bridge to object, but they don't. "Once we're out of its sensor range, we change our transponder code to the Friendship, circle around the sector to give us a less suspicious approach, then head for Desskyie."

"I foresee two problems," I say. "First, it requires us to clear a plan with the Crysian *before* we've met her conditions and demonstrated our peaceful intent. Second, cowardice and peacefulness are two different things. A coward who runs away from a fight when they've got a disadvantage will fight when they have the advantage. That's not peaceful at all. A peaceful man is *less* likely to fight when the odds are in his favor, because fighting's a last resort."

"I doubt the Crysian understands the difference," Lars says. "The Organians certainly don't."

“By the way, *Galatea*’s hull is watertight,” I note. “Though we’re not built to operate in water – the Rovillians have a few fully amphibious starships, but they’re so esoteric they’re not even ISC standard.”

“The Federation prefers to use customized shuttlecraft for water ops,” Lars says. “But because they primarily serve exploratory goals, they’ve been put so far down on the production list that I doubt any have been produced since the second year of the General War. They aren’t combat effective.” Until we have to attack the first underwater Rovillian base, then we’ll see how loud Starfleet screams.

“I’d be happy with *one* shuttlecraft we could juryrig into a wild weasel. Kenneth, any chance we can convert an escape pod?”

“If it were that easy, everyone would do that. And the first time that people lost their lives because too many escape pods had been converted into impromptu defensive systems, the press would photon torpedo us.” I note. I can tell by the heaviness of the sigh that Ivan is kicking himself for even suggesting it. Lifepods are the one system that no Captain is allowed to sacrifice.

And of course, if we operate our shields in water, we’d fry every system on this ship.” Hazard notes. “Even so, barring the Crysian’s help, I can’t help but think using the water is the best trick we’ve got. If we stay low to the water, and sink before they use their weapons...”

“It would help us against phasers, provided we could quickly attain a depth of two to three kilometers,” T’Doroth tells him something he probably already knows – Vulcans do that a lot. “But we should be wary of going below eight kilometers – even duranium has its limits. Also, a single plasma torpedo striking the water would have devastating effects.”

“Extreme times sometimes call for extreme measures,” I say.

“Which will probably make us all extremely dead.” Lars counters. He wouldn’t be quite so vocal if I hadn’t agreed to be his *glika*.”

“Okay!” Ivan says. “We’re approaching the end of the shift, and there’s no reason why we need to flog ourselves any further. Let’s get some quality sleep, and we’ll regroup...”

I don’t go to my quarters immediately – I have other places to visit. Seven hours later, I finally stumble into my quarters, ready to change into a fresh uniform. Francis suddenly crawls out of bed and intercepts me. “Working late again?” he scolds, and then he senses that I’m freshly showered, and I can’t hide the happiness in my mind. “Oh...” he says, suddenly realizing where I’ve been. Then the smile appears on his face, and I don’t think he could be happier even if he was the one having a romantic tryst. “Oh!”

“It’s supposed to be a secret.” I say. I knew I couldn’t keep it from him for long – he’s got a radar for detecting relationships.

“Why?”

“Because if word should somehow get back to Vulcan, things could get complicated.” I say. “She’s not from a ‘noble’ family, so I don’t have to worry about arranged marriages, but some Vulcans in high places still have problems with human/Vulcan relationships. Not a surprise, given how difficult it is to interlace human and Vulcan genetics.”

“You’re talking about children?” Francis wonders. “You want to inflict little Kenneths on a helpless galaxy?”

“T’Doroth is very practical. She wants me to be aware of all the difficulties before we proceed with the relationship. And now I know, so we’re proceeding.” I pause for a moment, adjust the

uniform slightly, make sure the hair is nicely geled. I wonder if I should start wearing a beard? She seems to like body hair. “How would you feel about attending a wedding on Vulcan?”

“I believe the whole idea of matrimony is a scandalous abuse of sapient rights,” Francis retorts. I shoot him yet another nasty look that’s designed to be the equivalent of a phaser set to “total matter conversion”. “And I would love to come to Vulcan with you and watch you destroy your life in the happiest way imaginable.”

“And people call me a sap.” I smile, and we embrace fiercely. “We’ve talked about changing crew accommodations and living together, but I’m not sure I want to leave you alone.”

“Kenneth...”

“Francis, I remember how Pratt died. I remember what I was tempted to do to myself when I was trapped in the hospital back on Earth. And there have been times when I know you’ve felt the same way, I’ve felt it in you.” Let’s face it, I *know* why Francis acts as crazy as he does – it’s his equivalent of a poker face. “We don’t have to talk about it, but I want you to know...”

“Hey, do you think I’m stupid?” Francis says, letting go of the grip. “Okay, bad question.”

“Of course I don’t.” I say.

“You’re not the only one who’s thought about life changes: where to go, what to do, why going back to Vespera and collecting soot isn’t the best thing I could do...”

“Francis, I think all you need to do is expend a little more effort, and most of *Galatea* will accept you. You need to get to know them a little more.” I say. “You *can* be happy in Starfleet.”

“In peacetime, maybe, when things get a little less military,” Francis says. “Of course the smart plan would be to leech off you for the rest of my life by making you feel guilty about scooping me off Vespera,” Francis chuckle. “I don’t know what I’ll do. I’m better at analysis than planning. I figure that maybe my path will cross with Greg’s again, and we’ll get together, steal an Orion ship, then wander the galaxy as a pair of mercenaries with a heart of gold. We’ll help the people that the law is unwilling or unable to help, and since Jensen can only pine away wistfully for our very grateful charges, I’ll get all his cast-offs.”

Now that’s typical Francis; funny, sick, and obscene, all at the same time. “Find yourself a new fantasy, Francis.” I smirk.

“I tried. The one I’ve got beats being dead or alone,” Francis says sadly. “For now I’ll just have to take comfort in wondering what you’ll look like in Vulcan garb and whether anyone will actually challenge you to combat at your wedding.”

Combat? “What on Vulcan are you talking about?”

“Something about Vulcan weddings a monk from Shikaar mentioned to me a few months ago on Vespera. Ask your bride-to-be about the *very* gory details.” Francis smiles. He has to be joking, right?

It’s probably a mistake for me to leave Francis with the impression that we’re actually engaged; I was going to wait until the mission’s over (or I’d leave it in the hands of fate and wait until we pass the most beautiful celestial phenomena I’ve ever seen, something that even a Vulcan would have to appreciate. It’s going to be nice to have a wife who has *standards*).

After spending a few hours tinkering with systems in engineering and brainstorming a way to use the tractors to grab water and shape it into an impromptu shield (which unfortunately, won’t work unless we had an additional sixty or so hours to improvise a scatterspray tractor array – something to add to the evergrowing list of things I want to add to the starship design of my dreams, along with the charge-stream tachyon transporters I’ve always to build) I make my way

back to the bridge, where Ivan looks like he didn't get enough sleep. Captains never take their own advice – I should know, I used to be one of them. “What's the status?”

“Fourteen hours until we intercept,” Hazard says. “Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum...” The man definitely needs sleep. “So how do we appear more peaceful?”

“The trouble is, Ivan, that we *aren't* here for a peaceful purpose,” I say. “We're here on a mission of war. Any offer of peace is a lie, Ivan, unless we're willing to change the mission specs.”

“The Federation is counting on us to visibly damage the ISC.” Lars notes.

“But even if we succeed, will the Concordium even know what we did?” Ivan points out. “Will our attack be just explained away as some freak accident? We've seen the ISC propaganda machine in action. The first casualty in war is the truth, and that seems to apply to *peace* in the ISC as well. All we're really doing is giving the people back home something to cheer about.”

“The ISC races have been indoctrinated for centuries,” Lars points out. “They'll believe whatever they're told.”

“That's too pessimistic even for my tastes.” I reply in full *glika* mode. “Maybe we're only going to make 1% of their population sit up and take notice. But even a small victory is still a victory. And sapients are often smarter than we give them credit. We just need to find a way to get the attention of as many citizens of the Concordium as possible, and introduce a seed of truth.”

“Surak said that the seed of truth always sprouts a tree of peace,” T'Doroth says. I really need to study Surak – he may have been the father of Vulcan logic, but there also seemed to have been some poetry in his soul.

“Which eventually gets chopped down by soldiers, so it can be used to fuel the fires of war...” Lars counters.

“But rarely before it gets a chance to spread its seed,” I say, enjoying the fact that Lars clearly is uncomfortable with fighting more than one rhetorical opponent.

“Enough with with the dueling metaphors.” Ivan sighs. “There's one other problem with the peaceful approach – after seeing these bastards win 80% of their engagements against the Federation and systematically brainwash who's anyone unlucky enough to survive, I want to destroy them every chance I get. We broke our backs fighting a ten year long General War that we didn't want in the first place, we suffered in ways that these prigs have never imagined possible, and then - when we're finally getting our house in order - they come in like some galactic nanny, basically saying everyone in the quadrant is a spoilt child who's equally guilty of wrongdoing.”

“Equally guilty...” Lars growls. “They're spitting on us, our dead, and the families of our dead who have to live the rest of their lives without their loved ones.”

“Exactly,” Ivan says. “To hell with them. Why the hell should I want peace with them?”

It's hard to really answer a rant of that intensity. “Perhaps...” I finally work up the courage to speculate. “We need to tell them that. They said back at the Academy that good diplomacy always starts with the truth.”

“And then the lies grow from there,” Lars adds.

Ivan sits still for a moment, in pose that would do Rodan proud, then sighs deeply. “You know those times when a Captain has to spend a few hours by himself so he can torture himself over the big issues?” I nod. He walks toward his ready room. “Mr. Said, you've got the con.”



I give Ivan a slap on the back as he leaves the bridge. It's not good bridge etiquette, but it seems appropriate right now. As the fallout over the tractor beam incident demonstrates, *Galatea* isn't just a crew anymore, we're a family. I guess, hiding so deep behind enemy lines, having endured such heavy losses, it would be hard for any persons of character not to develop such a strong bond. Even so, something about this ship feels very special to me.

"A credit for your thoughts, Kenneth," Francis asks me as I log into the con.

"This is just an odd moment for me," I say. I don't know if I need to explain myself any further; this is the first time I've been trusted with command since I was nearly stripped of my commission over the tractor beam incident. This feels strange, but I've probably never been more ready for command. If we die today, I'll die with more of my demons buried than at any other point in my life. "Mr. T'Doroth, move *Galatea* so that the planet's horizon is between us and the CA. The atmosphere bend may confuse their sensors."

"Aye sir." T'Doroth says.

Ivan takes longer than expected to return. With nine hours remaining until the CA arrives, I check the ready room and discover that he's sleeping, head slumped in his arms as he slouches against the table. It's best not to disturb him.

"Kenneth, we've got an incoming probe," Francis suddenly turns my attention back to the starscape. "Seventy seconds until we're in probing range."

It's certainly launching it from a distance. "Red alert," I declare. "Mr. Gable, lower shields and set maximum to ECM. Mr. T'Doroth, bring thrusters on-line, and take us down underwater to a depth of six kilometers."

The viewscreen begins to dip to show a view of Androthaxis's ocean. "Shouldn't we destroy the probe before it comes into range?" Lars asks.

"Peaceful intentions, Mr. Lars," I say.

The Captain wakes up in the middle of the situation, and although I suspect he'd prefer to blow up the probe, he agrees to support my call. The probe passes overhead and shoots past us on a course that will probably take it into the Androthaxian sun. "Wow. An ECM caccoon formed around it when it passed. I think the ol' gal hasn't abandoned us yet. Though she's not performing any of her usual augmentations."

"Crisis averted. Okay Kenneth, get out of my chair or I'll put you back in Sickbay," Ivan smiles. If any of this stuff ever got back to Starfleet, we'd be in *so* much trouble... "How long until they get here?"

"Eight hours, fifty-one minutes," Francis informs him.

"We're still a few hours out of jamming range. Stand down to yellow alert. Lars, I'd like you to conduct security drills. Odds are pretty high that we'll have some unexpected guests soon. Kenneth, how'd you like to do some judo before we go into battle?"

"Actually, why don't you try Francis on for size?" I suggest. "I'm still pretty beat up, and a new opponent would probably do you some good." Sometimes you do need to push your friends; Francis needs more diversions, and it'd do Ivan some good to expand his inner circle. Of course, Ivan likes to keep his judo to his closest friends, but... although Ivan looks hard at me, the glance isn't remotely resentful; it's more the look of someone saying "sure, I'll do you a favor, no problem."

"Okay Mr. Gable, it'll be a battle of the science officers, if you're ready to meet the challenge," Ivan says. "You will have to wear a gi, though."

"If I win, can we do naked judo in the return bout?" Francis asks.

“No.” Ivan declares in a sudden, clipped tone, while the rest of the bridge shudders.

So once again we play the waiting game. We dodge two more probe attempts in the next three hours, while the crew runs everything from boarding party to hull breach to plasma fire drills. A little over four hours later, Francis and Ivan return. I can sense from Francis’s mind that they’d spent more time talking than training. Francis’s mind isn’t in an alcohol haze (and Ivan doesn’t have anything on his breath when he takes the con) but at least a little drinking had been taking place. I guess a couple of toasts before the battle won’t hurt.

“Four hours, thirty-one minutes to extreme weapons range, Captain.” I say, once again returning to my station.

“It’s time to have a chat,” Ivan says. “Hail them, Mr. Gable.

Francis sends a signal. It takes several seconds to reach them – they’re still a ways away, at high warp. “*Al’traes* Shommho is willing to talk. Onscreen.”

The viewscreen lights up, showing a ruddy skinned Q’Naabian, one of the ISC’s so-called “crater-faces”, dangling in the center of his bridge, suspended like a spider. On a catwalk behind him, four identical Veltresssai stand at attention, hands behind their backs. People at other stations in the bridge are rising out of their chairs, scrambling to duplicate the pose. Judging from the number of platforms, ladders, and non-angled workstations, I’d conclude that the bridge layout is very different than the one on *Lasting Peace*, obviously built for people used to working on land, not water.

“*Galatea*, you have violated Concordium space. We will not tolerate the intrusion.”

“ISC Cruiser, the Federation does not recognize your internal borders. You have made no effort to negotiate borders with the Federation.”

“Our diplomats have no reason to negotiate with a minor entity whose border is not adjacent with our own,” the Captain says.

“Then what are you doing in *our* space?” Ivan says. “There’s an old human saying: ‘do unto others as you would have others do unto you’. If you don’t like us being washed into your space by the tide, then maybe you should reconsider your own actions.”

“We have been invited by one of your quadrant’s powers, and we are there at their behalf.”

“Fine!” Ivan says. “I’m sure the Federation would be willing to grant you a corridor to Organia as part of the peace treaty. On the other hand, the Organians are hardly the governing race in the quadrant and they don’t have the authority to give you *carte blanche* to do as you please in our space.”

“The Organians are the most advanced culture – the only truly advanced culture we’ve encountered from your quadrant – therefore we’ve chosen to recognize them and only them.” You know, Lars has a point about diplomacy.

“And how do you decide who is advanced and who isn’t?” Ivan says, and then he holds up his hand. “You don’t need to answer that. Let’s face facts, you’re going to believe whatever you have to believe to justify your invasion and your disrespect for our culture. You say that you want peace, but you haven’t the slightest idea how to resolve a real conflict.”

“We have studied the history of your species. Every time you come on the verge of enlightenment, you throw yourself into chaos. You get into a conflict, and either you lose and become so thirsty for vengeance that you descend into savagery, or you triumph and you become addicted to reliving the glories of the past.” The *al’traes* seems to think it’s a winning argument.

“You might be right,” Ivan says. “And if you didn’t act like such an arrogant son of a bitch, we might even listen to you and look to you as a mentor. The thing is... peace isn’t just the lack

of war or the fear of pain. It's respect for a culture and a desire to treat them as equals. Without respect, you don't make peace, you make truces. But a truce is often a start, so let's make one."

"You harbor the war criminal Kenneth Said. Surrender him, and I will consider your truce," the Q'Naabian states.

"May I ask what crimes he's allegedly committed?" Ivan asks, beginning to lose his temper.

"His technical experiments to develop new weapons of war are known to us," the *al'traes* states. "And he corrupted a trans-sapient being and transformed her into a weapon of mass warfare. That crime is much graver than any we have prosecuted in centuries. He is the greatest criminal in your entire quadrant. Peace cannot be bartered until he is in our hands."

"Wow." Francis whispers. "You've hit the James T. Kirk level of making enemies and you're barely a Lieutenant!"

"I know," I whisper back.

"The Romulans informed us that you had infiltrated our space, ready to unleash a weapon on our homeland," the *al'traes* snaps, and I'm suddenly overwhelmed by the desire to meet Tomarand again, preferably with a phaser in my hand. "Did you think we would allow that? How dare you even consider the idea!"

"I think we were inspired by numerous ISC attacks on our worlds, the loss of thousands of our comrades, the continual propaganda footage showing our friends being transformed into telepathic zombies, and the utter arrogance, self-righteousness, and self-delusion of your peoples." Ivan says. "I'm getting sick just talking to you. I had heard that Q'Naabians were an intelligent species, curious about the universe, always asking questions. I don't see that in you. I'm just hearing regurgitated Meskeen propaganda, and not particularly well stated propaganda at that. So I'm giving you a choice – if you seriously want to talk about truce conditions, let's do it. But if you want me to surrender one of the finest people I've ever known, a man whose friendship is one of the best things to have happened to me in years, because you've accepted propaganda without question or because you're playing some political game... well, don't delude yourself. I stand upon a moral mountain, and compared to me, you're in the abyss. And if you think you can crawl your way up to my level because you outgun me, guess again. I'll kick you off and send you to hell."

The transmission ends, and although only a few minutes have passed, the CA seems hours closer. "Sir, the shields are being reinforced," Francis reports. "By 422%! Weapons are showing a similar increase."

"Unfortunately, we're going to need every percentage point against that heavy cruiser," Ivan says. He pushes a button on the comm. "Battlestations," he declares.

According to Lars, a soldier isn't just someone who knows how to fire a weapon, or who's brave in battle; a soldier is someone who knows how to identify their target, knows when to take their shot, and makes sure that shot counts. Ivan called for battlestations a lot earlier than I would have done, but the long wait gives everyone a chance to settle their nerves. We've been through this before on *Galatea* as well as on other ships. We may be young, but we're veterans and battle no longer makes us skittish or reckless. There's no peace quite like the peace that can be found within the heart of a hardened soldier who sees his enemy walk over the horizon, and yet calmly waits for him to get into the perfect killing zone.

*Shommho's Folly*, as we've nicknamed our nameless enemy, finally comes into range. As soon as we're in weapons range, she opens fire on us with a pair of Phaser-1s. Even at long

range, the barrage would normally be devastating but, thanks to the Crysian, this discharge soaks into our shields and barely dents them.

“Captain, our shield recharge rate is much higher than normal.” I note. That’s probably even more important than the strength of our shields, especially against a single ship. The Crysian has certainly gotten stronger since we let her rest on Androthaxis.

“Let’s stay close enough to the planet to make things easier for the Crysian,” Ivan says. “And hold fire until they’ve reached a distance of seven clicks.”

“Aye sir,” T’Doroth affirms.

Now the ISC CA looms closer, a bird of menace whose magnified wings fill the viewscreen. At twelve clicks, two churning balls of plasma hurtle from the ship’s forward ports, making a beeline for our forward shield.

“Rotate our shield facing, Mr. T’Doroth,” Hazard calmly instructs. It’s a standard tactic - try to take each plasma torp on a different shield. Unfortunately, it requires some very skilled piloting to get the timing right, and what would have been routine for Kolloos isn’t routine for anyone else. Despite the Vulcan’s valiant effort, both plasmas impact against our forward shield.

“Forward shield strength down to 137%.” I report. “I’m running an ionic flare along our shields to make the damage look worse than it actually was.”

“Don’t bother Lieutenant,” Ivan says. “At this range, they’re not going to mistake our specs.”

“Ten clicks,” T’Doroth announces.

“Come to papa, you black-hearted son of a bitch,” Ivan says. I guess Ivan likes to vent in the heart of combat. I prefer a cooler, steadier approach, but I haven’t been on the bridge during *that* many fights, and this *is* Ivan’s first time in the big chair during a firefight. I can forgive him, particularly if he apologizes over the wreckage of an ISC cruiser.

“Eight clicks.”

“Firing sequence Hazard-1, now!” Ivan orders, a little sooner than we expected. T’Doroth initiates the attack, and fires one of *Galatea’s* phaser-1s into the ISC’s forward shield, then hits with the second. It’s not quite equivalent to the punch of a starbase phaser, but no one’s complaining here. The shield vaporizes on the second hit, which also scorches the hull without quite breaching it. The plasma torpedo hit, on the other hand, produces a much more spectacular and even more satisfying result.

“Hull breaches on five decks, Captain.” Francis reports, squinting through the science station’s deep scan window.

“We’ve hurt her, but she’s far from finished.” Ivan leans forward in that singularly Captain’s pose and points at the cruiser as though he could actually touch it through the viewscreen. “It’s going to fire its rear plasma. Take it on a starboard shield, then bring us around for another shot.”

“She’s discharging four shuttlecraft,” Francis notes. “One of them is staying next to the ship, the others are scattering.”

“Wild weasel. So much for our plasma torpedoes,” Ivan curses. “Any idea where the other three shuttles went?”

“Down to the planet, I’d guess,” Francis shrugs.

“It’s probably evacuating non-comms,” Lars says. That theory makes sense, especially since the ISC actually allows families to live onboard their starships, at least the ones they haven’t assigned to our quadrant and the war. (A little fact I picked up in the computers aboard *The Lasting Peace*). Even so, something doesn’t feel right about the move.

"Keep an eye out for those shuttles," I instruct Francis. Ivan doesn't countermand the order. It's good when the command team's on the same page.

The ISC cruiser turns around, a slow aching maneuver for a ship that's normally quite nimble for its size, discharging a plasma torpedo and another pair of phaser-1s. The phaser-1 cuts through the remnants of forward shield, and I can tell from Francis's frustrated squint that our sensors are glitching. A look at the engineering board confirms it, and then a hull breach warning sounds.

"They cut through a bulkhead on Deck 4," Lars says. "Exposing two unoccupied crew quarters to space. No casualties reported."

Next it's the plasma torpedo's turn to connect, striking our damaged starboard shield, reducing it to 112% normal strength. That may sound impressive, but the basic shielding on a heavy destroyer like *Galatea* isn't particularly strong.

"Fire our PPD," Hazard orders. Time for the acid test. I cross my fingers when T'Doroth hits the firing control, and a surge of cascading plasma waves envelope the ISC-CA and rock it hard. The cruiser fires a rear mounted phaser-3 that obliterates our forward shield and cuts into one of our Deck 6 cargo bays.

"Disengage!" Hazard says. "Veer away on a course 321 Mark 12. We'll swing around again on a course that will protect our forward and starboard shields and give them time to regenerate..."

"Aye sir," T'Doroth says, and we can almost feel the ship changing course. But things don't quite go as we planned.

"Transporter mine materializing dead ahead!" Gable warns us. That's when we spot the tell-tale sign of a transporter signal, materializing a mine about two clicks in our path.

"Hard to starboard!" Ivan instructs, and we nimbly skirt around the edge of the explosion. It rocks us, scratching our port shield, but it's nowhere near as bad as it would have been had it connected directly with our almost non-existent forward shield. Unfortunately, a second transporter mine suddenly appears in our path, forcing us to continue to veer starboard. As we're in mid-turn, our opponent attempts their own desperate gambit, a high energy turn that sets her three clicks on our bow. There was a good chance that the move would drain her energy's power reserves, but it doesn't. Damn. The cruiser launches another plasma torp into our rear shield, then follows it with one of their recharged Phaser-1s. ISC technology is too damn reliable.

"Rear shield reduced to 105%," I report.

"Increase velocity by 10%. Release a mine when we've achieved five clicks separation." Ivan instructs. "They've got a stomach for a fight, I'll give them that."

Another Phaser-1 shot reduces our rear shield to 62%... and then they fire their own PPDs, a pair of them. I didn't think this class of heavy cruiser had two forward facing PPDs. All of *Galatea's* shields take a serious pounding; our forward shield, which had managed to regenerate to 40% of its normal strength, collapses again.

"Hull breaches on Decks 3 and 4." Lars reports. "But we're lucky. They've only hit evacuated sections so far."

"About time we had some luck on this ship," Hazard snaps.

"Captain," T'Doroth says. "The ISC cruiser is veering away. It may be attempting to get some range so its PPDs will be more effective. They will negate our recharge advantage."

"No, we've beaten them," Hazard says confidently. "They've got to realize how badly we've hurt them. Hail them, Mr. Gable. Let's give them one chance to surrender."

Francis tries to hail them, receives a brief audio-only message, and shrugs. "Well, now I know the Q'Naabian phrase for 'Go to Hell'."

"Sir," T'Doroth notes, with a catch in her voice that is the equivalent of a Vulcan scream.

"The enemy vessel has changed course."

"It's running away?" Hazard wonders.

"No," T'Doroth answers. "It's heading straight for Androthaxis Wash."

"What?" Ivan wonders.

"Course confirmed," T'Doroth reports. "It will reach the outer atmosphere in twenty-six seconds."

"Captain, the cruiser is overloading its forward plasma torpedo..." Francis adds. "But it can't make an attack run against us on that course..."

"Oh... no..." I say, suddenly realizing where those shuttles had gone and what the cruiser's about to attack. "The Crysian..."

"Maximum impulse, T'Doroth!" Ivan says. "Close the gap now!"

Five seconds passes with a slowness that steals my breath. We rapidly catch up to the ISC-CA and fire our forward Phaser-1s into its stern. Weakened by our PPD, the second shot cuts into the port nacelle, and the cruiser begins to vent plasma.

"They've got a plasma fire in main engineering," Francis reports.

"We're not going to make it, sir." T'Doroth states.

"Raise them!" Hazard shouts. "Now!"

But the heavy cruiser, hellbent on killing, continues to ignore us. Francis looks directly at me, and in our minds, he does the equivalent of holding my hand. "Forward plasma torpedo has been fired," he says.

Another globe of green energy shoots out of the cruiser, just as Androthaxis begins to loom in front of both ships. It would be insane to attempt to come between that rock and that hard place – and it's a good thing I'm not in command right now, because I'd do it. T'Doroth makes a quick course change and *Galatea* accelerates, overshoots the planet, and comes around again on an attack vector.

But the damage has been done. I can only imagine what happens when the torpedo strikes the surface. The Crysian, stationed ten kilometers beneath the waters, received my telepathic warning, and had already begun to dive. She had reached a depth of fourteen kilometers when the plasma torpedo detonates, eight kilometers above the ocean. It generates an explosion that vaporizes both the atmosphere and the ocean in approximately a one hundred and thirty kilometer radius. The ocean does provide a buffer, but a sizable chunk of the planet suddenly ceases to exist, including the top ten kilometers of ocean around the blast radius. It's the heat that kills the Crysian; an explosion that reaches a temperature of approximately six million degrees Kelvin for a fraction of a second. The planet's oceans boil, instantly peeling away approximately 8% of the Wash's watery mass, converting it to steam. The remaining ocean floods in to fill the gap created when the waters vanished, giving birth to the greatest storm that Androthaxis Wash has known since it was created in the collision of comets. A world dies. I guess that's a form of Pacification.

Ivan looks at me with a shocked expression. Does it mirror my own? "We're rapidly losing power on the augmentation," someone says – I have no idea who's saying that, because even though the words are coming out of my mouth, and it's my voice, and there's no telepathic influence on me, it can't possibly be my voice. Maybe the hemispheres of my brain have become

disconnected, and the soulless machine part of my brain has taken control of my body – they can bury the rest of me after the fight.

“Let’s use it while we’ve still got it. T’Doroth, continue to target its engines.”

“Incoming Plasma!”

“Evasive maneuvers!”

Voices take on an echoing discordant tone, artlessly surreal. And have you ever noticed that whenever you really need to order evasive maneuvers, they never seem to work? The torpedo strikes us on the port shield – our strongest – reducing it to about 10% strength. We decelerate to put us again on their rear shield, then we catch her with a Phaser-3 strike that slices into the cruiser's engineering section. Part of me actually feels sorry for them, fellow engineers, brothers of grease and circuit. But no, I'm not really sorry, it's a sociopath's imitation of regret. All I am is numb. Yet somehow, I continue to function, in the long seconds that follows the death of gods.

“We’re being hailed.” Francis announces.

“Onscreen.” Jackal of a methane breather, what words are spittle enough for your cragged, broken face? Happily, Ivan does his best to find them.

“Congratulations Captain, you just committed genocide,” my Captain says, channeling the rage I can't express, the rage I'm also feeling from both Francis and T’Doroth. At least we still have that, the empathic link. “I couldn’t have arranged a more effective demonstration of your peacekeeping skills if I tried. Bravo.”

“Don’t you dare turn this into a moral discussion,” the Q’Naabian hisses. “You’re the savages who invaded *our* space. You brought her here. Now, you no longer have your advantage, and we *will* make short work of you. Of course, if you agree to confess to your crimes, and surrender...”

No. Their Captain seriously underestimates what we’ve done to his ship. “There’s no surrender left in us, *al'traes*. Maybe we’ll just burn. More than likely though, you will.” Ivan cuts the channel before they can respond. “T’Doroth, come around to the cruiser’s flank. We’ll match her speed and concentrate our fire on her rear plasma tube. Sooner or later, we’ve got to take out that son of a bitch.”

"Aye sir." Even T’Doroth's feeling the loss of the Crysian, but she’s putting it aside for now. We swing around in a wide arc, catching the cruiser limping. It fires a meek phaser-3 at us, but our side mounted phaser-1s rip into the leviathan’s flank, opening new wounds above its engineering deck, and creating another plasma leak. The ISC catches us starboard with another weak phaser-3, but we respond with a plasma torpedo. It would have been a beautiful, fatal thing, except for the wild weasel that protects it, and directs it off course.

“The cruiser is launching more mines.” T’Doroth tells us.

“Take us around, port shield...” Ivan instructs. T’Doroth lifts an eyebrow: that’ll expose our more vulnerable starboard shield to the explosives. “Do it.”

“Aye sir.” The order is confirmed. In the middle of a fight, you need to know that.

The mine detonates all too close to us – *Galatea* rocks hard, and for a moment the inertial compensators glitch and lean us at an angle of at least thirty degrees. That sends me out of my stupor, and I grab the console to keep from falling. Sparks fly out of the science station, and Francis clings desperately to the console, probably praying to his corrupt Vesperan gods that the console isn’t going to ionize and electrocute him. If it weren’t for the optic-based ISC subsystems that are linked to our consoles, the entire bridge would probably be in flames.

“Kill that shuttle!” Hazard shouts. Now I understand why he took us port side – it’s the quickest route to the wild weasel. Unfortunately, our Phaser-1s are still recharging, and our

single working Phaser-3 isn't good enough to remove a shuttlecraft in one shot. Meanwhile, as we're distracted by the shuttle, the CA somehow finds energy for a burst of speed; she accelerates and begins another turn. Everyone knows what it's trying to do – if we take one more hit with its PPDs, we'll be helpless. Even if the cruiser doesn't destroy us, its next strike will weaken our shields to the point that we may as well gather fruit and flowers to present to the inevitable boarding parties. Even as badly damaged as their ship may be, the ISC Pacification teams on a heavy cruiser still outnumber our entire crew by a 3:1 margin. We need to cut off the head of the serpent, now.

"Ready plasmas, Mr. T'Doroth." Ivan instructs after a few moments in the Captain's pose. "Mr. Said, I need you to transport a mine between the shuttle and the main ship. Once we've separated the master from its lickspittle, we'll feed them some plasma."

It's my shot, even with computer guidance. I consider the vectors of each vessel, and I decide to place it slightly under the path of the shuttle; whenever I've piloted shuttlecraft, I always found it harder to recover from an upward attitude adjustment. "Mine ready."

"Transport it... now."

"Transport initiated." I smile.

The mine materializes slightly ahead of where I wanted it to appear, but I'm glad I didn't try to futz my calculation and allow the perfect to become the enemy of the good. The wild weasel lurches upward in a frantic attempt to avoid its dance with death, but the explosion is timed almost perfectly. The detonation catches it squarely on its undercarriage – and after taking the earlier Phaser-3 shot, that's enough to disable it. Now the cruiser's primary defense against our plasma torpedoes is gone.

"Now, T'Doroth!" Ivan barks.

The only ship in the history of the Federation ever to fire a plasma torpedo unleashes its final strike – vicarious revenge for every Starfleeter who's ever died at the hands of that terrible weapon, including too many of my old mates on *Ark Royal*. The torpedo catches the ISC ship in the center of its stern just as she's firing her PPD. The PPD hits us hard, but T'Doroth has time to unleash one final Phaser-1 shot before she's knocked flying from her chair by an explosion. But she does her job, and more. The plasma torpedo sheers one of the ISC ship's nacelles, and we get to watch it blow. When the Phaser-1 hits, that's followed by a much larger, and much more satisfying explosion. Fight's over.

Bridge lights are down. Main power is out. I quickly make sure the emergency power is being properly routed to shields and life support. Without the beeping and hum of the instruments – and with everyone holding their breath – I've never heard *Galatea's* bridge so silent. All eyes are on the Captain, who's bathing in his own sweat. He wipes his brow with his sleeve.

"Lars, I'll need a casualty report as soon as possible," he says. The big Efrosian nods.

"Kenneth, I need you to get to engineering and give me a systems update."

"Sure," the part of me that can still talk is surprisingly calm. "And congratulations, Captain. You did it."

The ship turns out to be in better shape than anyone suspected. Five people were injured; one critically (poor Ensign Rigney becomes the latest redshirt to honor the pedigree of that department), but we could have been in a lot worse shape. Initial repairs should take about eighteen hours – our engines sustained minor damage; and although communications and sensors



took a serious beating, we can probably repair those along the way during the first week. As long as our transponder signal is a message of *Friendship*, we're good to go.

Later that day, Francis reports one unexpected bit of good news. There's no sign of the Crysian, but life in the Androthaxis oceans was not completely terminated by the ISC torpedo. The Crysian buried pieces of herself and her old ecosystem in the deep oceans, well below the level impacted by the plasma torpedo. I have no idea how those spears could survive under the deep pressures, the only depths where they could be protected from the fire, or how the Crysian knew that she needed to take desperate measures to safeguard herself. We also have our own discarded Crysian spears in our hold that didn't descend when we tractored her to the planet, and we've also got samples of Monoceron bactal growths. With the Captain's permission, we place the spears and the samples in five separate probes and set them into a slowly decaying orbit around the planet. In a couple of years, when the oceans have cooled to normal temperatures, they'll land in the water. Thus, in case the Crysian's safeguards fail, we'll have provided her with a back-up. Perhaps one day, long after I'm dead, long after the records of the current conflict have faded into legend or oblivion, a new Crysian will evolve on Androthaxis. It's very unlikely, but you never know. You never know about anything in this universe.

The launching ceremony is the closest thing we have to a funeral for the Crysian. It's just Ivan, Dr. Bradley, and Francis, T'Doroth, and myself. Bradley, in an attempt to honor me, reads verses from the Qur'an. *Those who revered their Lord will be led to Paradise in throngs. When they get to it, and its gates are opened, its guards will say, "Peace be upon you; you have won. Therefore, you abide herein forever. The angels terminate their lives in a state of righteousness, saying, "Peace be upon you. Enter Paradise as a reward for your works."*

"I've heard more beautiful verses," Gable whispers to me.

"It's death. What do you expect?" I answer.

Francis, T'Doroth and I each have one enduring gift: our empathic link, I guess we're together for the rest of time. I suppose the gift should be foremost on our minds, but it isn't; Francis spends most of the ceremony standing by himself in a corner, as though he were contemplating one of the great riddles of the universe. T'Doroth finds my emotions more painful than ever, but she doesn't shy away from my touch; our paired fingers flutter like swallows and play with each other whenever we get close.

"Do Vulcans mourn?" I ask her as we watch the final probe launch.

"Do humans?" she replies. Of course I know the answer to both questions.

Ivan is silent until the end of the ceremony. "Kenneth..." he says, practically smothering me with an embrace. My attention's elsewhere though, I'm staring past him into the viewport, looking down at grey-brown Androthaxis, a world that will be covered in storm clouds for many years to come. "You're taking this better than I expected."

The observation sounds hollow to me. "I don't understand life and death anymore." I admit. "I thought she was dead, then she was alive, she rejected me, and now... I dunno. Then I thought Lars was dead, and he's not... I thought Greg was dead, and he's not..." I shake my head. "Not to mention the dog."

"You've led a very strange life," Ivan remarks. Those words deserve to occupy a special space among the great truths of the universe. Naturally, I ramble about something else.

"When I was a kid, one of the few relatives I cared about - my great-mother - mom's grandmother - she died from some rare alien condition. Before she died, she told me that there is no real death. She said the pieces of our body, our atoms, they become part of nature, we trade

them with one another, so that in this hand I've got a discarded cell from Suleman the Magnificent, and on my knee, a piece of Colonel Green. Over a lifetime, a person assimilates or wears the remnants of a thousand souls, whose lives we don't appreciate. I didn't know she was on her deathbed, I just thought she was sick. I thought it was funny."

Yes I'm definitely rambling. Fine. Let me ramble. Ivan's a patient man.

"We are all composite creatures, glued together by one soul..." No. I'm in shock. I'm not capable of dealing with this right now. "Sorry, Ivan. I'm trying to be philosophical and make some sense, but I'm not finding any. The truth is that any time I come face to face with death, something inside me just can't cope. There's a difference between honoring someone's memory, and becoming so wrapped up in grief that it turns into selfishness. When death becomes more about your grief than your loss, it dishonors the dead."

"Maybe it should be about us..." Ivan interjects. But I'm too busy venting to pay attention.

"I always go a little crazy when someone dies, or when I think someone's about to die. No matter how often I play the scenario, I'm never ready for it when it happens, and it kills me." Ivan shakes his head, looking for the right words to say.

"Ivan, I need your help," I'm begging him now. "I need to honor her without becoming that... twisted little kid who copes so badly every time something goes wrong. They say that life's a gift, and I've been granted some incredible ones, but all I ever do with them is..."

Ivan squeezes me hard enough to stop my monologue in its tracks. "You deal with life as badly as most people do. Including me. So what should I say, Kenneth? Stop being an idiot, stop your grieving, grow up and live your life with a little dignity?"

"Maybe..." I mutter, letting the embrace slip.

"That's what you want me to say, but it doesn't make a lick of sense now, does it?" Ivan smiles. "At some point, I *am* going to need you to start coping and living again, probably sooner than you'd like. But I'm not going to shake my fist at you just because you have a tendency to wear your heart on your sleeve in the face of unbelievable tragedy. Who doesn't? If you can't do your duty when I need you, I'll reconsider, but for now, I give you my blessing to be human. After all, if anything were to happen to me, it's nice to know that at least one person in the universe would miss me."

"Such a typical Captain," I begin to laugh, as tears start to run down my cheeks. "A complete egotist..." That's all I can say. I'm still laughing when the breakdown happens, but for the first time in my life it happens at an appropriate moment, and that - the end of my childhood - is the Crysan's final gift to me. What an unexpected, precious gift it is.

ACT V:  
Words, Mere Words

***Interlude:  
Two Years Ago, Early 2294, USS Ark Royal***

“Peace, Mr. Said,” Commander Teller said, puffing while the deceptively slim young Ensign carted an overloaded blue Starfleet bag over his shoulder as if it were inconsequential. Paramon Port was bustling, but the young Ensign navigated through the crowd like they weren’t even there. “We’re into peacetime operations now. That’s a chance for an engineer to shine.”

“I’d think that fixing engines in the middle of a battle is more of a chance to shine than polishing the dilithium chamber while deep scanning a nebula for the eightieth time.” Kenneth Said declared. The Ensign found it intensely uncomfortable to contradict a superior officer, but the fallacy bothered him more.

“You liked the war, then?” Teller asked.

“No sir, I did not,” Said replied, ducking low to avoid the lip of the doorway – it was built for a race that was slightly smaller than human beings. “I look forward to seeing what a Constitution refit can achieve when Klingons aren’t trying to tear it apart.”

“You had bad times with the Klingons, then?” Teller wondered.

“I’m not aware of anyone who didn’t, sir. Their job was to make sure we had bad times, and they did it very well,” Said’s answer did a poor job of hiding the pain of three battles – and one very painful *bat’leth* wound that had been inflicted on his shoulder. Scars heal, Kenneth Said thought, but pain takes a lot longer to go away. The mind and the body are very different places.

“Well, we all have stories...” Teller nodded, a little sleepily. He should be observing his new technician more carefully, but he had just pulled a double shift, and he found welcoming duty tiresome, though he did his best not to show it.

“Excuse me!” Another slender man, who might have mistaken for an albino if it weren’t for his raven black hair, bolted into the transporter room. He had two Lieutenant’s pips on his

shoulder, and his accent had a trace of a Scots burr. “You’re Said, aren’t you?” he said with a smile.

“Yeah. Does everyone know I’m coming?” the Ensign wondered. He thought that the arrival of a single Ensign on a ship of 430 people would be a trivial event.

“Of course not, Ensign. Engineering knows,” the newcomer pointed to Teller, “The Captain knows, and the ship’s Logistic’s Officer knows – and the last one’s me. I’m Timothy Pratt.”

“Kenneth Said...” Said smiled politely as he shook hands with the cheerful (if gawky) stranger. “If you don’t mind, what planet are you from?”

“Earth,” Pratt answered. “You’re probably wondering about the skin color. I always joke and say it’s because I’m secretly a member of Starfleet’s Ghost Control team, but it’s actually an allergic reaction to the overly purified air on starships.”

“You’re serious?” Kenneth Said wondered. Pratt laughed.

“Of course not. It *is* an allergic reaction, but to some climatization drugs I had to take while I was stationed on Vasindo.” Said found Pratt’s grin to be infectious. “It was such a nice, quiet gig, I didn’t mind shivering in bed from Rumala Fever.”

“That doesn’t sound like fun to me.” Said replied, noting that Teller seemed relieved to have found an excuse to bow out of the conversation.

“Anytime you don’t have to worry about six D7s showing up and killing you is fun, Mr. Said,” Pratt again gushed with enthusiasm. “We’ve been at war since 2283. This tour is going to be a really welcome change of pace. We’ve got close to eleven years of scientific and cultural research to catch up on!”

“Ah, enthusiasm,” Teller finally remarked as though the concept were a distant memory.

“When I’ve recovered from spending the last forty-six hours stuffed inside a tug like so much cargo, I may remember what it feels like.” Said moaned.

“I wouldn’t be too sure about that,” Teller says. “The first thing we’ll probably do is put you to work in one of the Jeffries’ Tubes.”

“Oh, it’s not the cramped quarters I mind, it’s the inertial buckling,” Said replied. “I like Jeffries’ Tubes. They’re such nice quiet places.”

“I always knew there was a bit of a monk in every engineer,” Pratt replied. “But I wouldn’t start getting ready for your first detail yet. Not after I spent three hours wrangling with your room assignment yesterday. Although I have to thank you for travelling so light – text books and journals aside.” Pratt wondered what it was about engineers and Captains that they both found paper volumes so attracted.

“As you said, there’s a bit of a monk in me, sir.” Said replied. “I won’t cause trouble. I’m sure I can get along with nearly any roommate you assign...”

“This is a Constitution class,” Teller interjected. “It’s a luxury liner, boy. You get a cabin to yourself. You’ve spent the last how many years on the Klingon front? You deserve at least a small reward for your service.”

“And you haven’t passed the Captain’s little *test* yet,” Pratt added.

“Hush, Tim...” Teller said. Not that he particularly liked Jensen’s little idea of a hazing ritual, but a standing order to keep quiet was not something to disobey. They stepped onto the transporter pad.

“That doesn’t sound good...” Kenneth Said said, just as he and the others were transformed into a coherent beam of light and broadcast to *USS Ark Royal* like a FedNews broadcast. The

irony of people being treated as another form of message was not lost on the young Ensign; sometimes the philosophy of a device was as important as its technology.

They materialized on *Ark Royal* without complications. Kenneth Said flung down his bag and breathed a heavy sigh, taking in the atmosphere of the great ship. *Ark Royal*. A name that went back all the way to the Howards, to the first great battle of the modern age of sailing. Somehow, despite its clean, curved sterile surfaces, it didn't feel like a ship of peace; Kenneth Said had a premonition that he would experience at least one great battle here, a premonition that would become frighteningly real two months later when the ISC fleet, working at the behest of the Organians, crosses the Neutral Zone. For a few months, however, there was a brief flowering of relieved smiles, buoyant toasts and that special camaraderie that only comes when people, working beyond their limits and at considerable sacrifice, escape together from the pits of Hell. It was a feeling that Kenneth Said was eager to share with a new crew.

"Mr. Said, welcome to *Ark Royal*," Lieutenant Brant, the transporter chief, an engaging man in his mid-50s who had seen many people come and go aboard his ship, paid particular attention to this one – Said's expertise with transporters heralded both interesting conversations and the possibility he was greeting his replacement. "We've authorized you to access the ship's systems, and there's an incoming message from the Captain." He brought Said around to look at a small viewscreen that was embedded on a side panel on the transporter control.

"Hello, Mr. Said." It was a golden man who spoke to him, a creature whose face held deep blue eyes and perfect cravasses, and his shoulders spoke of immeasurable strength. "Don't unpack your bags yet, Ensign, because there's one test remaining to see if you have a place aboard my ship. I'm coming to *get* you. Your job is to put me in a position where I won't be able to do that. The clock is running, Ensign... I'm coming for you." The screen went black.

"What?" Kenneth Said wondered. Pratt suppressed a snicker, and even Teller had to admit that the look on his face was amusing. But the wheels had already begun to turn in his head. This was a problem solving session, and if Said treated it like that, he could beat it, in spite of the fact that he had never stepped foot in the vessel and the Captain knew every inch. Kenneth Said bolted out of the transporter room, and, looking both ways, sprinted for the nearest turbolift. He needed to get to engineering. It was the place he knew best; even a strange engineering section would feel like home, akin to the sense of *déjà vu* one often feels when they walk the grounds of their ancestral seat.

"Engineering..." Said ordered as he entered the lift, holding the directional shaft like a tillerman steering a barge. The lift began to work its way through the great ship – and then Said felt it turn the wrong way, and he nearly slapped his forehead. "Turbolift, full stop," he said. The Captain was hardly going to give him a sporting chance. He had the command overrides for everything aboard *Ark Royal*. The turbolift would simply take him to the bridge.

Kenneth Said pried open the roof of the turbolift, hoisted himself up, and began to navigate through the part of a starship where he felt the most comfortable – its inner works. Meanwhile, on the bridge, Greg Jensen sent a message to Pratt. "He stopped the turbolift," he said, impressed that he'd gotten further than most candidates. "He's a keeper. Move his bag into his quarters."

"Yes sir." Pratt responded. "So are you going to call off the hunt?"

Greg Jensen removed his jacket and left it on the conn. "Hell no, Mr. Pratt," he said through a predatory smile. "I want to see how much trouble this boy can give me."

The turbolift was the heart of *Ark Royal* and he could probably hide here safely for hours – or so he thought - so Kenneth Said decided to lay low. He had heard the legends of the Captain’s combat prowess, and Said, though reasonably capable, knew that he wouldn’t last five seconds in a fight against a Gwaiian. No, he needed to run, and set a trap. And to set up a trap, he needed to get to the engineering stores.

So he climbed down the ladder, looking for the emergency engineering shaft. Unfortunately, just as he found it, a Captain suddenly appeared at the top of the shaft.

“Ensign, you’ve been caught...” he said.

Said said nothing. Maybe he was beaten, but he still had at least one last gasp in him. He punched the button and slipped through the door. “Computer... emergency force field, seal entrance...” he quickly looked back. “A16...”

Like a pulp hero, Jensen quickly slid down the shaft. He punched the button and attempted to kick through the opening as soon as it appeared in one smooth athletic motion. It was an arrogant act that he quickly regretted, as he suddenly found himself bouncing off Said's unexpected force field. Jensen tumbled eight meters down the open shaft to land on top of the dead turbolift.

“Damn!” he exclaimed, after determining he hadn’t broken his spine on the landing.

One of the odd paradigms of Kenneth Said’s life was that the narrower the tunnel, the faster he could navigate it. He quickly bolted down the repair shaft, caught another turbolift shaft, and spidered his way to engineering. He can only imagine what he looked like when he exited the shaft, but the Captain had awakened something inside him that he barely remembered was there, not just the joy of solving a difficult problem, but a competitive instinct.

“Engineering kits?” he asked as he stumbled into main engineering. Four officers gave him the oddest looks, but Said, racking his brain for where the stores might be located, found them on his own. He could perform the action here – but he could also access everything he needed from the secondary diagnostics control in Jeffries’ Tube C, so that’s where he went.

Greg Jensen burst into engineering looking more bruised and battered than anyone had seen him since the last battle of the war. There he had fought a Klingon champion – now he was fighting a Starfleet engineer who was too clever for his own good. “Where’d he go?” he asked.

“Who, Captain?” Nagura, a trim (and deceptively strong) Japanese security officer asked.

“Ensign. Male, human, Semetic, dark skinned. Covered in about as much dust as me,” Jensen described.

“Him? He was very cute, sir.” Nagura smiled. “Let me see...”

“Where is he, Nagura?” Jensen snapped, irritated by how much certain crew members seemed to enjoy interfering in his “acclamation procedure”. “That’s an order, Ensign.”

“One of the Jeffries’ Tubes. B or C, I think.” Nagura said with a sigh.

“That figures. A true engineer.” Jensen laughed, and pushing himself forward, he resumed the hunt. The Jeffries’ Tubes were a tight fit, but some engineers were stout enough that the tubes could accommodate a Captain’s frame. He casually inspected “B”, decided that he needed to inspect it more thoroughly, so he crawled through each sub-section. The matter-antimatter stream would be a perfect barrier to put against him – heck, he could even redirect the stream in the one place in the tube where it would trap him on two sides, thus technically satisfying the conditions of the contest.

“Maybe that’s it...” Greg Jensen told himself. “Maybe the kid’s actually trying to win this thing.” He was beginning to like Kenneth Said more and more with each passing minute.

In Jeffries Tube C, Kenneth Said managed to finish his preset sequence, with a few extra contingencies, in case it didn't work. He was in position to set his trap – and he had started to think of backup plans, provided that Captain Jensen didn't grab him before he could get the sequence off and beat the stuffings out of him.

Finally, the Jeffries Tube opened, and Jensen began to crawl through the corridor. There was no immediate sign of Said's presence, but something told Jensen he was here; maybe he could smell the man's sweat in the back of his nostrils. Tube C was almost pitch dark except for the faint illumination of the tube lights. A perfect hiding place.

"I can hear you breathing, Ensign," Jensen happily called down – he couldn't, of course, but it would unsettle his opponent. "I can smell your sweat. I can..." And that's when something caught the Captain's eye. A small diagnostic tube interface, about three centimeters long, and almost transparent. He began to quickly crawl toward it, then turned his head upward to face the Ensign who had lodged himself in a small nook in the ceiling.

"I can ignore your lure, Mr. Said," he said.

But Kenneth Said wasn't so easily intimidated. He sprang down on Jensen, attached the transponder to his shoulder, shouted "Emergency Transport Sequence Said-1!" and bounced off the Captain and began to scramble down the tube. Jensen hadn't expected him to be so agile in such a tight space – he actually missed his attempted grapple, and by the time he turned around, Said had scuttled almost at the edge of the tube.

"Commence transporter sequence!" Said shouted again. But there were no transport sounds, no sounds except for bodies scrambling down the metal causeway.

"Sorry, Lieutenant!" Jensen smiled, ignoring the fact that his opponent was actually outpacing him down the tube. "I revoked your transporter privileges. Petty of me, I know."

Said moaned inwardly, but he was not beaten yet. He scrambled out the Jeffries Tube and sealed it behind him. That wouldn't stop Jensen long, so he didn't dare break his stride. At least he was a good runner, a perfect Starfleet rabbit. Unfortunately, Jensen had anticipated his plan – transporting the Captain into a holding cell would have been perfect; he supposed the Captain had made a note of his specialization as a transporter engineer and taken special steps to counteract it. Fine. Jensen would expect him to do that. The other logical thing for him to do would be to go to the Armory and get a phaser, so he had to rule that plan out too. He could also work the environmental controls – if he knocked out the entire ship, himself included, that would also satisfy the conditions of the hunt.

"And I'm sure my shipmates will love me and respect me for flooding the entire ship with anaesthetzine," Said muttered, considering the long term consequences of the act. No, he couldn't do anything that drastic – nor could he think too much like an engineer. There was one place where he could go, however, that Jensen wouldn't anticipate. On the ship, Jensen was protected by his command codes, and it was virtually impossible even for an engineer of Said's skill to make changes that Jensen couldn't override in seconds. There was one place aboard *Ark Royal*, however, where the Captain's supremacy wasn't quite so paramount. And that's where Kenneth Said was running now, doing his best to ignore the burning sensation in his lungs. Few things were more tiring than playing the role of prey.

Meanwhile, Greg Jensen broke out of the Jeffries Tube only to find that his quarry had already bolted out of engineering. He began to chase after him, when the ship's PA system suddenly announced: "Captain to the Bridge..." Jensen bolted for the nearest communications panel.



“I take it that this is a false alarm?” he asked.

“Aye sir. Looks like your Ensign’s getting a little mischievous,” Pratt responded. “Perhaps you should call this off before it gets out of hand.”

“My interest is piqued.” Jensen answered. “I’m pushing it to the end.”

“Aye sir,” Pratt said, glancing at the First Officer, who was wondering whether she should take the ship to yellow alert.

Jensen smiled at Pratt’s response, but he had a point, this was getting a little crazy. He pushed the comm panel button. “Computer, locate Ensign Said.”

“Mary had a little lamb, sir.” The computer said. “Its fleece as white as snow...”

Great, Jensen thought. Now that he’s got an engineering kit, Said could manually override any turbolift on the ship – he could be anywhere on the ship, and a vessel the size of *Ark Royal* was too big for a manual inspection. “Computer, override all adjustments to internal sensors made in the last two minutes and locate Ensign Said.”

“Shuttlebay One,” the computer answered. “Ensign Said has just entered Shuttle *Marlborough*.”

Jensen nodded, proceeded to the turbolift, initiating his own override in case Said arranged to trap him; get the lift to stop between floors, weld the escape hatch shut and remove the emergency charge, and Said would have succeeded in meeting the conditions of the challenge. “From this point on, I will never underestimate a good engineer again,” he vowed.

With that he made a brief detour to the armory, grabbing a tricorder and a phaser, and strode into the shuttlebay. Said might not be able to get a phaser onboard ship, but a smart officer always remembers that a shuttlecraft has a weapons locker – and its security precautions are best described as lax.

Jensen edged toward the shuttle, keeping a careful eye on the entrance, lifted his tricorder for a one-handed sensor sweep while keeping the phaser fixed on the entrance. The tricorder whirred, and its screen showed a single life form, a human male, onboard. It *could* be a decoy, he thought, but if that were the case he’d stun first and apologize later. He rolled into the shuttlecraft.

The door closed behind him, and the last thing he saw was the sight of a smiling Kenneth Said, dematerializing as the juryrigged shuttle transporter carried him back to the ship. That’s when the ship’s power sequence began; the bay decompressed in seconds, the huge bay door opened, and the shuttlebay was exposed to space. As Jensen pounded helplessly on the controls after he discovered his command overrides were useless, Shuttle *Marlborough* lurched from the pad and launched itself into space.

“Do I win, Captain?” It was Said, speaking from the ship’s transporter control. Greg Jensen stared at the viewscreen with a dumbfounded expression, then collapsed into the pilot’s chair and laughed his head off. “Captain, did I do something wrong?”

“You certainly did, Ensign. You got your Captain’s attention – in spades – and there’s no bigger mistake that a newcomer on a starship can make than that.”

“Uh – I’m sorry, sir...” Said stammered, as the gravity of the situation suddenly struck him like a sonic sledgehammer. “I was just trying to obey orders.”

Greg Jensen was never a good loser, but for some reason, he felt absolutely magnanimous. People had beaten him before – usually by getting hold of a phaser set to stun – but Said had managed to beat him without attacking him, and that was unprecedented. “Well, Mr. Said, we’re going to have to have several long discussions about the gaping holes in ship’s security that can

be exploited by a good engineer, you and I. Now, if you could unlock the command override sequence....”

“Certainly, Captain. Just say the words ‘Said Override Protocols 1C!’.”

“And Mr. Said?” Jensen said with an even broader smile on his Teutonic face; he liked how it made the young engineer visibly nervous. “Welcome to *Ark Royal*.”

## I: The Road to Desskyie

Three weeks pass while we do our best to fix up *Galatea*. St. Galatea, Our Lady of Malfunctions (as Latham called her during the shakedown) is beginning to feel very much like home. We proceed on a circular course around the majority of ISC worlds, and we're amazed at how easy it is. No one interdicts us. We pass within three parsecs of Prynnyhu, homeworld of the Pronhoulites, and no one even hails us to ask questions. Given how tight security has become in the Federation since the General War, *especially* around the inner worlds, no one aboard ship can quite believe how easy it is to traverse local space. No one's asking us about our previous course, our flight plan, anything.

Sure, the War of Pacification has focused more in our space than the previous war; most of the people aboard ship still resent the fact that the citizens of the Concordium are living in snug security while back at *our* home, our loved ones are quaking in fear every time they turn on the news. On the other hand, while I understand my crewmates' resentment, I don't share it; I rather like the fact that these people aren't experiencing our hell of war. Not that they deserve their sense of security, but it does give me a taste of peace, something I haven't experienced in a very long time. And it gives me more than just a glimpse of peace - it's a harbinger of hope.

Three weeks without serious incidents is enough to take the edge off a lot of things that used to make me nervous, including reporting for bridge duty, so no one blames me when I come onto the bridge that morning without expecting to find anything out of the ordinary. But the second I climb out of the turbolift - and the bridge crew's looking at me like a hungry wolf spying a limping elk - suddenly I remember what it's like to get nervous around here.

"Is there a problem, Captain?" I ask. I'd had a medical check earlier that morning, and Dr. Bradley had told me I was in the best physical shape of my life, but maybe there was something he wanted the Captain to tell me.

"Mr. Gable has intercepted a transmission," Ivan informs me.

“Okay, what is it?” I ask and then my face washes corpse-white with as singular a fear as I’ve ever felt. “Not Greg...” I say.

“No, it’s not Jensen,” Francis assures me. “We just hit the mother lode of ISC brass,” He pushes a button, and an ISC propaganda broadcast suddenly fills the ship’s main viewscreen.

“And lastly – let us turn our attention to Lieutenant Kenneth Said,” the universal translator gives the Meskeen narrator’s voice a particularly portentous tone. Their computers have touched up a photograph that gives me a wild-eyed stare. “Although he wears the uniform of a Starfleet Lieutenant, Concordium authorities widely consider this evil engineer and Federation death merchant to be the most dangerous man in the quadrant.”

“Ivan!” I laugh. “Okay, who put this together? You’re still sore because I beat you twice last night, right?”

“No. It’s legitimate,” Ivan answers, instructing Francis with a sliding gesture to increase the sound volume.

“Trust me, even we couldn’t come up with a picture of you that looks like *that* big of a Herbert,” Gable adds. “Though I’m definitely adding it to my archives...”

“Born in the primitive city of Riyadh on Earth, Kenneth Ibn Alexander Said lived a tribalistic life centuries more primitive than the norm of his planet... The youngest of eight brothers, Kenneth Said lived in a compound where he was indoctrinated in old racial hatreds, sharing ancient forms of bloodshed with his family in unspeakable barbaric rituals...”

“They’ve got to be joking!” I moan in disgust. Riyadh is hardly a primitive city, and I did my best *not* to spend time with my brothers or my cousins if I could possibly avoid it. Not that I really need to defend myself. Everyone’s amused by both the “exposé” and by the dumbfounded look on my face. Even my *glika* seems sympathetic.

“As a boy, Said scoured ancient Earth battlefields, digging up ancient weapons of death. While these century old explosive devices were shunned as part of Earth’s shameful past, the eager hands of Kenneth Said were fascinated by them.”

“I didn’t dig up explosives, I worked on abandoned engines!” I protest. “And how can ‘hands’ be fascinated? Haven’t the people ever heard of mixed metaphors?”

“The universal translator handles metaphors poorly,” Ivan tells me something I already know.

“Said’s unusual talents soon drew attention from all corners of the globe. But Said was not content simply studying weapons – instead, his fascination was drawn to a normally innocuous engineering system.”

“Kenneth’s forté is the transporter, that’s his primary area of interest.” It’s Teller, dressed in the white and tan uniform of the ISC engineering services, a Starfleet logo paired with the ISC symbol on his chest. “Whereas your average engineer just wants to service transporters and make them run efficiently, Kenneth’s obsession was increasing their efficiency, increasing their range, decreasing the amount of space that a transporter buffer requires. Most engineers would consider these to be a mere flight of fancy, but not Kenneth. He spent most of his time working on system simulations. He got so wrapped up in them that he barely slept. We called him ‘Kenneth Said, Man Without Sleep.’”

“Didn’t you spend most of your time in Jeffries’ Tubes?” Francis mocks.

“That’s what I *wanted* everyone to think,” I wink. When the universe becomes a mockery, the only thing a sane person can do is mock it back.

“Kenneth Said’s obsession with transporters contributed to alienation with his Starfleet crewmates, who, in the midst of a primitive, barbaric war with the Klingons, didn’t have time for

his experiments. Then, tragedy struck. A transporter accident on Said's ship, *USS Phillipi* led to the death of three crew members." My mouth suddenly gapes open – it had been a horrible accident, three crewmembers getting their bodies tangled when beaming back from a reconnaissance mission on Venek III. "Yet so clever was Kenneth Said at hiding his experiments that the official explanation blamed the incident on equipment failure. It's only in retrospect that, as we come to appreciate Kenneth Said's evil genius and ambition, we realize that the young Ensign had complete access to both the transporter and the equipment logs, and was not just able to conduct his experiments, he was able to hide his handiwork and get away with... murder."

"That sounds like a court martial offense to me," Ivan quips.

"Not funny," I say. "This is getting sick." I wasn't on duty when Lopez and the others died, but I haven't forgotten the incident either.

"Kenneth liked to keep a low profile," Teller says. "He definitely had no taste for combat or command, both of which kept him from tinkering away or lying on his back in a Jeffries' Tube. Kenneth had an obsession with power systems, though. He'd spend hours working on them, even when nothing was apparently wrong. We thought he was being diligent."

The camera cuts to a large Meskeen, whose title is some Meska script I can't decipher – it reminds me of a dog's paw prints. "It's his fascination with power systems that most clearly indicates his state of mind," it speculates (I can't tell its gender). "Kenneth Said clearly craves some sort of temporal authority, probably because he was denied it as a child, being the youngest of his litter, he was almost certainly bullied, perhaps even sexually abused, and engineering systems were the only outlet for his rage and his need to control his environment."

"This is definitely getting surreal, and not in a good way," I tell Francis. At first, he was enjoying the joke as much as the rest of them, but now he's feeling my concern.

"Despite a lackluster service record, Kenneth Said was transferred to the engineering department of the honored ship *Ark Royal* where – unfortunately – Kenneth Said would soon receive all the power he could want, and more. His tour of duty onboard this vessel began with an ominous note."

"Kenneth formed a really unhealthy relationship with the ship's Captain," Teller reports, leaning back in a chair and making sagely motions with his right hand as he speaks. "Greg Jensen is one of the great military commanders of our time, as well as a man's man, and Said became obsessed with earning his trust. That's probably why he volunteered to set up sensors on Monoceros Wash."

"It was on Monoceros Wash that Kenneth Said attained all of the power he craved, and so much more..."

"I get the point." I say. "In the back. And it's coming out my chest. You can shut it off now."

"You're missing the best part, Kenneth." Francis says. "The mate of one of the Rovillians you trapped in the transporter on *the Lasting Peace* talks about how her husband still has nightmares over the experience, and damns you to the Great Crushing because of your hideous experiment on innocent Rovillians..."

"I think Kenneth's heard enough..." Ivan sighs, and he looks at me. "You can watch the rest of it at your bachelor party."

I blush. How did he know I was planning to propose to T'Doroth? Okay, maybe (as usual) I'm not seeing the joke in a hysterical situation, and that probably will add zest to the ship's traditional behind-your-back mockathons. Worse, the remark pricks T'Doroth's interest, and so

does my nervous reaction to it. I would like my proposal to come as a least a *little* bit of a surprise.

“Okay, aside from the fact that I now rank alongside Krona and Rolandus as one of the three great enemies of the ISC state, is there anything else anyone would like to share with their favorite war criminal?” I quip. “Any news that doesn't relate to accusations that are too shameless even for *this* crew to believe?”

“I'm still detecting far too much of a gravitic wobble where Desskyie's sun is supposed to be, without light.” Francis reports, mercifully changing the subject. “I'm wondering if their capital doesn't orbit a neutron star. The infrared signature is also very pronounced.”

“That would be odd.” Hazard wonders. “ISC broadcasts are very reverential toward Desskyie, and they've got some sort of telepathic parliament centered there, but they're also secretive about it. It's like it's a big mystery to everyone but the Meskeen. I've assigned Kollos to monitor ISC communications. It'll give her something to do while she's trapped in her current form.”

“Good.” I say. “I need to inspect the duranium supply...” In order to repair much of the outer hull as possible, we need to draw upon our emergency duranium stores, and processing it is an arduous process when you're short staffed. Even if everything goes smoothly on *Galatea*, we'll be fabricating hull replacements for the next four months.

“Mr. Said,” Lars says. “Ensign Rigney has asked me to tell you that he'd like to see you in Sickbay as soon as it's convenient. He says it's extremely urgent.”

Rigney? He's hardly a friend of mine, though (like most of the crew) I like him. “Sure,” I smile. “I've been meaning to visit him.” Miles Rigney, son of Africa and America, is still only in fair condition three weeks after a skull fracture in the Battle of Androthaxis nearly killed him. Gbeji has spent a lot of time with him; their relationship had been on the wane in the days before the battle, but if a near death experience won't repair a relationship, nothing will. “Do you have any idea what he wants?”

“What does anyone want aboard this ship?” Lars spits.

“Go, Kenneth,” Ivan says. “Do your rounds. We'll call you when the next crisis hits.”

“Aye sir,” I nod. I leave the bridge, do a quick circuit of engineering and the duranium stores, then head for Sickbay. I'd stopped to say hello this morning when I came in for my physical, but he was so woozy that all he could do was stare at me and occasionally blink. “Hello Ensign,” I smile. He's still heavily bandaged, but he's a lot more awake; Ensign Shotev, whose antennae are virtually standing at attention, is trading lewd anecdotes with him.

“Lieutenant!” Rigney exclaims, actually genuinely glad to see me. “Thank you for coming.”

“You're dating my subordinate. I wanted to make sure you're treating her right,” I say as Shotev gives way to let me sit down. “And I wanted to see what I can do for you.”

Rigney leans back and stretches his frame. The man was a champion decathlete at the Academy, and he's got that classic athlete's build, much like Greg Jensen. “Have you and the Captain gotten into any fistfights lately?”

“Nah.” I say, unconsciously feeling old bruises throb on the side of my face. “We've decided to hang up our gloves for the time being. Maybe when the ISC comes to visit...”

“A pity.” Rigney says. “That was a damn fine bout. I wouldn't mind going a few rounds with you myself.”

“Congratulations!” I smile. “You've just completed the set! Now every male in security has at least hinted that they want to box me.” Rigney starts to laugh. “I'm surprised Costa hasn't

thrown her hat into the ring.” I add, referring to our burly Venezuelan lieutenant who tends to be a little overcompetitive with her male counterparts.

“Costa *is* scary,” Rigney says, elevating the medical bay slightly to get a better look at me. “It’s all a matter of respect, sir. That, and the fact that no one really knows what to make of you. Especially me, and *especially* right now.”

Yeah, I’m used to cryptic remarks by now from everyone aboard *Galatea*. I had sensed something odd in Rigney when the Crysian and I did our telepathic tour of the ship, but he had hardly been the center of my attention. “You wanted to see me, Ensign. I take it that it’s important?”

“It is, sir, but the explanation’s a little complicated.” Rigney says. “You do know that a lot of the crew are psionic.” I nod. “You’ve been touched by that telepathic nosebleed field...” he notes and I smile. “Bledsoe’s a telekinetic, Davidson’s a cryokinetic. Lieutenant Lars has that strange affinity with animals, T’Doroth’s a Vulcan, Kollos is Kollos, and you know about Ensign Burke’s telepathy.”

I nod. “To protect us from ISC telepaths, Latham and the other bright lights at Starflint decided to stock our ship with Starfleet’s strangest and finest. What’s your gift?”

“I’m what they call quantum-sensitive.” Rigney says.

“Never heard of it.”

“That’s not a surprise,” Rigney remarks, making me nervous by shifting upward in the bay. “It’s a very rare condition, even in races more psychically attuned than humans. We see variations in probability – they look like ghosts to us – things that might have been are always on the edge of our perception, so if we strain really hard, we can look into several realities at once. It’s really been pronounced since the accident – Dr. Bradley figures the fracture aggravated the psychic centers of my brain or something.”

“Or something.” It’s one of those blanket confirmations. It’s interesting, but I’m not sure what it has to do with me. “What do you see with me?” I ask, in the same tone I’d ask someone to read tarot cards.

“From where I’m standing sir, Ensign Wirchenko’s got his arm around your shoulder, only he’s a Lieutenant. A field promotion.” That statement almost makes me jump out of my skin. “I can also see another really weird alternate reality where you’re in a strange uniform, and Wirchenko’s there too. dressed in some leather muscle-boy outfit – I think he’s your bodyguard - and you’re blackmailing me into luring Lieutenant Lars into an assassination attempt.”

“Are you sure you’re not hallucinating?” I don’t know why I said something so callous. It’s not like, as second-in-command, I can’t just go to Dr. Bradley and check his medical records for unusual conditions.

“I *am* hallucinating.” Rigney says. “Only the hallucinations are real. And Wirchenko’s trying to convince you of that right now, in one of the realities.” I can almost hear the big Slav now, whispering *yeah, Lieutenant, listen to the man*.

“Can you tell him that I miss him?” I ask.

“Hey, Wirt, the man from one of the realities where you died says he misses you!” Rigney exclaims. The Ensign pauses for a second. “He said something about it’s hard to hold a grudge across dimensional boundaries – I think that’s what he said, it’s hard to hear him. By the way sir, has anyone ever tested your quantum signature?”

“Not to my knowledge, Ensign.” I say, shaking my head. Mind you, when I was in the hospital, Starfleet put me through a lot of tests they never told me about.

“Usually sir, when I’m quant-walking, everyone appears as a slight haze, except for people who are very old and don’t have long to live, or people who are really set in their ways. With the exception of your Mirror-Sig,” (as he refers to the quantum signature of myself in the “evil” dimension), “which is universal and blurry on pretty much everyone, your quantum signature is clearer than any I’ve ever seen.”

I grab a cup of water from a table adjoining the medical bay and drink it in one shot. “Let me guess. That means I’m going to die soon?”

“I don’t think so, sir.” Rigney says. “The Quant-sig of everyone aboard this ship is different – steadier than I remember for people not from *Galatea*. And yours is kind of... the anchor of everyone’s steadiness.”

“You need to take another look at the Captain’s.” I wonder. Lately, I really have felt like a supporting player in the novel of Ivan Hazard’s life, standing at his side as he develops into a Starfleet legend. Maybe I am, but Rigney seems to have a different lead character in mind.

“I’ve looked at it sir, on numerous occasions. His sig is pretty steady too, but yours makes him look downright shaky,” he says. “I don’t think it means death. Maybe it’s something worse.”

“Like outside forces affecting the probability field, manipulating me, using me as a puppet?” I speculate. The Crysian. Argos. Perhaps, given the Crysian’s final encounter, even the Organians? Now there’s a thought that *really* scares me.

“Use the word ‘tool’, Lieutenant, it’s a little more comforting than ‘puppet’,” Rigney smiles, lighting up Sickbay with a display of white teeth. “I know this isn’t going to be a big comfort to you, but I thought you should know. I respect you a little too much not to tell you.”

“Thanks, Ensign. Much appreciated.” I nod. “If there’s anything I can do for you?” I say, and I turn to walk away.

“Well sir, what’s this I hear about you being some sort of war criminal?” Rigney asks. I freeze in my step. How many people *know* about that? “You really want that boxing match, don’t you, Ensign?” I smile.

“Absolutely. When the skull fracture’s fully healed.” Rigney laughs.

“A pity you have to wait,” I tell him as I walk away. I really need to take a shower.

Quantum signatures. The ability to see them has often been confused with hallucinations and ghostly visitations. Even in the inky world of telepathy, it’s been confined to the status of a vaudeville freak show, but Rigney’s statements indicate something infinitely more profound, maybe even religious. Maybe I’ve been manipulated by higher beings, that’s the most logical explanation, certainly the sanest one to accept.

Maybe I’ve even got a destiny.

I head back to the bridge, half-squinting when I pass people to see if I can spot anyone else’s quantum signature. But that’s not my gift, I’m forced to look at people with mortal eyes. And when those mortal eyes are fixed on T’Doroth, that’s more than good enough for me.

“Mr. Said, welcome back,” Ivan says as I walk back on the bridge and quickly step to the engineering console - a quick glance at the board tells me everything’s normal. “What did Mr. Rigney have to say?” Both Francis and T’Doroth can instantly tell I’ve been thrown for a loop.

“Something I need to think about for awhile,” I answer. “So have we received any more ISC propaganda that I should know about? Trillion credit bounties on my sorry hide, that sort of thing?”



“Actually, Kenneth, you’re worth one million *barazos* dead or alive,” Francis says. “Though I have no way to know what a *barazo*’s purchasing power is...”

“It’s always good to have options,” Lars smiles.

“*Glika*.” I half-spit at him.

“You did come in the middle of something, though...” Ivan says, interrupting our quarrel.

“Sir, you haven’t seen the half of it,” Gable tells Hazard. “I just got new data regarding the thing’s composition.”

“What ‘thing’ is that, Mr. Gable?” I ask.

“Desskyie.” Francis answers.

“Kollos and Mr. Gable have gathered enough data on their capitalworld to put *this* together. Prepare to be mind-boggled, Kenneth. Mr. Gable, if you could show the Lieutenant?”

A huge grey-brown sphere appears on the main viewscreen. “It has a diameter of five hundred million kilometers, and a thickness of two kilometers.” Francis explains, shaking his head.

“It’s a Dyson sphere!” I exclaim, fascinated by the engineering implications of that legendary structure – until I realize *that* is what the mission’s calling on us to attack. A Dyson sphere, a solar system’s excess mass crunched into a huge bubble that encapsulates a star. “But at five hundred AU, that’s a lot bigger than any Dyson I’ve ever heard of. Even theoretical models don’t allow for that scale. There shouldn’t be enough excess mass in a solar system to build such a structure.”

“It gets more interesting,” Francis says. “The outer hull has a casing of one millimeter of solid neutronium, dwarf star matter, enough to make it impregnable against anything the Federation’s likely to develop in the next ten thousand years. Whoever built that thing (and *don’t* ask me how old it is) didn’t just convert the excess planetary mass of the system; they mined a companion star – possibly even a neutron star – and used *its* mass to complete the project.”

“That’s why it’s so big,” I note, and I can’t take my eyes off the thing. Like the mythical tower of Babel, whoever built this structure were trying to be the rivals of Allah himself.

“Theoretically, we could build primitive Dyson spheres with only a few minor leaps in current Federation technology, and a lot of manpower.” Ivan says, again telling me nothing I don’t already know. “But don’t ask me how they built *that*. Or why, for that matter.”

“People build monuments.” I say, remembering a boyhood trip to the reconstructed great pyramid of Khufu, an engineer’s Haj that had been worth the heat, dust, bad food and a week-long bout with influenza that followed the trip. *Nothing* is more impressive than the first great wonder of the universe that’s beheld by a seven year old’s eyes. “Sometimes, the explanation’s *that* simple.”

“I can state with only minor hyperbole that Desskyie ranks among the great scientific discoveries of the century.” Francis tells me.

“Scientific? Think engineering!” I exclaim, unconsciously chewing the words. “But how on Earth are we going to attack that thing?”

There’s nothing more plentiful in the universe than questions without answers, but I still dislike them, and the closer we get to Desskyie, the more our questions tax us: where are the ISC defenses, what will find when we get to Desskyie, what’s the best escape route... too many questions.

Duty shifts are long, quiet, and permeated with a sense of foreboding when we don’t allow the shock of our past adventures to overwhelm us. Despite the three weeks of relative peace we’ve

experienced since Androthaxis, night comes as something of a relief. Much of this is credited to T'Doroth, of course, she of the moon veil skin and sandalwood eyes, and hair as dark as the basalt of the ocean floor. We're together now, sharing food, philosophy, and a bed. We haven't run out of things to say to each other, which has to be taken as a good omen for the years to come, but it's those immersive moments of quiet, the silences in which we bathe in the other's company, that produce the seconds that I most keenly cherish.

T'Doroth. I compose a hundred poems to you, attempting to express what I feel when I look at your face. Just when I think I can't come up with something more trite and embarrassing, I compose a new poem. There's something about her that makes me regress into a mute, sensual animal. It's odd to think about it when I hold her so close, so accepting, when I expect her to express a hundred vitiations of my character.

"Kenneth," she says, looking up at me from our bed. The viewscreen in our quarters has been set to watch the passage of stars – a nearby blue dwarf winks at us as it slowly stutters out of view. Starlight is too dark to be truly sensuous, but there's something about it that makes us more comfortable, especially now. It surprises me that she's so open to sex. It surprises me that I'm so open to it too; I've been accused of showing near-Vulcan stoicism regarding physical pleasure (especially by Francis, but also by Greg and a few others who are less interested in annoying me), and the accusations have had more than a hint of truth. But, more than most, there's a duality in my nature; during those times when I'm not a stoic or a eunuch, I'm a hopeless romantic, a half-wit Byron without the redeeming monstrosities. I don't like the feeling of being so out of control, especially the part of me that likes being a stoic, but those out of control moments often produce the best experiences of my life. I guess I'm a pendulum, and those two states, stoic and romantic, are the two apexes produced by the gravitic forces that tug at my soul.

As I mentioned earlier, I've been composing some really bad poetry lately.

"Kenneth..." T'Doroth sighs as she pulls me gently into bed with her strong but gentle fingers. I can sense her mind isn't on the experience we just shared, even though I can't take mine off it. I want to describe her body, but every time I try, it ends up sounding like pornography. She deserves better: her beauty deeper, her mind richer, than base descriptions of longing. "Do you remember when you asked me about Vulcan relations with the ISC?"

"No, I don't."

"It was aboard *The Lasting Peace*," she reminds me. "We were working together on that bridge, attempting to cope with the incline."

"That was a long time ago." I say. "No, I don't remember."

"Kenneth," T'Doroth asks. "Where do you stand with them? Would you make peace with them, if you could?"

"Of course," I say, even though there's a part of me that remembers the photon torpedo shooting out of the bow of the ISC cruiser and squarely striking the surface of the waters. "I'm Starfleet. We're at our best when it's peacetime."

"That sounds like a mantra to me," T'Doroth says. "And it has been so long since we had peace that I fear it has lost its meaning."

"What are you saying?" I ask, which of course means 'get to the point'. Or – worse – 'are you saying something I really should hear'?

“I have more than just logistical concerns about the mission,” T’Doroth explains. “I have ethical ones as well.” I nod. “I had expected a far greater military presence close to the ISC capitalworld. I expected to find an achievable military target. Now, I fear, there may be none.”

“I’m sure we can find an unmanned communications relay somewhere that we can attack,” I shrug. “There’ll be a target, and we’ll take appropriate actions. We’re not animals, we don’t attack civilians.” I state. I’m sure Ivan feels the same way, though what Latham felt, only Allah can say. “Our history may be written with the blood of the innocent, but we abandoned that useless, stupid path a long time ago.” I shake my head. What a positively didactic thing for me to say! I wonder if Vulcans recognize when we’re too much in love with the sound of our own voices?

“We need better intelligence, Kenneth,” T’Doroth says. “You may believe in peace, but I believe the Captain was correct when he told them that true peace requires respect. The ISC do not respect us. Perhaps military force is not the best way to win it, but...”

“The only time they’ve ever listened to us is when we’re sitting in a torturer’s chair, screaming,” I answer, once again holding her. Sex is an intellectual stimulant for Vulcans, so after we make love our conversations often deal more with philosophy than personal concerns. Unfortunately, my aesthetic is not especially intellectual tonight. “But I’ve got something else to talk about,” I say.

“Oh?”

I get out of bed, rummage through my drawers, and with one awkward motion I throw my life to the fates in a way that not even a ‘quantum sensitive’ could foresee. I hold out a small, velvet box. “Open it,” I tell her, wearing the most nervous smile of my life.

Her fingers pry open the clasp, and the filament glitters in bright starlight; that blue dwarf is very close and bright. She holds it up. Twenty silver Vulcan runes dangle from the string, making noises like tiny bells when they clatter together.

“Ivan has contacts on Vulcan. He helped replicate this for me.” I explain.

“This is wrong...” T’Doroth mutters.

“Wrong?” I exclaim, my heart sinking.

“Yes, quite wrong!” she declares, putting it down as though it offended her.

“But the matrimonial symbol... the religious symbol...”

“Kenneth, it is the matrimonial symbol of a group of families on another *continent* of Vulcan.” T’Doroth explains. “And the religious symbol represents a sect to which I do not adhere. I am not *kya'shin'lailara*, nor do I even respect their tenets – they are bigots whose history is riddled with acts of hypocrisy. And that symbol...” She points to something that looks like a mangled treble clef, “represents that I melded with my betrothed prior to our *kahs-wan*, but you have never even endured the ritual.”

I cannot begin to describe the embarrassment of the moment. “So, you want me to go into the Vulcan desert and bake for a few months?” I wonder aloud.

“No. You are too old. You have had other trials that serve as an appropriate substitute.” T’Doroth informs me. “Kenneth, I do indeed love you. Indeed, the idea of matrimony is... acceptable, even desirable. However, until you know my culture better, I cannot agree to your proposal. It would be unwise.”

“You would like me to go to Vulcan and live among your people?” I ask. I’d do it.

“That is probably unnecessary. I am not noble born; unlike some of the most prominent Vulcans in Starfleet, my house does not rank among the great families of my world. We would

not demand such proof of your intent.” It’s not the first time she’s mentioned that her family doesn’t come from a religious or noble background. I wonder how much it really bothers her; I can pick up vague impressions of discomfort from her mind, but it can be such a subtle place... “But we do have a little pride, and while you would add to our family’s luster...”

“Me? Add luster? A war criminal?” I joke.

“That is an accusation that would make even a Vulcan laugh. But even if it contained a small element of truth, one of the great paradoxes of your history is that some of your war criminals evolve into your most effective peacemakers. It is a fact that we Vulcans find troubling, though it does not prevent us from studying it. Your man, Nixon, for example, is particularly intriguing; there are many parallels between he and Surak...”

“Earth also has perfectly good pacifists in the Surak tradition,” I reply. “I was trying to make a joke, though I suspect you may have a more keenly developed sense of humor than me. But if you *do* want to marry me, what must I do?”

T’Doroth leans back and ponders the question. “First, the filament you gift me with must be appropriate for one of my family and station. Pursuit of this gift will lead you to ask many questions – I will not help you find these answers, but they can be found and you will benefit from the journey to find them. Second, you must win approval for the union from my mother’s parents, who live in the Baked Hold beside *Koshol*, the Lake of Red Storms.”

“What about your parents?” I ask.

“I do not respect their opinions in this matter,” T’Doroth’s bluntness shouldn’t surprise me, but it does. “But my mother’s parents are different than most Vulcans, and their judgment means much to me.”

“Is it enough to shape the rest of your life?” I ask. I can sense her nodding in her mind, even if she doesn’t physically perform the gesture. It makes me very curious to meet them. “There is a saying among the males of my people: *women are a trial*.” I laugh. She raises an eyebrow. “But it’s a trial I’m prepared to face. I’ll meet your conditions, T’Doroth, T’Sai of my heart. And while I’m at it, I’ll also negotiate a fair and honorable peace with the ISC. Because when I’m with you...”

“...please do not tell me that ‘you can do anything’, Kenneth,” T’Doroth tells me coldly. “The laws of the universe do not change because of your proximity, despite considerable evidence to the contrary.”

An hour later, we’ve called to the bridge. We’re still five weeks from Desskyie, but our disguise is working perfectly. I’ll have to thank Greg for it when I next see him.

“Mr. Said, Mr. T’Doroth,” Ivan says. “No need to call a formal briefing – I never saw the sense of going into a separate room when everyone’s here.”

“Aye sir,” I say.

“Mr. T’Doroth has raised ethical concerns about the mission. I am not sure I agree with them as strongly, but we’re in complete agreement on the need for better intelligence. So we’re going into action to get some.”

Ivan brings up a display for a small space station that’s monitoring a nebula. “We’re going to have bump our schedule by a week, but this should have computers that’ll give us at least some idea of what we’re getting into. We’ll come in at high warp, jam her signal, then send a small tactical team aboard to secure her. Once she’s secured, Mr. Said and Mr. T’Doroth will board her

and access her data banks. With luck, this will actually turn out to be a routine mission..." he says.

"Routine mission?" I question.

"Those actually do happen once in awhile, Lieutenant," Ivan answers with just the hint of a smile. "Or so they told me at the Academy. We're going to try to come in quietly; since their sensor array is clustered to look into the nebula, we'll take an opposite approach. Hopefully, we'll be on their blind side until we hit transporter range."

"Are we sure it's even a station? It's small enough that it could even be automated." Gbeji wonders.

"We've intercepted personal messages from what appear to be a family of Meskeen who live at the station," Francis says. "There's also a Q'Naabian technician aboard and someone whom the translator's best guess is "an Iclydian". My guess is that there are six to eight people aboard, all non-combatants. The station is probably not even armed."

"We will know that they have detected us when they raise their shields." T'Doroth says,

"We will not – of course – be counting on it to be so easy," Lars says. "If everything goes according to plan, we will stun each of the ship's occupants, transport them aboard *Galatea*, then destroy the station once we've finished raiding its data banks."

"And I guess it'll be up to me to make sure the station's destruction looks like an accident," I say.

"I think that would be an excellent idea." Ivan states. "So we have a decent plan," he adds with a smile. "And if anyone says anything to the effect that this means we're doomed, I will have a small chat with them that will be followed by a long stay in Sickbay – T'Doroth and Gbeji excepted, we'll just have the small chat."

A day later, *Galatea* comes into range of the station. We reach a distance of seven thousand kilometers, just barely out of transporter range, before they raise their shields.

"Damn," Ivan says. "So close. T'Doroth, estimated time to shield collapse if we only employ our Phaser-IIIs?"

"Eighteen minutes, Captain." T'Doroth says. "I recommend performing an alpha strike with our two phaser-IIs, then whittling it down with the phaser-IIIs. That would reduce the time to seven minutes, without significant risk of destruction."

"Recommendation accepted. Commence firing," Hazard orders. "Mr. Lars, is your prime team assembled?"

"Aye sir," Lars says, his face obscured by a blast shield (he's been more cautious about that since he lost his eye) and a phaser rifle slung over his shoulder. "I'm just evaluating the sensor logs before I head to the transporters. We'll go in four squads of two."

"Good. Mr. Gable, isolate one short band frequency and broadcast a standard demand for their surrender. I take it they've issued a distress call?"

"The station's mostly communications and sensor equipment, but its warp engines still don't have the power output to break our signal jam," Francis says, and then mutters. "It's all too easy."

"Too easy? Do you have a problem with that, Mr. Gable?" Lars says through a growl.

"Well, as long as your security officers don't strut around boasting how great they were when the operation was about as difficult as phasing a *kliptep* held in a tractor beam..." Francis scowls, "I can live with it."

I think Francis's remarks would receive a warmer reception if he had threatened to detonate a phaser grenade on the bridge. "Is that meant as a criticism of your shipmates, Mr. Gable?" Lars asks. "Aren't you proud of the risks they've taken and what they've accomplished?"

Things are getting a little tense. Francis and I trade glances, but I sense he doesn't want me to intervene. "There's only one of the seven deadly sins I feel toward the men and women of your department, and it isn't pride," he sneers. I roll my eyes in disgust, while Lars's face turns almost black as it flushes with Efrosian blood. "If you can out knifefight a cadre of Klingon warriors when you're outnumbered two to one, like we did at *Xolnat*, then I'll kiss the feet of everyone in your department, living or dead. But until then, I remain unimpressed."

"Francis, at *Xolnat* you had Greg and Zirkan on your side..." I snap, referring to Greg's right-hand man, the big (and extraordinarily capable) Rigillian security chief who later died at Strokhara. "And the Klingons were rookies, and badly trained ones at that."

"It was still Hell," Francis says with a half-shudder. "And surviving Hell raises one's standards in ways you wouldn't believe. Sorry, Lieutenant."

"Fine," Lars snarls in response. "And you'll forgive me if I hope we *don't* have to meet your standards today," Lars answers. "Now Captain, if I may be excused, I've got a Prime Team to lead."

"Don't forget we're facing civilians." Hazard says. "We've been facing real combatants for so long that your men might need a little reminder on how to act like... intelligent gentlemen."

"Aye Captain," Lars says, and he turns to me. "Lieutenant, the ship should be captured within seconds of our arrival. You and Lieutenant T'Doroth should be ready to beam in shortly after it's been secured; I'll rendezvous with you just outside the bridge."

"We'll be ready," I tell my *glika*.

*Galatea* continues its bombardment of the station's shields, while T'Doroth moves us slowly around the station to maintain contact with the forward shield while the station rotates. At the six minute mark, T'Doroth and I head to the transporter room, maintaining a subspace link to the bridge.

"You are troubled?" T'Doroth asks, sensing the disquiet in my mind.

"Just pre-mission jitters, I think," I reply. For some reason, this one feels worse than the assault on that ISC frigate that was my first serious taste of danger aboard *Galatea*. "Silly to feel like that, after I've risked my life as often as I have."

"Caution is a logical reaction to potential danger – but paralytic fear is not," T'Doroth says. "I suspect that you know this to be true, but I have found humans..."

"...often need to be told the obvious just to reassure them." I answer.

"Indeed. Although more accurately, it is a quality shared by most non-Vulcan cultures, not simply humans."

"We don't endure silences very well," I affirm, and we arrive at the transporter room just in time to see the others transport away.

The news comes in quickly; the defenders are unarmed, though a pair of old Meskeen males – old bulls, we call them – put up a nasty fight. "It took five shots to take one of them down," Lars reports. "I don't know why they bother using *Korlivilar* when they've got these critters."

"Is it safe to beam over?" I ask, ignoring Lars's observation. I'm sure I'll hear plenty of stories in the mess hall about how tough the fight was.

"Come on over. Just don't trip over the bodies," Lars says. We step to the transporter pad, get a lock on Lars's signal, and energize.

The first thing that strikes me about the station is how dark it is; the construction looks similar to a Federation ship, but it's taller (five meter high ceilings) and older; worn edges, aging paint job, and a dusty smell. If we weren't going to blow this place out of space, I might take a few minutes to check the atmospheric filters here, just from force of habit.

"Bridge is this way," Lars points toward a long ladder whose rungs are spaced very wide apart, but before we start to climb, Costa interrupts us, her phaser rifle butt and uniform splattered in a red-grey ooze that I recognize as Meskeen blood.

"Sir, we've found a complication," she informs us in a matter-of-fact voice.

"Great..." Lars says, rolling his eyes. "Show me."

Costa and Roy lead us down several decks into a chamber in which an algae-ridden pool, about eight meters in diameter, has been constructed. A large naked Meskeen – female, I assume – is slumped in its center, face up in the water. Insects like a cross between gnats and dragonflies are buzzing everywhere, and odd ultraviolet lights set in the ceiling makes the place look like we were staring at a landscape through antique night vision goggles. Costa draws our attention to several clumps of shadowy objects in the water. "I've counted about fifty of them, sir."

"Eggs?" Lars moans.

"Our duty *is* to protect innocent life, even the enemy." T'Doroth insists.

"I know," Lars sighs, probably wishing the Federation wasn't so conscientious. "I just wasn't expecting to have to turn *Galatea* into a nursery."

Ensign Roy is put in charge of overseeing the egg's transfer to *Galatea*, while we return to the bridge. When we get to the top of the ladder, I have to step over the biggest Meskeen I've ever seen – a three meter tall mottled grey-green beast who's breathing hard even though he's stunned.

"He's big." I note.

"He is a *she*," T'Doroth notes. "Note the fermentation sac on the throat – it performs a similar function as a Vulcan female's breast."

"Big, though." I say.

"Meskeen do not stop growing," T'Doroth says. "And the oldest known Meskeen is several thousand years old and makes this woman look like a dwarf."

"I'm glad they don't use these to crew their ships," Lars says.

"Their size makes them incompatible with the other ISC crews," T'Doroth informs us as I bend down to examine the unconscious female. "And I have heard that older Meskeen find violence, particularly that of a starship in wartime, distasteful, though the ferocity of their defense contradicts that statement..."

It's not often that anything catches me off-guard – as I've mentioned before, my reaction times are about as good as any human ever tested – but suddenly the bull-like female roars, grabs me and rolls me under her bulk with a titan's strength, biting my face once I'm pinned to the floor. Her tongue is venomous, and I can feel my face start to burn as soon as it touches me. I scream and writhe like a slime devil in a trap; the toxin is one of the most painful things I've ever felt.

The Meskeen feels much the same – the Crysian may have attuned the crew of *Galatea* so I could touch safely them, but everyone else in the universe goes into spasms. But the huge Meskeen's bulk – at least three hundred kilograms, or I'm an Efrosian – traps me, and her initial telepathic trauma gives way to a berserker frenzy, as her stubby but powerful limbs try to bludgeon me. Fortunately (or maybe not) I'm lodged so firmly under her body that it's hard for

her to do anything but crush me. I hear the sound of phaser fire, and it can't come soon enough. The Meskeen gives a deep, low, creaking moan, and the next thing I know three of our security people, straining with all their considerable muscle, is struggling to roll the Meskeen woman off my crushed and battered body.

"Is she dead?" Shotev, the Andorian, asks as soon as they've finished the job. After that, I don't remember much, because I'm too busy going into convulsions with all the Meskeen venom running through my body (though the answer to the question is "no"). A medical team is beamed over from *Ark Royal*... no, it's *Galatea* now... and they manage to neutralize the venom before it reaches my heart and lungs, paralyzes them, and kills me. They also inject La Madre Grandenza (as Costa calls the female) with enough sedative to keep an elephant unconscious until the heat death of the universe

"Nasty stuff," I moan, as I feel the throbbing start to subside. My left eye is watering so badly that I think it's about to burst.

"Are you embarrassed that you were so easily caught off-guard?" Lars asks. I nod. I hate to admit it, but I should never have gotten so close to the "unconscious" Meskeen.

"Damn, that was stupid," I admit. "How does my face look?"

"Almost as bad as it would if we had a fight," Lars says, helping me to my feet. I'm still not quite sure what the etiquette is, given that formally we're enemies, but I think Lars would probably help me no matter what the situation. "As Tactical told us during our initial combat briefing at the start of the war: *fear the frog*."

"Just get me to the bridge," I mutter, still annoyed by the stupidity of my mistake.

The bridge is a couple of levels above us, accessible by what we've come to call the "leaping ladders; though Meskeen legs aren't quite built like a terran frogs (once again, terramorphing rears its ugly head), they do have superior leg strength and their walk is a little more bouncy than humans. The gravity is also just a little weaker than normal, maybe eight-tenths Earth standard, and that also encourages a more "jaunty" step.

We make our way to the bridge, and compared to every ISC bridge I've ever operated, this place is an antique. I touch the controls and attempt to access the telepathic guide – only to discover there isn't one.

"Father..." a small conscious Meskeen asks a groggy comrade – the smaller one surrendered to Ensign Kendell, formerly my subordinate in engineering, who has a phaser drawn on the pair of them. "Is that the evil man?" he asks, pointing at me.

"I do not think so," the elder says, "Lieutenant Said would not dare attack the Concordium. Our eyes cannot discern the subtlety of their facial features."

I'm almost tempted to introduce myself – and then, on a sudden whim, I do. "The boy is correct," I say. "My name is Kenneth Ali Michael Ibn Said, Lieutenant, chief engineer *USS Galatea*." The boy nervously grips the father's arm.

"You lie." The father spits.

"No," I say. "But I've never murdered your people, nor have I experimented on them, nor have I ever conducted unauthorized experiments. I have no idea why your people chose to turn me into a villain when there are some perfectly good Romulans who are far more deserving of your contempt."

"You will not get the Dancers," the older Meskeen snaps. "They won't reappear for another three *movron*." I guess that must be the name of the celestial phenomena they're studying in the



nebula. Francis is going to be very disappointed that we missed it. The older Meskeen almost cackles. “You missed them, you savage bastard.”

“I’m sorry I did. It sounds interesting. Are you willing to share your name?” I ask.

The Meskeen spits at me – which, given the toxicity of a Meskeen’s saliva, is probably meant more as an attack than an insult. Fortunately, it splatters on the shoulder of my uniform. “You may address me as ‘he who spits on the corpses of assassins’,” he proclaims defiantly.

“You don’t look like a Mirak to me,” I quip. “Fine, Spitz, let me inform you what’s going to happen to you. Your entire crew – and your eggs – will be transferred to *Galatea*, where you’ll be staying in the brig. You will be released into friendly hands as soon as it’s safe for us to do so.”

“And our station?”

“I’m afraid we’re going to have to make it look like it was destroyed.” I say.

“This station was built one hundred and fifty *kovra* ago,” the Meskeen snaps. “There’s not another of its kind left in the Meskandium. You’re barbarians.”

I ignore the insult. “We can beam over any personal effects that pass through our security inspection. I recommend cooperation – we’ll make this as painless for you as possible.”

“You won’t have time,” the Meskeen smiles.

“I beg your pardon?” I say, and then I suddenly realize the significance of what he’s saying. “We’d better evacuate now, Lars.” I bark. “Credits are good that they’ve got some sort of autodestruct ready to blow, or I’m *not* the scourge of the Concordium... T’Doroth, you check the defense systems, I’ll check the engineering systems, everyone else out now, Lars, that’s an order.”

He hates it when I do that. T’Doroth finds the defense array, determines it’s inactive, and moves to help me check the engineering systems. We find the auto-destruct in the communications sub-systems, though the set-up makes more sense than it did on *The Lasting Peace*; there’s a psionic bomb set to go off and fry the brains of everyone aboard the station, thus killing intruders (and defenders) while leaving it in a condition that allow the Meskeen to safely reuse it. Cute.

It’s a trick to disarm the auto-destruct, but we manage to do it with three long minutes to spare. Once we’ve disarmed it, we proceed to raid the data banks, we catalog the Meskeens’ personal possessions and transport them aboard *Galatea*, and we set the warp reactor to overload on our signal. We wait until we’re a quarter parsec from the station before it blows – it doesn’t receive a lot of subspace traffic and it’s less suspicious that way.

The guests are another problem. Rivirko, the father we encountered, was the station manager and the effective leader, (though the large Meskeen are three centuries older (and barely fit in our containment cells), and is reluctantly agreeing to serve as liaison between the Meskeen guests and their captors. Orturnk, the egg-mother remains in the cargo bay with her clutch. What we’re going to do with them when they hatch, only Allah knows. Let’s hope we get to Desskyie before they do...

We do give Rivirko permission to visit the eggs and make sure we’re treating their offspring right. The egg-mother’s asleep, and Rivirko shocks us all by scooping up one of the eggs and eating it. He responds to my reaction with unexpected amusement.

“Hot eggs will hatch to become Meskeen,” Rivirko explains. “Warm eggs will hatch to become unintelligent animals. Cold eggs will not hatch. It’s considered merciful to eat the animals before they hatch. I take it your species would consider it cannibalism?”

“Yes,” I say.

“Good.” Rivirko croaks. “It’s good to shock you with *our* savage behavior for a change.”

The next day, we’re back on course for Desskyie, and Ivan’s gone through the data and has called a meeting.

“I’ve got good news,” he says as Gbeji sits down. I guess she was spending more time with Rigney, who’s now well enough to rest in his quarters. “There’s an alternate target – the Dyson Sphere is surrounded by thirty artificial worlds, heated by artificial suns that orbit each of the worlds. One of the worlds is Meska, the homeworld of the Meskeen. It’s protected by a fleet of police frigates, and there’s a cluster of true naval ships about a half-parsec distant in what they call the Ol-Kromon shipyards, but we should be able to get in, destroy the Meska communications array with three clean phaser hits, destroy this unmanned sensor array as a back-up target, and pull out before they mobilize the fleets.”

“Do we know where they’re keeping Federation forces?” Lars asks. “It would be a morale boost if we could recapture Federation officers and free them from the Concordium’s control.”

“Not to mention it’d sate our thirst for vengeance,” I say. I wouldn’t have mentioned it, but I agreed to be his *glika*, and staging verbal knife-fights with him is one of my duties.

“We will adapt to whatever the situation throws at us.” Ivan says. “The Sphere has a breach big enough for a small fleet to pass through, and they keep what’s stationed inside Desskyie under tight security – and our sensors can’t penetrate dwarf star metal.”

We take a deep breath, and scrutinize the map of the system. “Communications relays don’t seem enough to me.” Lars says through a scowl. “You mentioned a small sun orbiting the planet?”

“More like an artificial nuclear reactor, the size of a small moon, which provides heat and illumination.” Hazard says. “All of the worlds have them. They receive periodic energy streams from the Dyson sphere to refuel them.”

“What if we hit that with a plasma torpedo? Could we damage it? That would certainly get their attention.”

“Interesting idea.” Ivan says. “Kenneth, T’Doroth, you’re generally the voices of restraint. What do you say?”

“It would have symbolic significance.” T’Doroth’s thoughts echo my own. “A plasma torpedo strike would certainly break substantial amounts of quasi-stellar matter loose from the moon, and if we aim our plasma torpedo properly, we could ensure it doesn’t rebound and strike the planet.”

“Could we destroy the moon?” Lars asks.

“With our current armament, no. You need weapons that produce a lot of inertial displacement; plasma torpedoes produce high concentrations of heat, but a much smaller proportion of force.”

“We developed tractor bomb prototypes twenty years ago, and never went anywhere with them,” Ivan notes. “I always thought that was a short-sighted move.”

“If we set the plasmas to envelope, our strike would not go unnoticed.” T’Doroth insists. “We would still knock a substantial chunk of the moon into space.” 4

“It wouldn’t take much mass loss to produce a dramatic climactic effect,” I posit. “Probably not sufficient to force a planetary evacuation – but I agree with T’Doroth, it would get their attention.”

“You should have Mr. Gable run simulations,” T’Doroth says. “We also need to run psychological and sociological simulations to make sure the enemy won’t overreact to our strike. If the ISC responds by destroying Earth’s moon, or T’Khut...” she refers to Vulcan’s sister planet, “I would advise against the action.”

"I still would prefer that we focus our efforts on locating and securing Federation prisoners," Lars says, leaning forward in a challenging pose.

“Well!” Ivan says. “We have several very interesting choices - as always. I’ll let you know what I decide before we reach the system. Until then – we’re two weeks away from Ragnarok. Dismissed.”

## II: Strike, Counterstrike

“Everytime I make an entry in the Captain’s Log, I think I’m making history,” Ivan remarks as he escorts me to the cargo bay. “I’ve never been so tongue-tied in my life.”

I nod, and nod again at the cordon of security that accompanys us on our walk. Despite the fact that the “visitors” haven’t given us any problems, we’re still taking no chances with them. “I can sympathize. That sounds like my first talk with my crew. And who was it who gave me grief that I wasn’t fit to be a Captain after I gave it?”

Ivan responds to my accusatory grin with an even bigger smile, an acknowledgement that he’s been caught in the act. “At least I haven’t started saying poetry into my log,” he says. “It’s ironic that I’m the Captain, but you’re the one with whom the prisoners wish to speak before we let them go.”

“You’re not a convicted-on-arrival war criminal, so you don’t count,” I laugh. “I’m special. But I’m glad we’ve found a planet we can strand them on before the attack. No sense in leaving civillians in danger.” *Even Meskeen*, I might have added... but that’s a thought too ugly for any Starfleet officer to willingly give voice. We’re going to ship the prisoners, seven Meskeen, one Q’Naabian and one Iclydian (a rare ISC race that resembles a humanoid flying fish), down to the surface of one of the outermost of the thirty artificial worlds that orbit Desskyie, located about a fifteenth of a parsec from the Dyson Sphere. There’s several research posts on the planet, but if we put them in escape pods, launch them toward the planet from a distance, they’ll never know we’re here before it’s too late. Either the prisoners will make planetfall in four hours, or they can steer themselves on whatever course they desire, in which case we’ll reenale their distress beacons after we’ve completed the raid on Meska.

And so I come face to face with the Meskeen. I nod at Rivirko in greeting. “We’re putting you into escape pods and launching you toward a world named Iaska.”

“Iaska, and you-reply-a,” one of the security guards whispers. I ignore him. The adrenaline rush of getting so close to the target – after over two long months in space - is making some of my crewmates act suspiciously like children.

“My apologies for not putting you down on Meska itself,” I say. “And for the four hour journey to Iaska. The pod’s communications systems have been disabled, but we’ll reinitialize them once we’ve made our presence known to your world.”

“Once you’ve finished murdering our people,” Rivirko spits, aiming the spittle at my face. I duck to one’s side to avoid the venom, and wave off security’s intense desire for a tactical response.

“Our goal is not the loss of life – simply a little of your pride,” I state with a tone that’d be imperious even for an Admiral. “You’ve attacked our worlds without fear of retribution. Today, we retaliate.”

“So you seek to spread terror.” Rivirko says, his face practically burning. Now that’s an ugly thought.

“Actually, I’m hoping more for sobriety than fear,” I say. “Fear is a momentary emotion, a quick kick of adrenaline – or whatever hormone is its equivalent in your anatomy. Sobriety, the calm consideration of action and reaction, force and counterforce, is far more desirable...”

“Liar...” Rivirko snarls in a low, breathless voice that’s devoid of the usual Meskeen bluster.

“I beg your pardon?” I say. I shouldn’t be offended by his tone – an enemy will be an enemy – but something about it bothers me. This is more than just the statement of a position. This hatred is genuine, deep, and enduring; it’s going to last until Rivirko’s body grows to five meters in height and his organs eventually fail, and that’ll be millennia after I’m dead.

“You are a liar and a coward. You dress your words with pretty smells, and warm them beyond their actual torridity. Your Federation doesn’t want ‘sobriety’. You don’t want ‘calm consideration’. No, you simply want revenge for our alleged slights! You crave it like a starving man craves his son’s flesh! Sobriety? Ha! You want us to be afraid! You want every child of Meska to look up and shudder, wondering when the next *Galatea* will drop out of the sky!” Rivirko quakes with rage – or at least a posture I can reliably interpret as rage. “Stop lying to us and admit it!”

I hate it when an enemy has a legitimate point. Involuntarily, I glance at Hazard, and at Lars, who looks back at me with a glance that suggests he wants to shrug. “I did not make this mission, but yes, I’ve lost a lot of friends in this war, and it’s a war that absolutely did not need to happen. If this makes me vengeful, then yes, I’m vengeful. But I don’t want your blood on my hands anymore than I want your spittle. The day will come – very soon – when we’ll both put this ridiculous war behind us and become friends. The less unnecessary blood that’s shed, the sooner that day will arrive.”

“It will be a long time before a child of Meska is ever going to be a friend of one who brought the flame to Desskyie!” Rivirko declares, in a voice that convinces everyone who hears it of its passion.

I guess I can’t communicate with these people. Once again, the bile of “superiority” helps digest everything we tell these people and turns it into fuel for their prejudices. How often has *that* occurred throughout history? “I think it’s time for them to go, Captain. Let’s send them on their way and get this finished.”

Security herds them into the pods, and I can't say we're sad to see them leave. Ivan and I watch as we watch them, one by one, into space. It looks like shooting peas out into the ocean; they disappear with nary a ripple.

"Do you know what your problem is, Kenneth?" Ivan says. It should be obvious to even people who aren't empathic that I'm depressed about my confrontation with Rivirko. "You're not angry enough."

"I'm *very* angry, Ivan." I reply, a little numbly. My mournful eyes continue to stare into space. "I just don't like feeling angry. If I let the words out, who knows what black djinn will slip out of that bottle."

"Kenneth Said, you are a moron," Ivan says that sentence with a tone that implies that I'm *not* one, except in this particular situation. "You don't think we should be angry? About the occupation of our territory, forced relocations, mass brainwashing, the death of our comrades, good people being accused of being war criminals, an insane war imposed on us by people who want to enforce an insane peace, not to mention the wilful murder of the damn Crysian, one of those so-called 'higher beings' they allegedly revere?" Ivan stops to take a deep breath. "It's time to stop feeling guilty about this mission – to stop trying to be *morally better* than them – and go out there and bomb those bastards' planet with a smile on our face."

"Is that an order, Captain?" *Do you mind if I use the ready room for an hour or so of primal screaming?*

"Abso-damn-toot-ly!" Ivan replies, getting the weirdest looks imaginable from everyone on the bridge as he grins like the most cunning fox you've ever seen. "Today is the day that the party starts."

Meska, small green world, our verdant enemy in full bloom, is now only hours away. We warp close to the planet; each of us is keenly aware with each passing heartbeat that we're approaching not just a planet, but history. The hours pass with surprising quickness – and then we come out of warp, and proceed at high impulse toward our green enemy.

"They've spotted us!" Francis says – we're ninety-six million kilometers from the planet, seven minutes at our current speed. "There are six orbital satellites, ancient drone launchers, coming online."

"Take them out when we get into range."

"One of the defense satellites just blew up, Captain." T'Doroth also analyzed the sensor data.

"Three other defense satellites are inoperable, most likely due to age and poor repair."

"They have sent a general distress signal," Francis states. "They are also calling for our surrender. Should I tell them to go to the Great Crushing?"

"The Great Crushing is the Rovillian Hell of deep water. I have no clue if the Meskeen have a Hell." I correct.

"I think it involves a hot skillet, a lot of butter, and a good French chef," Ivan smiles. For someone who's commanding one of the most important missions in Federation history, he's certainly showing no sign of nerves. "Open a channel, Mr. Gable. Give me every channel you can access."

Gable nods and adjusts the board. "All channels opened, Captain. Ready to launch testosterone torpedo on your signal," he adds, once again jabbing the Captain's verbal tendencies at an inappropriate moment. I guess Ivan's used to them, or he's not about to let anyone spoil his fun.

“This is Captain Ivan Hazard, *USS Galatea*. In light of ongoing acts of aggression and the Concordium’s unwillingness to enter into good faith negotiations, the United Federation of Planets is launching this retaliatory strike against ISC facilities. At this time, we advise all citizens of Meska to find a safe and secure refuge. We will not target civilian facilities, however collateral damage is always a risk.”

“Sir, request permission to deep scan for Federation personnel.” Hazard asks.

“Sure,” Ivan says. “With only two defense satellites in play, we probably have breathing room. However, our priority is the targets we confirmed yesterday: the planetary communications grid and the orbital sensor array.”

“And the moon?” T’Doroth asks.

“It’s still a tertiary target.” Ivan had mentioned this at the previous day’s briefing, but from his more raucous tone, it was not inappropriate for T’Doroth to repeat the question. “Let’s monitor their communications traffic to see if we’ve got their attention before we do anything *that* drastic.”

Three minutes later, *Galatea* began to shoot the drones out of the sky with well-placed Phaser III shots; ECM reduces the barrage so we only take five hits, distributed on three shields. Two minutes later, we’re in weapons range of the planet.

“How fragile are those defense satellites, Mr. Gable? Can we take them out with a shot apiece?”

“A phaser-1 would do it,” Francis answers.

“Change of target, Mr. T’Doroth. One phaser-1 apiece.”

“Aye sir,” T’Doroth says. “Firing weapons,” she adds, and the drone launchers cease to exist. *Galatea* triumphantly slips into orbit.

“No sign of any Federation lifeforms on the planet. I’m detecting several surgically altered Romulans though...” Francis says.

“They can keep them,” Ivan spits. “I hope they both have *fun*.”

“We’re being hailed by a number of planetary officials.” Francis adds. Ivan notes the information without stating a response.

“Our telepaths report a number of attempted telepathic intrusions,” Lars reports. “So far, we are successfully resisting.”

“Good. We’ll keep to high orbit, just to make things difficult for them...” Hazard states. Fortunately, even a good telepath, like any weapon, has a distance limit. “Francis, let me know when a leader type of suitable rank hails us. T’Doroth, let me know when we’ve got Phaser-1s recharged.”

“We have our Phaser-3 back. Phaser-1s will be back in seventy seconds...”

The report is interrupted by a sudden rocking of the ship, and a blue field envelopes us. “Tractor beam!” Francis reports. “It looks like it’s coming from a commercial facility. I think someone’s taking the defense into their own hands.”

“Can we break it?” Ivan barks.

I gauge the strength of the tractor and nod. “It’ll take a couple of minutes. And it will pull us down a bit...”

“Damn local heroes,” Ivan snaps. “Francis, tell them they’ve got fifteen seconds to shut it off or we’ll hit it with our Phaser-3,” Francis attempts to hail the facility, but either he’s not raising the right frequency, or they’re ignoring us. We fire a Phaser-3 at the facility – narrow-beam, as precise as possible – and it vaporizes in one shot.

“Facility destroyed, Captain.” T’Doroth’s voice does not reflect the intense sadness she’s feeling at the moment. We just shed some blood. “Phaser-1s will be online in twenty seconds.”

“Target their communications array, Mr. T’Doroth, and launch an alpha strike on my command.” Ivan says, leaning forward in his chair. “The next thing we need to worry about is transporter bombs...”

“There are numerous attempts to lock onto us from their planetary transporters,” Lars reports. “But our shields are preventing any boarding action. Telepaths report that they’re trying to lock onto anyone who might know our shield activation codes.”

“Good thing I disabled them.” I smile.

“I thought I felt something crawl through my head.” Ivan snarls, referring to the telepath. “Francis, have you got a conversation for me?”

“*Al’anaev* Rakyрка, onscreen.” The viewscreen blinks, and displays a large, grey-green-brown-speckled Meskeen (a female, judging from her protruding neck sac) who’s seated on an armless chair that almost looks like a big rock. It’s obviously some sort of council chamber; the ISC emblem is displayed prominently, and there are other Meskeen, heads bowed and bodies crunched so the *al’anaev* is the only one prominent in view.

“We will not surrender,” the *al’anaev* snaps defiantly. “Though the stars chill, and Desskyie crumbles, we will not give our surrender.”

“I have not requested it, *Al’anaev*.” Hazard says. “You have attacked us, now we attack you. It’s that simple.”

“We have never attacked a capital world, or even one of the homeworlds of one of your major cultures.” Rakyрка states in a clipped, angry tone. “They are sacrosanct. Your basic violation of this fundamental principle is proof that the heart of the Federation is the heart of a barbarian.”

“You can save the arguments for your diplomats, *Al’anaev*,” Ivan retorts, squeezing the arm of the comm chair like he wants to strangle it. “I’m a soldier. Your people turned me into a soldier by starting this conflict, when I was perfectly happy as an explorer.”

“Don’t take that moral tone with me, Captain,” the *Al’anaev* shouts. “We know who the real authority is on *Galatea*... deceiver, liar, murderer! You dare to speak of diplomacy while the greatest criminal ever produced by your race of criminals stands behind your chair and prods you while you dance!”

Ivan doesn’t even hide his disgust. He makes a slashing motion across his throat, and the transmission is cut. “The bastards still won’t bend their pride. Francis, advise the communications facility that they have five minutes to evacuate their personnel. T’Doroth, change in plan, let’s take out the unmanned sensor relay, now.” he instructs.

*Galatea* fires a flaming breath. The sensor relay ceases to exist. “Secondary target destroyed,” T’Doroth states calmly. Five minutes later, two phaser-1 shots and a phaser-3 coordinate perfectly on the communications facility, cutting through armor and superstructure, vaporizing the building. Let’s hope they evacuated everyone in time.

“Primary target destroyed, Captain.” T’Doroth says. *Galatea* continues to wheel gracefully in high orbit, a kingfisher scanning the ocean for its next meal. “Shall we get in position to attack the moon?”

Ivan takes a deep breath. “Kenneth, you’re my first officer. What’s your advice?”

“I don’t think they’d be in any mood to appreciate any restraint we’d show them,” I say. “Let’s do it. One shot. Later we can tell them about the damage we could have done with multiple volleys.”



“Move us into position, Mr. T’Doroth. Let’s keep the splash to a minimum...”

“Sir!” Gable shouts with almost unprecedented urgency. He takes control of the viewscreen to display the object that caused his panic. “I don’t know where it came from, but an ISC command cruiser has just warped into the system.”

The viewscreen stares at a black menace, a ship easily large enough to destroy *Galatea* in its current condition with two well-placed alpha strikes. It’s currently eight minutes away from us at maximum impulse, and could easily catch us even if we went to our best warp speed.

“What is it that the Klingons say?” Ivan muses sourly. “That ‘death is what happens when someone overstays his welcome’?”

The Desskyie system is one of the most sprawling star systems I’ve ever encountered; any system with a Dyson Sphere at its center would be unusual on its own, but it’s a *large* Dyson Sphere, around which thirty artificial worlds revolve, spread over an area about a twentieth of a parsec in radius, each warmed and illuminated by its own artificial, refuelable sun. I can only imagine the thoughts that are racing through the Captain’s mind at the moment; that somewhere in this solar system, there has to be the means to escape this place, a cosmic rabbit to be pulled from the hat of the stars.

“Overstays his welcome?” Lars wonders as Hazard motions for T’Doroth to take us out of orbit. “I thought the saying was ‘today is a good day to die’!”

“T’Doroth, we’re going to forego the shot. Get us out of here, 236 Mark Neg-127, maximum impulse,” Ivan instructs. “And Lars, no real Klingon would *ever* say that. They’d rather kill the other son of a bitch.”

“Course entered, leaving orbit,” T’Doroth states.

“I believe the command cruiser was stationed on a planet on the far side of the Sphere,” Francis reports, playing the role of a serious science officer better than expected. “Nothing was listed on the chart as military there, but the planets have so much variety in their ecosystems that the perfect training ground’s available for virtually any environment.”

“Fascinating, Mr. Gable, but - for the moment - trivial,” Ivan says, ignoring Francis as he sticks out his tongue at him. “We can’t engage the cruiser, and I don’t intend to surrender. Suggestions?”

“Activate the distress beacon on the escape pods. If they stop to perform a rescue operation it will buy us time,” T’Doroth suggests. Ivan nods, and T’Doroth sends the signal.

“They are ignoring the distress call,” Francis notes after a few seconds. “Captain, we’ve got another problem. There are a number of large mining freighters scattered throughout the system. On their own, they’re slow and poorly armed, but they’re beginning to come together...”

“And if they intercept us as a fleet, they’ll be a problem,” I remark with a sigh. “Especially if they slow us down. Well...”

“We knew the odds of escaping this system were low,” Lars says, resigned. Ivan looks like he wants to stamp his foot in disgust, but that wouldn’t do us any good, not now. The silence is long and ominous, almost as ominous as the incoming ISC command cruiser, that dreadnought with legs.

“We’ve heard mentions that there’s a telepathic parliament on the Dyson Sphere itself.” Hazard finally muses. “But the gravitational pull of the sphere...”

“It’s countered by rotational factors,” Francis says, “And who knows what technology is inside? Heavy graviton beanstalks aimed at the right point...”

“...is at best, some schizophrenic genius’s pipedream,” I don’t think Ivan wants to get into a duel of technobabble with Francis at the moment. “But you’re right, just because we don’t know the explanation, it doesn’t mean it’s not an option. One does wonder how a culture can grow up to be as arrogant as the Meskeen when you grow up in the shadow of something so overwhelmingly grand.”

“All assertive cultures display a streak of arrogance,” T’Doroth says. “Even Vulcans.” As desperate as the situation is, the bridge almost bursts out into laughter – Vulcans are about the most arrogant culture any of us knows. I can sense T’Doroth is annoyed by the amused reaction, mine in particular.

“It’s got a surface area of about three hundred and eighty-four *quadrillion* square kilometers of real estate,” Francis informs us. “And there are habitable areas.”

“You think we should transplant, Mr. Gable?” Ivan asks.

“It’s better than dying. And it’ll take forever for them to find us in a place that’s *that* big,” Francis replies. “Why not wait out the war in a place where *we* control our fate, rather than in an ISC death camp?”

“Twelve moons...” Lars gasps an Efrosian oath. “The lunatic actually makes a lot of sense.”

“I agree.” Ivan states. “Kenneth?”

It’s good that he’s actually consulting his command staff on such an important decision. “That’s easily our most viable option, Captain.” I respond. There’s not a shadow of a doubt that I’m right.

Ivan gives a hard breath, and he presses the conn button. “All hands, we will be evacuating *Galatea*. Move all essential goods into our spare transport pods and stand-by for final evacuation on my signal.” Ivan bows his head. “T’Doroth take us to low orbit around the Sphere. Francis, you need to find us a good place to set up a campfire and sing rousing courses of *Kum Ba Ya*.”

“Scanning for *Kum Ba Ya* zones.” Francis smiles. “There *is* water on the surface, and areas with vegetation. There’s also clusters of technology whose function I can’t begin to describe, including conduits that lead below the surface of the Sphere.”

“Those would make good hiding places in case things aren’t quite as rosy as we hope,” Lars states.

Lars’s statement makes me wonder what else is on the Sphere. What we’ve heard so far is pretty sketchy... “Francis, do you have any idea where that ISC parliament’s located?” I ask.

“Are you thinking of launching a protest?” Francis replies.

“I’m serious, you... chowderhead!” I snap.

Normally Francis would grin in response, but for now he’s simply content to lecture. “Most of the livable areas are close to the equator. It’s probably near one of the technological enclaves, but there’s only several billion of them to choose from.” he replies. “Kenneth, the scope of this thing’s incredible. Take the surface area of every Federation world and colony, combine them, then add the Klingon and Romulan Empires for taste, and that wouldn’t even begin to fit them on the equatorial belt of the Sphere. It makes you wonder why the Meskeen ever left the system.”

“I take it we’ve got a rich variety of options...” Hazard says.

“Maybe not.” Francis says. “Another ISC ship – a strike cruiser – has just lifted from the surface of the Sphere.”

“We’re outgunned, but we might be able to take it,” I say.

“Their boarding parties would rip us to shreds.” Lars contradicts me. “I’d put any one of my people up against three ISC boarders, but we’d be facing more than three to one odds. Once our shields are down, we’re dead.”

“Captain, we’re being hailed by the Strike Cruiser. They’re sending two signals, one on a public channel, and a second that’s being broadcast in a tight beam.”

“Split the screen.” Ivan instructs, and we get two views of the same commander – Rovillian, not Meskeen.

“*USS Galatea*, there is no escape. Surrender while you have a chance. I understand you barbarians pride yourself on dying in the line of duty, but civilized people will submit to the merciful authority of the Concordium.”

“*USS Galatea*, look for a charged magnetic anomaly on the Sphere at 0 by 23 71 87. Reinforce your forward shield so it ignores our alpha strike, then shoot past us, find the anomaly, land, and power down. They won’t be able to find you.”

“How dare you make such a demand!” Ivan snarls, playing to the general audience. There’s a pause for a few seconds as the commander composes two replies.

“*USS Galatea*, I should have expected such an arrogant response. I take no pleasure in avenging those you murdered on Meska, but there will be satisfaction.”

“*USS Galatea*, you will have to trust that we are your only hope. As proof... Luiif and Jensen send their regards.”

The transmission ends. “I hate it when the options evaporate,” Ivan says. “Let’s do what they say. And hope that Kenneth’s psychotic ex-Captain isn’t going to get us all killed.”

“Well, knowing Greg,” Francis says acidly. “If he does, it’ll be spectacular. The man can’t scratch his behind without turning it into some grand opera.”

We shoot past the strike cruiser, absorbing its alpha strike, and proceed to the landing zone. I think we manage to avoid the notice of the command cruiser; it still annoys me that they didn’t stop to rescue the escape pods. Once again, the “guardians of life” prove themselves to be anything but what they say they are. There’s nothing in the universe more infuriating than blatant hypocrisy.

Close approach of Desskyie turns out to be one of the most surreal experiences of my life. We slow to one tenth impulse, then one-thirtieth, and even at that speed, it grows without the abruptness that you always get when you approach a planetary body – the boom! and you’re there! effect – its gradual growth reminds me more of an approach to a large nebula. From a distance, it’s a dark brown-grey body, not unlike a dead star, but swollen. On close inspection, however, we can see plumes of light erupt from the surface (energy emitters, according to Francis) and the surrounding bodies are blue and green.

“Next stop, a place as big as God.” Trust Francis to put things in perspective and still be more annoying than anyone else in the universe.

So we approach the cosmic wall that is Desskyie, and ignore the impulse to gape in wonder like children looking up at the Pyramids. I hate ship landings, even in a ship that’s built for it, like *Galatea*, but the awe of the engineering achievement that is Desskyie causes all of my old prejudices to vanish. We follow the strike cruiser’s instructions, touch down near a large lake at the coordinates we were given, and hope we haven’t been snookered. Allocating battery power for sensors, life support, and transporters, our sensors determine that the place is habitable, so it’s time to put together a scouting party: me, Francis, a pair of redshirts, and Ivan.

“Nothing like lining up all your command staff to be picked off one by one,” Francis smiles. No one contradicts him. Yes, the alpha team’s top-heavy with command staff, but the best landing parties are usually the most experienced - and Captains do like to have all the fun. That’s what you get when you populate Starfleet with commanders who are still young enough to enjoy stretching their muscles. No wonder the Fleet’s full of cowboys (or “cowboy fascists” as Roger Price liked to call us). And it’s hard to get more cowboy than Greg, whom Starfleet tended to keep on a very slack leash, because he was willing to do the jobs that needed to be done that every other Captain in the fleet found distasteful or just flat out insane.

“How many Klingon houses have sworn vendettas against Greg?” I ask Francis casually as we disembark.

“Seven. Though I think one of them committed mass suicide from the disgrace,” Francis answers. I find that unlikely, but I don’t challenge him on it.

The exterior of the Dyson Sphere is a very pretty place. The sky’s about as dark as any sky I’ve ever seen, except for energy plumes and atmospheric condensers that shoot synthesized elements into the sky at odd intervals. “What I wouldn’t give for a flashlight,” one of the redshirts remarks. It’s the sort of remark that makes me want to grab my tricorder and scan the surrounding landscape, because it sounds just like one would say on a bad holodrama just before the monster strikes. And once again, I give into my worst impulses and scan.

“Six Rovillians and one human, about two kilometers northwest,” I report, a little surprised that my empathic link with Greg hasn’t kicked in yet. My connection with Greg was by far the strongest of any I had with my meldmates; we were capable of such subtle empathic interactions that most of the time you may as well have called it telepathy. But as we walk toward the life forms, I begin to feel him, and Francis does too. The combination is like a drug, and it’s hard to restrain myself from breaking out into a sprint.

“You sense something?” Ivan asks me when we’re about a half kilometer away. I don’t say anything, but I don’t have to – I guess my expression pretty much speaks for itself. “It’s him, right?” There’s no real need to reply. “Just when you thought life couldn’t be more of a Chinese curse, you find yourself walking into a Dim Sum palace,” he adds. And people call me a pompous ass. You’d think you could at least try to have a civil conversation with someone before you decide to hate their guts.

About sixty seconds later, we find them – six suited Rovillians, and Greg, wearing a loose robe like a pancho and a pair of tight fitting shorts. He has a smile on his face; but there’s something wrong. Last time we encountered each other, thanks to the Crysian’s telepathy, I’d thought he looked much better than he did on his last days on *Ark Royal*. Now, however, he looks a lot worse, a lot more ragged. There’s an empathic flash from Francis that tells me that not only does he share my concern, he senses something seriously wrong.

*I wish I could tell you he’s wrong. Greg’s face seems to say. But I’m glad you’re here.*

We embrace with the passion of long separated brothers, which we are. Greg squeezes a bicep and smiles. “Finally!” he exclaims. “You’ve decided to get out of a Jeffries’ Tube and live a little. You look great.”

“Thanks,” I say, wishing I could say the same about him. He shoots Francis a glance, and I can sense the connection between them –neither of them are as close to the other as they are to me, but they’re still brothers, at least metaphorically.

“So this is the famous Gregory Livermore Jensen,” Ivan says, eyeing him suspiciously.

“Lieutenant Commander Ivan Baron Rudgers Hazard,” Greg replies, returning coldness for coldness. “I’ve read the service record. Bullying *and* insubordinate. So I understand you weaseled your way into command of Kenneth’s ship.”

*Oh no.* I can already tell this is going to go badly.

“The chain of command changed,” Ivan snarls back. “You do remember what that the chain of command is, don’t you, Mr. Jensen?”

“Captain...” Francis says, referring to Hazard. “Trust me, this is the *wrong* man to challenge to this type of contest.”

“I remember, Mr. Hazard,” Greg replies, ignoring Francis as usual. “In fact by the same chain of command that you’re so recklessly invoking, I could take your ship away from you and bust you down to polishing sensors before you had a chance to spit.” Greg snaps his fingers to illustrate his point. “Though with the lack of professionalism I’ve seen on our record, I’ll bet you’d be too busy sulking to do a decent job on the polish.”

Okay. That’s gone far enough. I should’ve known better than to let Ivan have a confrontation with Greg – I can tell Jensen’s not in any condition to deal with it, and Ivan couldn’t handle Greg if he loses control. I take step between them.

“Greg, Captain Hazard has been a very good friend to me. I wouldn’t be in such fine shape if Ivan hadn’t hadn’t been looking out for me,” I counter. “I think an apology would be more than appropriate.”

Jensen blinks hard, and I can feel through the empathic haze that he’s genuinely surprised that I hold the Captain in such high regard. “My apologies. The last three weeks have been very difficult.” Despite the soft words, his enunciation is underscored by a hard, unforgiving tenor. The Crysian died three weeks ago.

“Fine, Jensen. We have a problem. The entire ISC wants us dead,” Ivan says. “I suspect the effort they’d willing to put in to ensure our demise would be about, say... equivalent to the effort that Starfleet puts into its combined operations for the next five years?”

“More. You hurt the one thing that matters to them. Their pride.” Greg replies. “But you won’t have to worry much longer. First, when things have calmed down, my allies have agreed to arrange freighter transportation for everyone aboard *Galatea* to Gorn space, where you’ll be able to get back to the Federation without too many problems. Second, the ISC will soon have much bigger worries than you.”

“Ah! Does Starfleet know about your little messianic mission, Captain?” Hazard asks, as I suddenly regret sharing Greg’s message with my then second-in-command. “I’ll bet they don’t,” he adds before Greg can answer. Right now, I’m wondering if I should hit Ivan before Greg does. At least Ivan can get up from one of *my* punches.

“Are you familiar with the phrase ‘need to know’, Lieutenant Commander?” Greg asks.

“Are you familiar with the phrase ‘rank-smelling fish droppings’, Captain?” Ivan snaps back.

“God,” Francis laughs. “An entire Dyson sphere, and it’s still not big enough for these two.” He turns to Captain Hazard with lifted eyebrows, and leans over to him, whispering in a low voice: “Normally Ivan, your whole ‘I loathe my superiors’ routine is extremely entertaining, but this is *not* the man you want to pull it on.” Especially now, he might have added.

“Stow it, Mr. Gable,” Ivan says, and he turns back to Greg. “I take it you have plans for my ship, Mr. Jensen.”

“No,” Greg says. “I don’t want your ship. Only its first officer.”

Ivan looks at me, and then flashes back to Greg. "He's my officer now," he insists, "And my friend. If you're planning to put him in danger, you're going to have to go through me first."

"What do you have in mind, Greg?" I ask, trying to cut off Ivan's concerns by dealing with Jensen directly. "Look, you know there's pretty much nothing I won't do for you, so just spit it out, and I'll volunteer. What do you want from me?"

I can feel an immense sadness in Greg right now. "I'm not just asking to put you in danger, Kenneth, I'm asking you to walk into what's almost assuredly going to be certain death," he says. "We can end this war, Kenneth, and we can save your ship, but it's probably going to require both of us to sacrifice our..."

"No... way... in.... Hell!" Ivan snarls, suddenly leaning forward and giving Jensen a double-handed shove to the chest that barely registers. "He's not your officer anymore, he's mine - you goddamn psychotic - and he's free of you, as of now!"

Greg shakes his head as I feel his annoyance level rise, like a kid who's getting tired of a dog that's yapping too much. "Captain Hazard, you don't have a say in the matter," Something in Greg *really* feels wrong; a part of him is enjoying this confrontation way too much, and it feels as though he's waging a losing battle to give into that emotion. "You don't understand the risk. And you can't win this fight."

"To hell with winning," Ivan says, and he removes the top of his uniform and throws it at his opponent, then leans forward in a combat stance that's as pure a challenge as any I've ever seen. "In case you have a problem facing a uniformed Starfleet officer," he smiles. I'm about to scream an objection at the top of my lungs, but Ivan smiles and says: "You're not talking me out of this, Lieutenant."

Francis flashes me a "to hell with both of them" look. The security guards look very confused, and the Rovillians appears even more aghast. "It's a dominance ritual," Francis explains to them. "Also known as culling the idiot..." he adds under his breath.

"Ah... violence..." one of the Rovillians says, understanding the situation.

Greg removes his pancho and leans back into a erect combat stance, a boxer's pose. The two men are of equal height, though Ivan's the more heavily built of the two. They look at each other for a second, sizing each other up. I want to rush between them and break this fight apart, but I'm getting a clear empathic message from Greg to let it run its course. Against my better judgment, I let it happen, fighting against a rising level of panic. Ivan's the sort of man who'll have a scrap with someone and use it to bond with them; he needs to test you before he respects you. On the other hand, Greg likes to test people too, but *never* with hand-to-hand combat or melee weapons. Jensen grew up fighting for his life on a daily basis on Gwai, and some instincts just run too deep.

Ivan throws a jab which connects with Greg's nose hard enough to crack the bone. There's blood, and I can sense Greg's astonishment; Jensen wasn't expecting Hazard to be so quick. Then something in Jensen completely snaps; it's a raw emotion, and sharing it may well be the worst experience of my entire life. It feels like what I felt when I first relived Jensen's childhood and adolescence, the feelings that ran through him when he stood over the man who murdered his sister, a man whom Greg once idolized as a god, and Ted Monarch's blood, blood as meaningless as rain, ran down his fingers.

With a growl, Greg Jensen ignores Ivan's defensive stance and steps into him. They stand chest-to-chest together like competing statues, then Greg grabs Hazard's head with both hands, and quickly twists his fellow Captain's head to about a one-hundred and five degree angle.

There's a sickening cracking sound and, feeling nothing but the battle throbbing hard in his breast, Greg Jensen lets his opponent go. Ivan Hazard falls dead to the ground.

### III: Speaking Words of Wisdom

“Said to Galatea, we have a medical emergency.” I kneel over Ivan’s body and shout into my communicator, trying to take control of the situation – in seconds, there’ll be brain damage, in minutes, brain death. “Get him directly to Sickbay, he has a broken neck, and he’s not breathing!” Jensen stands over us, feeling completely numb for a few seconds, then the transporter carries him away. In the dim light of Outer Desskyie, the sparkles take on a fiery appearance: the transporter, a pyre.

“Gentlemen...” Jensen finally says to the security guards, who have weapons pointed directly at him, but may just be too shocked to fire – and whose threat is panicking the Rovillians even more than Ivan's sudden death. “Mr. Said, Mr. Gable and I will settle things from here.”

“Go!” I snap. “We’ll deal with the son of a bitch,” I say. “Go now, that’s an order.” They signal *Galatea* and the transporter carries them back to the ship. As soon as they're gone, I jump on Jensen. He backs away, arms spread wide, making himself as defenseless as possible. I back him into a large rock, draw my fist back to hit him, and... he just looks at me.

“Why?” I snarl, unable to hit him. I expect him to blame Ivan for throwing the first punch, for escalating the conflict into physical violence.

“Because in order for him to sleep at night, your Captain has to know he did his best to save you.” Jensen answers. “And you can’t do much more for a friend than dying for him, even if it’s only temporary.” He takes a deep breath. “I know my self control is an atom's thickness away from falling completely apart, but...”

"It is?" Francis interjects sarcastically.

"You feel it, Kenneth feels it, and I know it... and Francis, for Christ’s sake, put down that phaser.”

Francis takes the phaser that’s in his hand – and I *know* he’d have shot Jensen if he’d gotten a clear, unobstructed view – and throws it aside. “You’ve lost the depriming, haven’t you?” Gable makes his accusation with a somber voice. A male Gwaian, once they pass the age of



adolescence, develops hormone imbalances that causes them to lose emotional control at a moment's notice. The Gwaiians usually solve the problem via castration, though the remedy that Greg found in Starfleet, a rigorous chemical program, was both more effective and more humane.

Greg nods. "The drug wore off about a month ago. Luiif tried to concoct a substitute, but the ISC's remedies have proven ineffective. I've thought about employing the traditional method – but I'm too much of a coward to do it."

"If Ivan's dead, and they can't bring him back – or if he comes back and they can't fix him right - I'm going to do it myself," I say with as much of a menacing smile as I can manage. I don't do it well, unfortunately (although Rigney tells me my Mirror Universe counterpart's smile is positively chilling), but what I lack in style, I make up for in sincerity.

"You've never spoken to me like this before, Kenneth."

"You've never murdered one of my friends before, Greg." I retort. He shakes his head.

"Hazard's going to be fine." Greg says. "I've used the exact same gambit myself, remember? I killed myself so I could make a point." He attempts to put his hand on my shoulder, but I brush it aside. The hand feels oddly heavy. "You're angry. But he'll be fine." Despite Greg's promise, Gable has skepticism written over his face. "You can make all the jokes about testosterone you want but believe it or not, Francis, he did exactly what a Captain should do. He defended his crew."

"And that makes your loss of control... positively spiffy?" Francis replies. "Where'd I put that phaser?"

"Enough of the jokes, Francis." I say. "I'm sorry, but I'm really sick and tired of them." I turn to Greg, who's still determined to find justifications for his fight with Ivan. "We're supposed to be heroes. Guardians of the Prime Directive, embodiment of the Federation's pristine values, explorers, poets, scientists, the enlightened knights of the Renaissance of the Cosmos." Greg says nothing.

"That's what it said on the brochures," Francis quips.

"Some Starfleet. They manipulated me, how many times? They sent me into certain death twice, first with the attack on Desskyie, and now with you and your little murder plot. Starfleet Captains are supposed to be the very best people the Federation has to offer, and yet I witness one of them kill another..."

"Don't be so hard on Starfleet," Greg interjects. "They have to defend trillions of lives scattered over many thousand cubic parsecs. I'm surprised they do as good a job as they do. As for us, we're far from perfect, but we *are* heroes, Kenneth. We give our lives freely, to defend the common good." Greg says.

I don't laugh – I could, but I don't. Instead, I walk over to the phaser that Francis dropped, pick it up, and train it on Greg. The Rovillians are startled – Allah only knows what's been going through their heads - but Greg waves them off. He's going to let me shoot him. I can feel his acceptance in his mind.

"Maybe it's for the best," Jensen says. "When a Gwaiian goes out of control, it's best to treat them like a mad dog. Back home, anyone who's seen what we can become tells themselves that it's better to die than to become like that."

"I can agree with that." Francis snaps, stepping beside me in a gesture of support.

“Just like Ted Monarch.” My recollections work for the two of us. “He saved a lot of lives when your colony was destroyed, he took a lot of risks, and then we both know what he became... a rapist and a murderer. Is that the sort of hero we’ve become, Greg?”

“Me, almost - maybe yes. Francis, not yet, though it’s in him.” To my surprise, Gable nods.

“As for you, my brother, you are whatever you want to be.”

“Oh... cattle pastures!” I snap, a sanitized version of an antique obscenity. “When? When was the last time I had a choice – a real choice - over my life? The war... Starfleet... the Crysian... Latham... you! Everyone’s tried to decide my fate except me!” I’m ranting so loud that my lungs ache. “I’m beginning to think Roger Price had the right idea, that cutting yourself off from the rest of the universe is the only choice a sane man can make....”

It’s then that I notice that Greg’s been as still as a corpse for at least five seconds. And, turning around, I see that Francis is just as frozen. And so have the (mightily confused) Rovillians.

“Okay...” I say, noticing the universe has become fixed in place around me. The haze that engulfs those few visible light sources on this section of the Sphere now appears much more solid, giving the barren landscape a haunted appearance. “Now what?” Someone’s done this – a remnant of the Crysian? Argos, who’s burst from his creche again? Some ancient intelligence within the Dyson Sphere who recognizes me as a cosmic whipping boy?

None of the above. A man, apparently human, who looks like he's on the cusp between middle and old age, walks toward me through the time-frozen landscape with a slow but steady gait. Instinctively, even without the temporal anomaly, I know that this man is far more than he appears.

“So,” I wonder, staring him down from the tip of his shoes to his roughly trimmed white beard. “Which one are you?”

“I have come to give you a choice, Lieutenant Said,” he tells me in a gentle baritone that sounds slightly British; his accent is almost identical to Latham’s.

“Really?”

“You have complained that your life has been manipulated by forces over which you have no control. I have observed you for some time, Lieutenant...”

“I feel *so* honored.” I’m not very good at sarcasm, but that time it came out just as I intended.

“...and while all creatures can make that claim, you have a better claim than most. I am prepared to set things right – to return to you to your Federation, onto any world you choose. You can resign from your Starfleet – or hide, if you think it's necessary, we could alter your appearance so no one would need to know who you truly are – and live the life you choose.”

I look into his eyes, and I wonder the question: Why me? I’m sure he senses it, but he doesn’t answer. “Does this apply to the rest of *Galatea*?”

“No. We have pledged not to interfere on that level again,” the man says, and that’s when it clicks – I know who, in the endless parade of *deus ex machinas* that have infected my life, this man actually is. The Crysian told me she talked with them – she probably asked them to keep an eye on me in the event that something happened to her.

I scrutinize this... being... as hard as I can. Part of me recognizes him as the closest thing to Allah I’ll ever meet, while the rest of me wants to scream obscenities at him for the rest of time.

“Mr. Ayelborne,” I address him, guessing at the Organian’s name – he was the one who originally dealt with the Federation and Klingons, and it makes sense that he’d be the one to deal with me. “It’s not a choice if I can’t rescue the people I love.”

“You would take their destinies away from them?” Ayelborne replies. “How often have you stressed the importance of free will to us? Do they not deserve the chance to shape their own fate? Did Captain Hazard not choose to continue his mission after the Crysian refused to accompany them? Did the crew not accept his choice of their own free will?”

“I hate it when you cosmic beings actually make a legitimate point.” I mutter as I throw down the phaser. “Sorry. I know the thought that I might actually use that weapons disgusts you.”

“Lieutenant Said, our disgust at your species’ violence goes well beyond its use of weapons,” Ayelborne explains. “That you even tolerate their existence causes us great pain. That you would even set foot on a planet where they are tolerated is a source of suffering to us.”

“Has anyone ever told you that you need to develop a thicker skin?” I blurt, not intending irony.

“We have been told. And our nature does not change.” Ayelborne replies.

“You *do* realize that the ISC is no better than we are.” I say. “Their methods are brutal – their reeducation camps are no better than Klingons. There is data aboard *Galatea*, we all know the story of Lieutenant Garth and the facility at...”

“Mr. Said, *nothing* has escaped our notice,” Ayelborne assures me, telling me something the Federation has wanted to hear from the start of the war. “Something terrible is coming, Lieutenant, a terror against which even we and the other transcendent races have no defense. Only the physical peoples have a hope of stopping them...”

“The Federation, the Klingons, the Romulans, Mirak...”

“And the Concordium.” Ayelborne explains. “It has been extraordinarily difficult for us to accept – most of my people would prefer to cease to exist than admit that violence may serve a useful purpose. That is why we have not spoken with your people lately, Mr. Said. The shame is even greater than our disgust.”

“But surely if you told us the exact nature of the threat, we might cooperate more peacefully?” I respond.

“Many of your peoples would never cooperate with the Concordium until they learn to respect them as killers.” That’s “soldier”, but that distinction means nothing to the Organians. “And the Concordium themselves need to accept their limitations. Humility is a hard lesson for them. We did not ask them to become peacekeepers to prevent a reoccurrence of your General War, laudable as that goal may be. The reason we asked them to fill that role because it will teach them the humility they need to know in order to ensure their survival.”

I gasp. “So that’s why this whole bloody mess is happening. A cosmic object lesson? I would never have guessed that great, noble, and almighty Organians would turn out to be so manipulative that they could give the damn *Tal Shiar* lessons.”

“It was not our plan.” Ayelborne admits. “But humans are not ready for the politics of the Old Galaxy.” It sounds like some races should be *allowed* to ascend to a higher plane. “Your peoples know us best, so the burden fell to us to act as intermediaries. As I mentioned before, our shame is great.”

“So you made a mess, and you expect us to clean it up?” I state.

“We did not force anyone to go to war, Lieutenant,” Ayelborne replies. “That was their choice. But yes, we have left your peoples with a great – and necessary – burden.”

I look down at the still form of Greg Jensen. “He and Ivan should have been the best of friends. They’ve got so much in common. The fight was just the way Ivan acts when he’s around people before he reaches an accommodation with them.” My breathing’s pretty sharp right now.

"The two of them remind me a lot like the situation you described to me between the galactic races. People who should be friends who end up killing each other."

"That's probably an accurate parallel," Ayelborne admits.

"Unfortunately, when you put even good people into conflict with each other... *this* is the sort of thing that can happen." I point down at Greg, and remember that terrible snapping sound. "It's like an opera, only it's real."

"Captain Hazard will not die." Ayelborne promises me. "And Captain Jensen may still be saved. Forgiveness will be hard, Lieutenant, but a friendship may yet develop if they both want it badly enough."

"Just like the Federation and the ISC," I muse. "There's a lot of good people in both camps, but..." And suddenly an impossible thought comes to me. He'd asked me where I wanted to go, but I suddenly realize that it's not where I want to go that's important, it's what I want to do. "Do you what I'd really like, Ayelborne? I'd like an opportunity to talk to the ISC and have them listen to me. To *really* listen, for a change."

"Certainly many people of the Concordium would pay attention to you, given your reputation." Ayelborne says. "However, it's highly unlikely they would try to understand you; rather, they would pick apart your words to find things that validate their own feelings."

"Unfortunately, whenever I try to be deliberate with my words, I turn into a jibbering jimmy-boy. And when I let them flow naturally, all that comes out is anger, and that'll just make the situation worse."

"We could help," the Organian tells me.

"No," I say. "I'm tired of *deus ex machinas*. This is *my* life now: life and death, success or failure, it's all me from this point. Captain of my fate, master of my soul." I add, quoting the Henley poem. "Thank-you for the offer. Just wish me luck, and if the worst happens, remember me as someone who tried to do the right thing, even if I've got as much chance at success as I have at reaching into the heavens and grabbing a star."

"Good luck, Lieutenant Said. You will be remembered," Ayelborne promises with a nod, and he walks away. Instinctively, I grab the phaser and point it at Greg. The universe starts to move again.

"Make your choice, Kenneth," Greg tells me. "Whatever it is, I will respect you..."

"Respect? Oh please!" I spit, probably doing a lousy job at hiding the change in my emotional state. I turn around, and I hurl the phaser away as far as I can. "If you really respected me, you wouldn't have put me into such an insane position. I know what you've been feeling lately, and guess what - I don't care. You're not getting out of life that easily. You have a mission, and you've primed yourself for it for months. But you'll have to put me in danger to do it, and the thought of that is killing you."

"I'm sorry..."

"No apologies." I snap. "I'm not listening to them. The only thing I want to hear from you is the mission profile, so spit it out Greg. What do you need me to do? Months ago, you mentioned a plan to assassinate the Meskeen elders. I take it from the fact that you're still alive and we haven't heard a howl of rage from the Meskeen that it hasn't happened yet."

"That's correct," Greg says. We both ignore the horrified expression on Francis's face.

"So where do I fit in?" I ask.

Greg clears his throat. "The Meskeen elders are the political – and telepathic - force behind the War of Pacification; without their intransigence, the ISC's will to fight this war would

literally collapse. Remove them, and you remove the chief barrier to peace. But the elders are inaccessible; they live in the deep undercaverns of Meska, completely inaccessible, even to me. They only emerge to preside over a few rituals and administrative duties.”

“Including the trial of war criminals?” Francis asks acidly. In his mind, Gable's practically begging me to walk away - now - but I don't.

“The ISC typically go into a person's mind to determine guilt or innocence of a crime – it's intrusive, but it's usually accurate,” Greg explains. “But we both know how good Kenneth is at resisting telepathy. If they can't get into his mind, they'll have to conduct a more primitive form of trial – an open presentation and examination of each case – and since we've gone to great lengths to manipulate the ISC propaganda machine into thinking that Kenneth Said is the worst specimen of humanity since Colonel Green...”

“The ISC elders will have to attend, and they'll expose themselves.” Francis completes the sentence. “So you're responsible for all those ISC broadcasts vilifying Kenneth. And I thought Latham was a manipulative bastard.”

“Of course, if I go to trial – even if you successfully assassinate them – I'll likely end up in an ISC reeducation camp.” I say, trying to stay as dispassionate as possible. I need to think about this very carefully.

“Our best guess is that they'll eventually lobotomize you, and replace certain centers of your brain with something more conducive with ISC thinking.” Greg speculates. Like Ivan, he has a habit of telling people things they already know. “But they probably won't do that to you until after the trial's over.”

“Would it matter to you if they did?” Francis asks.

“It would matter to me!” I exclaim.

“Kenneth, you can't seriously be considering forgiving him for what he's done!” Francis walks over to me and grabs my arms as a gesture of support. *Tell me you haven't lost your common sense* he might as well have added.

“I'm not forgiving him.” I state, as clearly as I can, again turning to Greg. “When Ivan Hazard shakes your hand, I will forgive you, and we will be friends again, but not before.” I state. “As for the mission, you can count me in.”

Francis looks at me like I'm closer to insanity than Jensen, but Greg acknowledges my choice with a nod, even though I can feel something churn in his stomach. He pulls out his communicator, but before Greg can signal his crew, three more Rovillians materialize. The original three Rovillian guards immediately converge on them, gibbering and squawking furiously – I can only imagine what they're saying, probably something along the lines of “these humans are crazy!” I recognize the oldest Rovillian from his worn features and the medical insignia on his suit, and I smile. “I was wondering when I'd see you again, Doctor.” I say.

“Lieutenant Said,” Luiif replies, bowing his dolphin-like head. “I am sorry that you have been embroiled in this conspiracy – much as I lament my own fortunes. I am surprised you recognized me.”

“I never forget anyone who's tortured me,” I reply.

“I never tortured you, Kenneth,” Luiif answers. “I *challenged* you.”

“It certainly felt like torture to me.” I reply, actually happier to see him than my words are indicating. It's subconscious bitterness welling to the surface, I suppose.

“All education and self-enlightenment feels like torture.”

I shake my head. Even now, he still thinks he had been doing the right thing! “You’ve haven’t changed much, have you, doctor?”

“Perhaps not. Unfortunately, the rest of the universe has seen quite a substantial change.” Luiif’s voice is more mournful than I remember it. I can’t really imagine how much it must be hurting this former torturer, a man trained to break people and drag their minds, kicking and screaming (yikes, that’s a really bad mixed metaphor) into the ISC lockstep, and now he’s involved in a conspiracy against the very same government. A righteous torturer must live a life of utter certainty, or they will break more easily than any other substance in the universe.

“The change looks good on you,” I retort. “As for how I recognized you – it wasn’t just the torture. Starfleet trains its officers to recognize different facial and body features for alien species.” I explain. Perhaps this isn’t the best moment for trivia or for long conversations, even though I’m *really* curious about the situation that forced him to turn his back on the ISC.

“Why are you here, Doctor?” Greg asks.

“Aside from enjoying the Ensign’s witty banter? The Meskeen command cruiser is approaching this position and performing a deep scan on the sphere’s equator,” Luiif says. “Even with the magnetic blind spot shielding your ship, I’m afraid it’s only a matter of time before they find *Galatea*.”

I could almost spit. I had a brief moment of hope where I imagined that once I was in ISC custody they’d ease their hunt for *Galatea*, but now it looks like they’ll fall into the Concordium’s hands before I can even help them. The thought of T’Doroth in an ISC reeducation facility is one I really can’t bear: it hurts both my stomach and my heart, and I won’t allow it.

“Doctor, do you know of any hiding places around Desskyie that are more secure?” I ask. It’s a desperation gamble, no question of that.

“The *Sound of Doves* is using Desskyie’s deep lakes as a base, but the cruiser’s sensors would likely penetrate them if they hit them with a deep scan. There is the access tunnels, but those are unnavigable. You might hide in them, but it’s unlikely you’d ever get out again.”

“I’m prepared to take my chances,” I declare, trying my best to ignore how easily the Captain’s mantle wraps itself around my shoulders. “If only we had Kollos back...”

“Who is Kollos?”

“A half-Medusan. Best navigator in the known galaxy – the only problem is that she was forced to disconnect from her body and since she now exists as an amorphous blob of energy, she can’t operate the controls.”

“We have ways to refuse a separated mind and body,” Luiif says. “The Astrians lose their connection with the physical almost as often than I surface for breath. I could reconnect her spirit with a little telepathic surgery.”

“Medusans drive people insane when they look on their true form,” Greg says. “It’s too dangerous, Doctor.”

“If I knew what triggered the insanity, I might be able to inculcate something that will deaden those parts of my brain that triggers the reaction.” Luiif responds. “Without a Level 9 psionic field augmenting the subject’s resistance, everything comes down to a battle between me and chemistry. And that’s a battle I *always* win.” The boast seems a little out of character for the Luiif I remember.

“I’d prefer that you stick to the original plan,” Greg says. “There’s no guarantee that they won’t dissect you before you go to trial, or that the *Korlivilar* won’t try to kill you. Luiif was going to be on station to keep an eye on you.”

“I’m not sacrificing my ship to save myself,” I reply. “Kollo is their best hope. If Luiif can help...”

“I will try,” the Rovillian promises, probably wondering what he’s getting into.

“We’d better get back to *Galatea*. Doctor, you’d better transport with us,” I add, handing him a transponder, then I pull my communicator. “*Galatea*, four to beam up... and keep the power footprint as low as possible.”

The transporter effect is a little long in coming. When we materialize, I can see why – Lars and six security guards are surrounding the transporter pad in a semi-circle, grim faces and phaser rifles trained on us. They quickly pivot to concentrate their fire on Greg Jensen.

“Wow,” Francis exclaims. “They really hate you, Greg.” Jensen shrugs.

“Stand down, Mr. Lars,” I instruct, trying to remain calm.

“Sir.” Lars says, remaining the perfect security officer even though his every instinct is to fire. “I believe that would be unwise. We should keep our weapons targeted on Captain Jensen until he’s safely escorted to the brig.”

“Captain Jensen will be confined to Mr. Gable’s quarters until further notice, pending formal charges.” I say. “Lars, we don’t have time for this. In less than an hour, an ISC command cruiser will be in scanning range of this ship, so stand down!” It’s as good a shout as I can manage under the circumstances. Lars lowers the weapon and the others follow his lead. As we pass him, Lars closes on Captain Jensen in a ridiculous attempt to express his disdain, tries to press himself against Greg and stare him down. I physically interpose myself between them and Greg walks past us without paying him any attention.

“Why protect him?” Lars snarls at me after they pass.

“I wasn’t protecting *him*,” I shouldn’t respond to his disapproving stare with a smile, but I do. I guess the Captain’s arrogance is coming back to me too. “Let’s get to the bridge.”

It’s been awhile since I felt the constant press of security around me, though Luiif is understandably the focus of their attention. The doctor, perhaps relying on past experience with the *Korlivilar*, does a good job of ignoring them. “The nearest conduit is here, Luiif says, pointing at the schematic. “And Command Cruiser *Sword of Remorse* is here...”

“We’ve got about forty minutes before they scan us...” I estimate.

“As soon as we activate our thrusters, they’ll spot us.” T’Doroth says.

“We need a distraction,” I counter. “If we can use emergency reserves to transport a distress beacon here...” I point to a location that’s a fair distance from *Galatea*, but not so far away that they’ll dismiss us. “If they concentrate their sensors on a deep scan there, we might end up in a bit of a blind spot. Then we slip away on thrusters, and get to the conduit. Once there, we try to lose ourselves.”

“Sir,” T’Doroth says. “At best, it will take us twenty-eight seconds to reach the conduit. The deep scan will only distract them for twenty seconds.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll buy you those eight seconds, that’s a promise.” I say. “Lars, I need you to supervise Dr. Luiif’s examination of our medical database.”

“I trust you have a good reason why you’re allowing him access.”

“He needs that data to heal Kollo,” Lars’s eyebrow ridge arcs. “Is that sufficient reason for you?”

Lars bows his head slightly, crosses his forearms and brushes them briefly. “I will supervise him,” he affirms.

“T’Doroth, the bridge is yours,” It’s probably going to be the last thing I say to her, but I’m doing my best to keep her from knowing my plans. I can’t – I mustn’t – let her see me leave. For some reason, I think it’ll be easier without a good-bye... and if that makes people think I’m a coward, then I guess the photon just hit the mark. “I’m going to check in on the Captain.”

It hasn’t been long since Bradley finished his surgery, but Ivan’s awake – barely, he’s not groggy, though strength and mobility aren’t exactly his strong point. He’s lying in a medical bay, a huge plastic vise yoking his neck, and the lines bouncing on the readout above the bay indicate his vital signs are weak. It looks like the most extraordinarily painful arrangement I’ve seen since I was tortured by the Romulans. I grab his hand and squeeze it. It’s cold, and there’s no strength in it at all, though he tries to squeeze back.

“You can start the machismo, Captain,” I say. “You know the dialogue you always say when things completely fall apart, when you spit in the face of impossible odds. The tough-guy talk that makes Francis want to change the gravity so he can get an extra bounce off the walls...”

“You’re running away with that bastard?” Ivan rasps.

“Yeah.” I reply, after a few reluctant seconds to consider my words.

“Then let go of my hand, and get the hell out of here, Lieutenant.” Ivan snaps.

I let go. He winces as a new wave of pain hits him, and I can see his blood pressure rise. “Take care of yourself, my friend. And if you can, keep an eye on Francis. He’s a very brittle man. I worry about him a lot.”

“Go to Hell,” Ivan spits, and then gives a slight cough that puts him in complete agony.

“Don’t worry, I am,” I say.

As I turn around. I hear the medical bay readout start to beat faster, and Ivan stirs in the bed as best as he can. Involuntarily, I turn back to look at him. He just smiles at me. “As long as you’re there, give some back at them, okay?”

“I’ll treat that as an order, Captain,” I say. “You softie.” Hazard always was soft-hearted at his core, for all his bitterness about the ‘Fleet. As soon as I leave his side, I immediately head straight for Dr. Bradley; he’s busy in his office shuffling records and although he doesn’t show it, I can tell he’s exhausted from his surgery on Ivan, and that he’s also peeved that he’ll be sharing his operating theater with a Rovillian. “So Doctor, what’s the prognosis?”

“He won’t be boxing any time soon...” Bradley says.

“No time for jokes,” I say. I’m about to walk into a situation I won’t walk away from, and all the jokes in the world won’t change that. “How does it look?”

Bradley doesn’t give me that *you shouldn’t ask such questions* stare I’ve come to expect from Doctors, and that alone is encouraging. “His left side is never going to be at one-hundred percent,” he informs me, glancing back and forth between me and Ivan. He’s talking in a low voice, though I’ll bet Ivan can hear me. “He’ll probably get back to eighty-percent capacity with a lot of therapy; at that level, most people probably won’t notice the handicap.”

“Ivan’s a pretty amazing specimen.” I agree. I’ve got the bruises to prove it.

“Exactly. His reaction times will probably still be in Starfleet’s top fifteen percentile. Though even this degree of loss can be psychologically devastating. He’ll need friends like you during his recovery - to support him, and to push him.”

"Friends like me," I repeat the phrase, so full of irony that I practically choke on it.

"And for the record, he’s really quite fortunate. A Gwaiian of Captain Jensen’s caliber has a strength roughly equal to a kodiak. The damage could have been a lot worse.”

“Death is pretty much a worse case scenario,” I reply.



“I could bring him back from a broken neck,” Bradley says. “But I can’t fix it when someone’s head is completely ripped from their shoulders.”

“Thanks for the image, Doctor,” I whisper grimly; there’s enough pain in front of me as it is. My time in Sickbay’s over, so I head to the door - just in time to meet Dr. Luiif as he enters Sickbay; he’s carting the portable stasis chamber that contains Kollos’s body. “Dr. Luiif,” I smile. “I take it this means you think you can do the procedure on Kollos?”

“Yes, I’m quite confident.” Luiif tells me, keeping half an eye on the cabinet controls. “It will be tricky, but it can be done. As I mentioned, I’m very good with chemistry.”

“Except for synthesizing Captain Jensen’s depriming drug.” I mention casually, just as I’m about to step out the door.

“I beg your pardon?” Luiif replies, and it stops me in my tracks. I look at him incredulously. “I haven’t synthesized anything for your Captain. If you’re referring to the medication to curb his aggressiveness, he had to discontinue it when we were transforming him for the mission.”

“Oh,” I answer, doing my best not to let Luiif know that he slipped. *Transformation?* “Well, I stand corrected. I thought you might have found a replacement drug that didn’t interfere.” I smile.

“I regret what is going to happen to you,” Luiif says. “If there is any comfort that can be offered...”

“Get Kollos up and running again. That will be thanks enough,” I reply, and I leave Sickbay as quickly as my legs will carry me.

I didn’t intend to turn this into the long good-bye, I really didn’t, but that’s what happens. I also didn’t intend to be kissed on the lips by a naked Francis Gable for twenty seconds, but that happens too. It gives me an unfortunate flashback to my Starfleet cultural acclamation class, where the instructors subjected you to things that made you intensely uncomfortable so you could get used to alien social customs, but at least Francis isn’t a big sweaty Italian who’s just barely smaller than Ensign Burke, and Gable doesn’t bite my lip. And I actually do care for this rangy annoying hedonist, far more than I care to admit. And - damn him, - he knows it.

“You worry about yourself,” I tell him, as he starts sobbing on my uniform. Greg’s here too; I think he and Francis had as much of a talk as our deadline allowed; we’ve got about ten minutes before we’re in position to make our move. “And take care of Ivan. He’ll need people to lean on during his recovery.”

“And T’Doroth?” he asks.

“You’d be the best person to explain the situation to her,” I say. “I hate to put this burden on you. On the other hand, she’s one of the strongest and smartest people I know.” *And Allah, every time I think about leaving her, I feel like Jensen broke my neck.* I gently break the pythonesque embrace he’s got around me. “Now get dressed, and get to the bridge – that’s an order. They’re going to need someone of your caliber at the science station when they enter the conduits.”

Francis heads into the sonic shower to clean himself up, and I turn to Greg. Part of me wants to confront him on what Luiif told me, but I’ve got a more important concern. Greg sits on the bed with an almost vacant stare on his face. Like a weapon before it’s been primed, it’s a bland, neutral beauty that could turn deadly at a moment’s notice. I can barely feel anything going on in there – I think what he’s still in shock over what he did to Ivan, and giving him time to think about it is *not* doing wonders for his mental state. “So was Francis still giving you the silent treatment?” I ask.

“My relationship with Francis has always been more complicated than yours,” he says. “And that’s saying something. He’s never forgiven me for not defending him when Starfleet forced him off *Ark Royal*.”

I’d guessed that Greg burned most of his favors with Starfleet Command getting me released from the hospital. I nod, and sit next to Greg. “How disillusioned are you with the Fleet, Greg?”

“Not as bad as you,” he says. “I was never the idealist you are. When you grow up like I did, the Federation looks pretty damn good, warts and all. And when you see what the rest of the galaxy has to offer, the competition looks pretty pitiful.”

“Greg, I need a favor from you. The biggest thing I’ve ever asked.”

“No,” Greg says. “I will not cancel my part of the mission because you have moral objections.” I sigh. “I agree that assassination is about as unbecoming as conduct gets for a Starfleet officer, but I’ve looked at the intelligence, and I’ve talked with the Veltressai and the Rovillian leadership, and even *they* have put aside their moral concerns to break the stranglehold that the Meskeen has on the Concordium. If these people – some of the most moral people in the galaxy – can do it, so can I. If I pull this off, the Federation is guaranteed peace.”

“It’s a deal with the devil, Greg.” I say.

“I know.” Greg’s blue eyes don’t reflect the sadness in his voice, though he leans forward in a contemplative melancholy. “Trust me, this was the hardest decision of my life.”

“Well, it should have been harder,” I tell him. “It should have been impossible. But I wasn’t planning to go that far. Greg, I’m going to get a chance to talk with the ISC. They’re going to listen to me. Maybe I’ve got as much chance of getting through to them as an Oberth has at escaping a black hole, but if it does appear that by some miracle I can actually start a constructive dialogue with them, then I want you to hold off. I want my shot to win them over with reason. And if that doesn’t work, then do what you have to do.”

“You propose a compromise,” Greg muses. I could feel him dismiss the idea even as I tell it to him. “I’ll consider it, but I’ll make no promises,” he says. I can tell he’s lying, but maybe he’ll change his mind. He looks at the holostand I’ve got on the night table beside my bed, and flips through the pictures. “I don’t recognize any of these people, Kenneth.”

“It belonged to a man named Roger Price, he was killed by the Romulans about three months ago. I’m holding his effects in storage – I promised I’d deliver them to his son on Westminster.”

“Was he a friend?”

“He was an ally of convenience. He actually tried to kill me once or twice. But in the end, he saved my life, and it’s the last act of a friendship that carries the most weight.” I tell him. I hope that it won’t prove to be an omen of things to come.

There’s still time before *Galatea* can make its optimum move, but with the hatred onboard toward Greg, it seems like a good idea to get to the transporter room early. I’m conscious of the fact that I’m never going to see this girl again, Miss Malfunction, USS Gala-ticked-off, USS How Not to Design A Starship, I’ve heard them all (and even come up with a few choice ones myself).

And, just when I thought my departure from *Galatea* couldn’t become more of an emotional battering, that’s when the door to the transporter room opens and I see T’Doroth waiting for me.

“Uh... hi...” I stammer. I can tell she’s angry – the one drawback about being so strongly accepted by her is that she doesn’t have too many problems showing other emotions to me.

“Are you getting forgetful, Lieutenant?” The coldness in her voice is reflected in her mind.

“No. Just boorish.” I admit. “I guess introductions are in order: T’Doroth, Captain Jensen; Jensen, T’Doroth.”

T’Doroth turns her back on Greg before he can even offer his hand. I’m almost proud of her.

“T’Doroth is the woman whom I intend to take as my wife, Greg,” I announce, putting my hand on her shoulder. She touches it, grabs it, and draws it to my side, a motion that manages to be both exhilarating and heart-breaking at the same time.

“I didn’t know,” Greg replies, caught off-guard for one of the few times in his life. “I’d offer congratulations, except...”

“You are taking him from me, to die, or – worse - to be mutilated beyond recognition.” T’Doroth says. “And before you insult my intelligence and my logic by telling me that he accompanies you by choice...” There’s a moment of rather intense contempt that almost shows on her face. “I doubt very much that Kenneth’s purposes match those of Starfleet’s Fallen Angel.”

“Tsai T’Doroth...” Greg says.

“Lieutenant T’Doroth, or T’Doroth is more accurate. My family’s station does not warrant the honorific.”

“Lieutenant T’Doroth, you’re a pacifist, aren’t you?” Greg says, circling her slowly. She raises an eyebrow. “Your talents, and your sense of duty led you to be assigned the position of Weapons Officer. You could have refused, you know.”

“Even a pacifist must take arms in a necessary war.” T’Doroth explains. From most people, that would be a lie. “What is your point?”

“It must almost kill someone who normally would refuse to hurt a fly, but whose job requires them to fire weapons that kill hundreds of people with a single shot.”

“I do that job, in accordance with a military code of conduct, yes, and the laws of Starfleet which I respect.” T’Doroth says. “Yes, Captain, I am not unfamiliar with the parallels between us. There are some on Vulcan who would call *me* a Fallen Angel. But you are no pacifist. And if my hypothesis about your mission is correct, the differences between us easily overshadows the parallels.” She turns to me, and in her mind, she’s coming as close as a Vulcan can get to groveling. “Kenneth, are you certain this is what you wish to do?”

“It’s the choice I’m making,” I insist. “T’Doroth, this is my chance to communicate with the ISC and present the Federation side. They’ll probably ignore what I have to say. But I might be able to plant a seed of peace that someone can harvest at a later date.”

“Just as Surak walked into the arms of certain death,” T’Doroth says. She sighs, and draws close to me. “You have chosen a path I dare not impede, and yet...”

“I never saw myself as Surak. I guess I’m surrounded by metaphors at every turn,” I mutter, trying to preempt any bad feelings. “If I die in the same way as those Vulcans you most highly respect, then I guess it’s not as quite bad as I thought.”

“No. You offer me little solace, Kenneth Said. Logic tells me that we have known each other for only a short time, and that your absence will quickly pass. But something... something else... tells me that this shall not be so.”

I wish she hadn’t said that; the statement just about kills me. “I just wish I was a better speaker,” I respond, trying to focus on the mission. “I wish in my most deliberate moments that I could remember my passion, and bring those two qualities together more effectively, without becoming a stuttering fool or an angry idiot.”

T'Doroth turns and touches my forehead. Suddenly I feel like I did during our first meld, in that moment that changed my life. I sigh, and my mind collapses into hers, a gentler union than any the Crysian ever gave me, a strength that seems less like an imposition and more like a magnification of my best aspects.

"*I shall not forget you Kenneth Said,*" she says, and there's no sentimentality in that promise, it's a reality. "*And in your hour of need, you shall also remember.*"

I don't know what happens to *Galatea* after I leave. Maybe Kollos awakes, and saves it, and it's headed for a place where I'm told even the Meskeen have never gone, into the inner core of Desskyie. Maybe the ISC noticed our transporter signal and killed it - no, that's just paranoia talking. Greg and I beam down to the surface. I search the sky for my ship, but it's too far away.

Using Greg's signal, the Rovillians lock onto us and quickly beam us over to a second position, well away from *Galatea's* sensor window, so we don't draw the cruiser's attention to the ship. I guess everything's working according to plan. The surface of the Sphere is unnervingly smooth and dark, like the Siberian planes on a dead winter's night, as it must have been before they put in Earth's weather control systems.

"So you were going to get married?" Jensen wonders.

"A woman like her shouldn't have too much trouble finding a good Vulcan boy," I blush.

"Has anyone ever given you that sort of a tongue lashing, Greg?"

"I think she hit me harder with her silences," Jensen replies, and for a second, I sense the old Greg is back again, a man of immeasurable strength and occasional subtle humor. "So you're engaged." He takes a deep breath. "I didn't expect this. Had I known, Kenneth..."

"Well we all have our share of surprises," I'm doing my best to avoid excessive conversation. "Take you, for example. I still haven't figured out how you escaped from *Ark Royal*."

"Oh, that." Greg says casually. "We abandoned the bridge by Access Tube 3. The only one that wasn't blocked."

"But that's a dead end," I reply. I know those tubes well. "That'll only get you down as far as the forward photon array."

Greg nods. "That was all we needed. Only me and three others survived the barrage. We found environment suits and life support pack, climbed down to the photon array, loaded ourselves into the forward photon torpedoes, and had ourselves launched into space. It shot us clear of the wreck. Four days later, an Orion scavenger team salvaged the torpedoes, and brought us back to the Cartel. Eventually, we were sold to the ISC. From there, things got very complicated and political *very* fast."

"You mean that fake admission of complicity?"

"No. Something *much* worse," Greg said, staring hard at anything that wasn't my face.

My communicator blinks, signalling us that *Galatea* needs us to send our signal now. I guess I should be thankful it spared me quite a dreadful conversation. I'm almost happy to hail the ISC command ship.

"Greetings, *al'traes*," I announce, even though he's probably a higher rank. "My name is Kenneth Ali Michael Ibn Said. You've made some inaccurate – and frankly, insulting – statements about me, and I'd like to set the record straight."

We materialize in a circle of Meskeen soldiers: almost three meters in height and thickly built, clad in worn leather armor that looks like ancient flayed animal skins, an emblem resembling

three interlocked claws in a yellow warning triangle draped over the center of their chest. I can sense their fear pique as soon as we come solidly into view. Allah knows where we are, we're probably aboard the warship; the air tastes too pure and clean for the Sphere. Towering a meter above the other Meskeen is the gauntest Meskeen I've ever seen. His red eyes slightly sparkle in a white, washed-out light, but there's no fear on his frog face.

"Greetings, Al'stazi," Greg smiles as we materialize. I'm content to let the Captain take the lead in negotiations, then Jensen steps behind me and grabs me in a chinlock/hammerlock combination that's so tight that it's hard to breathe. "As I mentioned earlier, you will have to employ extreme caution in handling this prisoner. If you want my assistance, it'd be a real pleasure."

"Ow!" I exclaim. The pain is real, and so is the grimace on my face – but I sense in his mind that this is all an act, a street theater's production of betrayal.

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant, but I'm afraid that I haven't..." he tightens the noose around my neck, "been entirely candid..." He tightens again. "...with my..." And again. "...true allegiances..." He lets go, grinning like a madman, shoves me slightly, and when I turn around, he lands a hard fist to my mid-section. Actually by Greg's standards, it's just a love tap, though it still hurts like the devil. "You don't mind if I work out some of my aggressions on him?" he smiles.

The Meskeen leader's eyes shift, blackening slightly in disapproval – blood flooding into his irises, I guess. Greg stops the beating long enough to give me my first clear view of the surroundings, which confirms my earlier opinion that we're either on an ISC ship or a base. Dark bronze-colored metal walls give this place an almost medieval appearance, which is contradicted by everpresent rounded, sensor panels, and blinking sensor displays set high in every wall. The walls are built with five meter tall, cathedraline ceilings, perfectly built to accommodate the giants of the toad-race.

"You promised..." I gasp at Greg, continuing our vaudeville melodrama, though the urge to vomit is real enough. "...that I'd get a fair hearing. And that *Galatea* would be safe."

"For a war criminal, you're awfully naïve, Lieutenant." Jensen overplays the line, but neither of one of us is expected to be critiqued on subtlety.

The Meskeen leader scowls and prods me with his foot. He should be thankful his boots are as thick as they are – he's not insulated against the psionic effects of touching me. "You shall get a fair hearing when our telepaths confirm your crimes," he says, not demonstrating much familiarity with the concept of "fair". "Your ship has attempted to take refuge in the conduits, but she will be hunted down soon enough."

Greg grabs me under my right arm and yanks me off the ground, almost dislocating my shoulder. "A pity you didn't show such concern for your crewmates when you served aboard *my* ship," he says.

"Bastard!" I snarl – I hate swearing, but the obscenity is so natural and yet so overplayed that I have to focus on the pain to avoid breaking into a smile. I swing wildly, and land a roundhouse right against the side of Jensen's face, then strike him repeatedly in the gut, an experience much akin to bashing your fist against a block of wood that's covered in a sheath of duranium.

*You're enjoying this, aren't you?* I can sense Greg's thoughts as clearly as if we still had full telepathy.

*Just as long as you don't get mad,* I reply.

"That was pathetic," Greg says, as he grabs me by the throat, lifts me off the ground, and lets me dangle helplessly for a few seconds. "You shouldn't play with your betters, boy."

Sorry he's actually saying. Whatever real conflict we had before has been shelved while we perform this cut-rate Tennessee Williams routine. *I'm really sorry, Kenneth.*

"Do not harm him, *al'traes!*" the Meskeen warns. No one wants damaged goods. Jensen hums sadistically as I twitch, smiling like a kid playing with a toy. Inside our minds, we're comforting each other as much as possible, even as we bring our little drama to a close. Carefully, expertly, and (despite the seeming violence) as gently as a Vulcan applying a nerve pinch., Greg Jensen chokes me into unconsciousness. As the blackness falls, the mingling of our feelings is a shared sob. Life is about to take a profound turn for the worse, for both of us.

I wake up naked in a cell, strapped to a table that's set to pivot on a vertical axis. I'm naked again – I always hate that, If I were glib, I'd say it was the worst part of being tortured. Of course it isn't, but it's probably the part that bothers me the most. Francis would probably say it was a sexual thing, but then, in his mind, there's nothing in the universe but vaguely concealed sexually motivated sexual practises. I'd swear that one look in Gable's mind would probably turn Sigmund Freud into someone who never wanted to talk about sex again.

I can't really judge time very well while I'm in here. Maybe fifteen minutes after I awaken, maybe as much as an hour, Telepath #1 enters the cell. She's a Meskeen with an odd reddish tint to her skin. She tries to reach my mind, but only senses my vague feelings. She touches me. She screams. She falls to the floor and writhes, and Meskeen blood pours out of several orifices. Several guards rush in, and drag her by the legs out of the room. Exit Telepath #1.

Telepath #2, another Meskeen, this time a brown-green male. I'd swear before a Starfleet tribunal that it's only been ten minutes since the first one left. He enters, walking with a non-descript gait, examines me visually, attempts to apply an unsuccessful mental probe, then injects me with a chemical. As he injects me, he accidentally makes contact with my skin, then he screams, writhes, and is dragged away like his earlier comrade. Exit Telepath #2.

Surgeon #1. A Rovillian with bluish skin, I think it's a male. He administers several drugs, and seems extremely nervous as he does it, like a man pulling a pin from an ancient grenade without knowing whether or not it's still armed.

"This will hurt a little," he tells me.

"Rovillians are such sticklers for manners." I reply. Almost as bad as Hydrans (or the Japanese). He seems slightly embarrassed by the compliment, then he pulls out a three-inch long needle, shows it to me, and inserts through my cranium and into my skull, penetrating deep into my skull.

"Now comes the painful part,"

That's when he flips the table to a fully vertical position, locks it, and begins the spinal tap. I stiffen my upper lip, British style, then bite it, desperately doing my best not to show the pain. I manage to stay in control while he's there, but as soon as he leaves, I spend the next three minutes screaming at the top of my lungs.

I never see him again.

Telepath #5. Q'Naabian, who wears a big red atmosphere suit like a vinyl Santa Claus. The "craterface" enters cautiously, and visibly snorting through the methane-filled helmet. I don't have any idea what that means – for all I know, it could be his race's equivalent of the sniffles.

He pulls out a sheet of sensor diodes roughly the size of a tricorder, and passes it over my body. I can see the reflections of various data, presumably in Q'Naabian script, reflected backward over a display on his faceplate.

"Will I live?" I ask him.

The Q'naabian ignores the joke, injects me with a drug, hovers over me for a few minutes, and tries to reach into my mind. It feels like a cold, solid weight pushing against my head. I fight against a sense of panic – I get the impression the drug was meant to induce anxiety, the sort which makes it hard to control their thoughts. The battle to control my thoughts, while the Q'Naabian presses against various parts of my psyche, lasts about ten minutes. When that fails, the Q'Naabian calls in a quartet of high foreheads, Veltressai with swollen skulls, even by that race's standards: Telepaths #6, #7, #8, and #9. They surround me, two stationed on each end of the table, the Q'Naabian standing over my chest, making arcane gestures, and I can feel their thoughts harmonize. The telepathic wave that hits me is worse than anything that the Vulcans ever did to me at Starfleet Intelligence, a true skull-crusher.

*Sing to us, Kenneth Said* cries the harmony.

I bite my lip again, and then my tongue, concentrating on that rough pain that's normally the product of human stupidity. That buys me a few seconds. But the telepaths regroup as well, and hit my mind with mental daggers while they probe for weak spots. It's a match of telepathic chess between effort, agony, and raw willpower.

"The mind has been altered," one of the Veltressai, Telepath #8, finally says. Why did he say that?

I focus my mind on some footage Roger Price showed me of his worst *bondo* fights, where Roger, settling a debt with an old enemy, threw the referee out of the the ring, then he and an equally beefy and sadistic Russian flayed each other with the strap and beat each other to a bloody pulp. The more violence in my mind, the more it'll upset them.

"It will not merge with ours."

I try as hard as I can to focus on the trading of kidney punches and strangleholds. I could try to compose a poem too: *sadistic stallions/ champions of the underground/ God how the blood flows...* well, I guess I just did, a bad haiku at that. I know that every word the telepaths speak aloud is for my benefit, to provoke a response from me. After all, telepaths don't *need* to talk to each other. But when they say something, I might inadvertantly think about the answer. Right boys?

"There is something else, another force is lodged in the mind," the Q'Naabian says. That information genuinely startles me, and for a second I think *T'Doroth*. "A Vulcan presence," the Q'Naabian adds.

"Can it be dislodged?" the Veltressai ask in unison.

"Without mutilation, unlikely..." the Q'Naabian says, a last desperate gambit to goad a reaction out of me. When that's unsuccessful, the telepaths keep pressing my mind for another ten minutes, hoping my defenses will crumble. But they're the ones who are tiring – telepathy is hard work – and finally the Q'Naabian nearly collapses. The relentless dancing within my skull abruptly stops. The telepaths finally depart, fuming, both their telepathic and ISC pride humbled, though they could take some solace in the fact that I'm going to be moaning in pain from this mother of all headaches for at least the next six hours.

Okay, so I owe this triumph to the Crysian attuning my mind so it's slightly off the standard telepathic "frequency". If the telepaths knew enough to spend a few weeks with me, like

T'Doroth did, they could probably adjust to it instinctively. But I'm not telling them that. It's still a major victory.

Assassin #1. Korlivilar, her skin patterns painted in a blue camouflage. I'm woken from sleep as she collapses against my body, scratching me slightly on my right arm as she collapses dead to the ground with Greg Jensen's prized military knife in her back. At least I think it's a female; maybe I'm confusing the lynxies with the Lyrans again (both are "feline" races, and the Lyrans are a matriarchy). Greg pulls the knife out of her back and smiles.

"Sorry to wake you," he says, examining a rip in his uniform. "He was a little tougher than I thought he'd be. I usually get a clean kill."

"Hi." I say. "Thanks for keeping an eye on my back. Traitor."

Greg examines the security cameras in the corner of the room, the assassin obviously disabled them. "Sorry about the choke."

"Sorry about the roundhouse," I reply.

"Sorry about letting the furry wetworks club get so close to you," Greg says. He pulls a chemical powder out of a small pack and sprinkles it on the Korvilar's wound, creating blisters. It's meant to fool a forensic analysis of the body; I guess he's worried that internal sensors would detect any use of a phaser to dispose of the body. "I took out three others before they got here, but it was touch and go on the last one." I shake my head. "And by the way, the roundhouse was pretty damn good."

"You've given me a lot of motivation lately, Greg." I say.

"Unfortunately, it's going to get worse," Greg replies, examining my wound. "I wish there was a way to get you out of this mess."

"It's not going to happen. But I still want you to give me my shot at convincing the ISC." I say. Greg's response is a chuckle, but it's permeated with sadness. He raises the table to a standing position, allowing my circulation flow normally, though he doesn't release me from my bonds, it still warrants a *thank-you*.

"Kenneth, I've had a chance to speak with five Concordium governments about the Meskeen. You don't have a hope in hell of convincing them." Greg says.

"I'd still like a chance."

"Hear me out, Kenneth. The Meskeen believe it's their destiny to impose a great and lasting peace on the galaxy, and if anyone gets in the way, they'll either be nudged aside like the Veltressai – who used to be the Captain's race before the Meskeen joined the ISC – or eliminated like the Mes'nok, a race that enslaved most of the parent species in this part of the galaxy about two to three thousand years ago, just before the Concordium came into existence."

"Mes'nok? Never heard of them." I say.

"That's by design." Greg tells me. "They wanted to join the Concordium at the same time as the Meskeen. Their empire had declined, their government had reformed, but the Meskeen never forgave them for the past crimes of their empire. An asteroid mysteriously came out of a blind spot and wiped out the Mes'nok homeworld, and the Meskeen suddenly found themselves without a rival for ISC membership. The toads know how to play dirty."

That's hardly a surprise. "What else did the others have to say about them?"

"Well, aside from establishing a Pax Meskana, they also have a personal agenda. The seven surviving Meskeen Elders were all involved in the initial explorations of Desskyie, the first landings of the Meskeen fifteen hundred years ago. Most of the secrets of the Sphere are still



locked in inaccessible areas. They've never even made it to the Sphere's interior. They've made no secret of the fact that they'd love to have Lyran or Vulcan or Cygnan scientists in the ISC, in case they can achieve what the Veltressai and the Q'Naabians have not been able to accomplish."

"And yet, they still say they're superior to us?" I can't really put my disgust into words. Greg nods.

"Kenneth, you're not just fighting prejudice. You're not just fighting against the arrogance of people who desperately need to cling to the myth of national supremacy. You're fighting against the politics of ambition. And you're fighting against the personal interests of people who are so powerful, it's obscene." Now Greg finds it hard to say the words. "We're both dead. We joined Starfleet knowing we might die in a hopeless cause, and it's finally happened. We've both done an incredible job of dodging the Reaper, but it's over. We need to accept that and make the last moments count."

"You're probably right," I say. "But I'd like a chance to pull off one last miracle before I die. Can you at least promise me that you'll wait until I'm finished talking before you make your move?" I can feel the doubt in Greg's mind. "Maybe I can change a few minds. If I can die thinking that maybe I made a difference, it'll give me some peace."

"Okay." Greg finally says, shaking my hand as well as the restraints will allow him. His hand feels cold and heavy to the touch – I guess the drugs have done more of a job on me than I thought.

"Greg, if you could be anywhere in the galaxy, doing anything you wanted, what would you do?" Greg thinks for at least thirty seconds, but he has no response to the question, it's not the sort of thing he thinks about. "I'm not sure how much time we have..."

"The Korlivilar cleared the building before their team came in. We've got hours, Kenneth."

"Building? So we aren't on a starship?" I ask, looking around.

Greg smiles broadly, once again reminding me of the Captain of old. "You're slipping!" he exclaims. "I'd expect a starship engineer to know when he's not aboard a ship!"

"I'm not at my best right now," I smile back.

"We're in the lower levels of the government complex on Outer Desskyie," Greg informs me. "Three kilometers away and eight hundred meters above us, the greatest minds in the Concordium are discussing important issues, reaching telepathic consensus, and informing the peoples of the ISC about the great policies that shall be enacted in the days to come."

"Oh." I say – for some reason that information makes a rather striking impression on me. "And what about *Galatea*?"

"Lost in the conduits, last I heard," Greg says. "I think the command cruiser gave up the chase, but I'm not sure."

"Greg," I've finally worked up the nerve to ask him the hard question. "What'd they do to you? Did they turn you into a bomb or something." Now it's Greg's turn to look startled. "Luiif mentioned a transformation, something so serious that you had to discontinue the depriving."

"You're the engineer, Kenneth," Greg says. "How would you turn me into a weapon, knowing what you know?"

Great. He's not even my commanding officer anymore, and he's still giving me engineering challenges. Some things never change. "Frankly, there are so many ways to do it, it's hard to speculate. Your Gwaiian viral infections are almost like nanotech when it comes to augmenting your physical capabilities, not to mention the sequences could be exploited in creative ways if someone could issue instructions to the viruses. And your cells are theoretically capable of

storing tremendous amounts of energy... which, being biological, would get you past sensors looking for weapons.”

“That’s true,” Greg says. “But that’s not a hypothesis, that’s a fishing expedition.”

“Of course, if you were storing energy, I’d expect you to be developing a fever, or at least sweat a little. Perhaps you’re incubating the Gwaiian virus inside you and you’re planning to infect the entire room...”

“That’s a line I’d *never* cross, and you know it.” Greg scowls. There’s no abomination worse than the one that most closely touched your life.

“I give up then...” I reply, clearly disappointing him. He always enjoyed the intellectual exercise even when it became tedious for everyone else – he really should have quit Starfleet and gone to work at the Academy. “Sorry, Greg, there are so many drugs running through my system that I can’t even think straight.”

“You’ll have to do better than that if you want to influence your audience.” Greg’s observation is pretty much on the mark.

“Do you have any idea when the trial’s scheduled?” I ask.

“The Meskeen have been persuaded to hold it tomorrow,” Greg explains. “It’s all going to be over soon.” I nod. It’s not what I expected, but it *is* good news. “I’ve looked over the procedure. There’s going to be over one hundred sapients involved, from every major race in the ISC, including all seven of the Old Toads. They’ll serve as lawyer, judge, and jury. A team of three Rovillians will present their case, a long presentation backed by telepathic evidence. Because witnesses report their telepathic memories, you don’t get to question them, but you’ll get your chance to interpret their thoughts during your presentation phase.”

“Okay, what’s that?”

“After they present the evidence, you get to make your presentation. The more focused on rebuttal, the better. Unfortunately, because you won’t have telepathic evidence to back your claims, everyone will assume you’re lying. Just another of the unsurmountable barriers in your path.”

“It sounds like I have free rein during my presentation.”

“That’s probably the only thing in your favor. You wanted a soapbox, you got it.” Greg informs me. “Just make it a show to remember.”

*Remember.* The words carry both a memory and a portent. T’Doroth is in me; a fragment of the Vulcan soul is coursing in my mind. “Greg, I’ve got another favor to ask.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t want them to turn me into another Teller – a trophy for their propaganda machine.” I say.

“You won’t.” Greg says, rubbing the top of my head with almost schoolboy affection. “That’s one promise I won’t have any problem keeping.” He goes over to the Korlivilar’s body, hoists it over his shoulder in a fireman’s carry. “I think I’ll take the cat out of the room – these things don’t smell too good when they’re alive, let alone dead. They may look like Lyrans, but at least the Lyrans have good grooming habits.”

“Thanks.” I smile.

“And by the way, the answer is Yellowstone.” Greg tells me. “Where I’d want to be. Deep, cool lakes, tall mountains to climb, a lot of woodlands.”

“Bears to wrestle?” I add, goading him.

“The competition for spawning salmon can get a little fierce,” Greg trades jibe for jibe. “What about you? Same question.”

“The plains of Vulcan,” I answer. Jensen winces, wondering about the sanity of anyone who’d prefer that red, sun-charred desolation to any other spot in the universe. “With T’Doroth.”

Greg gives the deepest laugh I’ve heard in months, a very odd sound after you’ve spent the last few days enduring telepathic torture, even stranger when the person who’s laughing has a dead Korlivilar draped over his shoulder like Hercules hoisting the skin of the Nemean lion.

“Dammit, Kenneth, that’s the saddest thing I’ve ever heard,” he says, tears in his eyes when the laughter finally stops.

Hours later, the frantic Meskeen come into the room and pepper me with questions about the dead Korlivilar that were found at the base. I simply shrug. “You’re expecting an explanation from *me*?” I wonder, raising an eyebrow. “*Before* you’ve drugged me or put needles into me?”

An hour later, a Rovillian enters the room, clutching a package. She gives me a brief physical examination, unstraps me from the table, and hands me a formal Starfleet dress uniform. It’s command, not engineering, and it’s got a Captain’s rank. I ask her to change the pips so I’m only a Lieutenant, but she refuses, so I remove the rank insignia entirely. She doesn’t like this, but after two attempts to force me to misrepresent myself in public, she gives up. A cadre of eight Korlivilar - and yes, they make me as nervous as you’d expect - come to escort me to trial, marching in a military unison that quickly reassures me that they’re not assassins, they’re soldiers, and likely to treat me with some degree of honor.

So that’s it. For better or for worse, we finally have an endgame.

## IV: Poet's Justice

The chamber of Justice, a concept with which the Concordium associates with telepathic intrusion and the painstaking reconstruction of events, is a huge sphere about one hundred meters in diameter with a glass floor and a gallery that extends upward to the thirty degree level in funny, inclined boxes. Under the transparent floor is an almost identical chamber that's filled with methane, which harkens back to the days when the Q'Naabians shared power with the Veltressai in the ISC, and the Meskeen were only a minor power who was eager to share the use of Desskyie with the greats of the galaxy in the hope it would increase their influence. When the Q'Naabians (or any other methane-breathers hold proceedings) they merely reverse the gravity, and the trials are staged on the bottom level. It's an elegant arrangement.

And I'll bet they want to stick me into the methane section and watch me choke.

The walls are brass, inlaid with crystal, into which ten thousand tiny lights have been set; the lights reflect softly on the brass sheen and make vague ghost images against the glass. The final impression is not unlike a ballroom set inside a giant chandelier, or Versailles' Hall of Mirrors scrunched into a giant ball, a snowball of solid glass.

"Magnificent," I gasp on my first sight of the place where it's more than likely I'll die.

The lights intensify slightly; they aren't just providing illumination, they're also cameras and holoemitters. Given how rarely this chamber is used, this promises to be quite a show.

I'm one of the first ones here; the chamber starts filling up with spectators, mostly Meskeen. The galleries are where the Judges will sit, while the spectators and the presenters (including me) are consigned to walk the floor in a mingled mob. This is definitely not a standard Earth trial. There is no central judge, no single authority figure to administrate; things will just happen.

"Hello, war criminal," It's Greg, giving me a slight adolescent body bump, hiding his friendly sarcasm with a growl. I knew he'd find a way to get in; I'm just surprised they let him through the front door.

“Hello, traitor,” I nudge him back. Greg’s never ever been this familiar with me; there was always a Captain-Ensign aspect to our dynamic that kept things formal, but now he’s treating me like an Academy roommate, a best buddy on a mischievous caper. I try to gauge his thoughts, only to receive the impression he doesn’t want me in his mind right now, and he walks away with a smile on his face. But at least he’s keeping an eye on me (as well as on the specifics of his mission). Given the number of Meskeen and Korlivilar milling around me, someone could grab me and slit my throat at any time. I’m sure the Federation would protest, but I’ll bet the average citizen of the ISC has been inundated with so much propaganda about the evil Kenneth Said that if anyone did knife me, nine out of ten of them would stand up and cheer at the top of whatever passes for lungs in their various anatomies.

The gallery fills with a more cosmopolitan mix than the floor: Q’Naabian, Rovillian, Korlivilar, Prohounlite, even a Caupyleum, one of those colony insect creatures we encountered aboard the ISC frigate months ago, the one that drove Lars a little crazy. Last of all, however, come the giants. Five meters of lumbering stump and bulk, the mastodon-toads, the Meskeen Elders remind me of lumbering Pleistocene resequenced animals I saw as a boy, down on the nature reserves outside Wilkesland City in Antarctica. Their bodies, those parts I can see though their velvet, tentish robes, are grey in color with patches of orangy-red, and their jowls sag into unhappy folds. The leviathans lumber to their places, and every conversation stops, every telepathic glance is halted, all eyes are upon them as they sit stumpishly in seven places on the ground floor level. Their arrival is the informal signal for proceedings to begin.

“We come to speak about the criminal, Kenneth Ali Michael Ibn Said,” a Rovillian climbs to the top of a meter tall platform that’s set in the center of the floor like a crystalline pitcher’s mound.

“Objection!” I shout, and the crowd turns to me in amazement. I suddenly get the impression I’m not supposed to interfere with this phase of the trial, but I don’t care. “I object to the word ‘criminal’ being used to describe me until final judgment is passed.”

“The human plays with words,” one of the Prohounlite judges declares, “like the liar he is!”

“That sure bodes well,” I mutter to myself as I turn to address the Judges. “Honored members of the Concordium...” The jeers indicate that the crowd thinks this is empty flattery. “I am accustomed to a different breed of justice, where precision in the meaning of words is paramount.”

“If you had a civilized system of justice,” the one of the Korlivilar snaps. “There would be no need for an instrument as imprecise as a word. Nor would there be, if you opened your mind to us, and spared us all this waste of effort!”

Greg, who’s been trying to keep his thoughts private, can’t help but flash me a sympathetic glance. I do my best not to draw attention to him.

“Only a twisted mind – a criminal mind – could hide his thoughts from this assembly,” one of the Rovillian prosecutors declares. The entire chamber erupts in a spontaneous display of agreement.

“Perhaps,” I arrogantly retort. “Or perhaps your telepathy isn’t as universal as you believe. I would bet that none of you has ever been inside the mind of an Organian, yet who would dare to call *them* twisted?”

That remark certainly earn me no sympathy from this audience. Several Korlivilar start to circle me, giving me shark-like nudges with their bodies, then one of them scratches my back with a claw. A cheer goes up from the assembly as I howl in pain and fall to one knee, and

though the Korlivilar who touched me goes into spasms as soon as he makes contact with me, a cadre of his fellow lynx-man grab him, carry him on their shoulders, and allow the twitching cat to (seemingly) display his bloody claw to the throng in triumph.

“You forget your place!” one of the Old Meskeen shouts, a low booming voice that could be mistaken for a sentient tuba. The assembly shudders; I’m not sure whether the Meskeen is referring to the Korlivilar or to me. “I did not come here to waste my time with either violence or bravado. Let the judgment continue.”

Then the prosecutors present their case with dizzying speed. They have four arguments. First, my use of the transporters to trap the Rovillians on *The Lasting Peace* put a non-military technology to a military purpose, which fits the ISC definition of a war crime. Second, that my coercion of a transcendent entity, the Crysian, to a military purpose, wasn’t just a war crime but a crime against sapience. Third, that I led a human ship to an unprovoked attack on the Meskeen homeworld. Fourth, *Galatea’s* attack on the commercial complex that caught us in their tractor beam, an attack which killed twenty-eight Meskeen civilians, constituted yet another war crime, and though I was technically the ship’s First Officer, I was the real power and authority on *USS Galatea*.

This is followed by a telepathic frenzy of witnesses and frantic emotional testimony, as “victims” of my use of the transporter as an impromptu stasis device describe their helplessness, their feeling of nausea, and the wild terror of the prospect of slowly, helplessly degrading in a transporter loop. All of the people who experienced it describe it as a form of torture unlike any that any member of the Concordium has ever endured. The Rovillian prosecutor – and I’ll have to admit this was very clever on his part – invokes the war crimes trial of a Lyran scientist and torturer who, during the Hydran occupation, used degrading transporter loops on the tripods as a form of torture. So I guess the ISC *has* heard of the concept of ‘legal precedent’.

“A question!” I shout, struggling to be overheard amid the raucous din that separated the pauses in the Rovillian presentation (they’ve never heard the phrase “order in the court” here). I have to shout three times to get people’s attention, and twice more to be heard over the assembly’s attempts to jeer me into silence. “Of the survivors of *The Lasting Peace*, what percentage reported experiencing psychological trauma?”

“The ghoul wishes to gauge the effectiveness of his technique!” the most vocal Korlivilar opponent shouts. I never do receive a direct answer to my question, although the crowd never ceases to be a source of amusement when I can bring myself to stop being afraid and view them with emotional detachment.

I wonder if Surak had it this bad?

The Rovillians’ supporting evidence for the most serious charge is a set of documents apparently “acquired” from the Romulans (thank-you, Mr. Tomarand) which were intercepted from Federation records. They’re very vague – frankly, I expected better from the *Tal Shiar*, but they bring up my involvement with Roger Price, and imply that I murdered Roger when he learned too much about my involvement with the Crysian, and my schemes to manipulate her.

“With a brainwashed cosmic entity under his control, who knows what damage Kenneth Said planned to inflict? Surely his mad quest for galactic domination would not have stopped by manipulating the Crysian to destroy Meska. Once he achieved his evil objective, he would have returned to his own home planet and used the Crysian to enslave his own people!”

It’s an accusation that’s totally unsupported (though it dovetails perfectly with what Rigney told me the Mirror Universe Kenneth Said was planning to accomplish!), and the audience buys

this like a child holding his first tribble and his parents' credit chip. I think I'd have a fairer hearing in a Klingon court, even if they broke my legs and arms first and pushed me into an arena to face a trial by combat against the Champion-General.

I need to make jokes about this. Losing my temper will not get me anywhere. At the very least, transmission of this broadcast will eventually make its way back to the Federation, and the more obvious and outrageous their lies, the more it'll motivate my fellows in the Fleet. I may not be the most popular man in Starfleet, but I'm as good a martyr as any of them.

The third accusation, the attack on Meska, is simply a matter of fact. *Galatea* attacked the planet, and I was its first officer. According to the ISC, attacking a culture's homeworld is a war crime. Actually, that's a point I could agree on in principle, but they'd need to sell it to the Federation first before I bought off on it. It's not a war crime unless both sides agree to the rules first. But that would require them to actually stoop to communicating with us, and that's clearly not an option for them.

The final accusation, the civilian deaths, is even more emotional than the ones dealing with the transporter trauma; there are numerous stories about bodies being pulled from the wreckage, the memories of families forced to the funeral feast, where children were forced to (symbolically, though it used to be literal) devour dead family members while their flesh was still young. These memories are heartbreakers – there are few happy stories in war.

Thus the prosecution's case concludes in a wild emotional contagion. Accompanied by thunderous shouts and the stomping of hundreds of feet (including most of the Judges), the Rovillian prosecutors descend from the platform. A number of Meskeen join in the celebration by spitting on me, which burn the side of my cheeks and my hands, though anyone who touches me goes into spasms. After about six people fall victim to the spasms (and I've had a chance to catch my breath), people clear me a wide berth so I can walk to the platform. I ascend to its center, still at face level with most of the spectators in the chamber, a forest of frogs and unfriendly faces.

"First..." I say, raising my voice while still trying to project an attractive tenor. "I wish to deny all charges."

"Mr. Said, how can you deny the veracity of this evidence?" a Prohounlite Judge shouts, and once again the crowd breaks into an applauding thunder.

"I do not – with the exception of the Romulan documents which are the lies of a *Tal Shiar* renegade," I insist. "But I seriously question the interpretation of the facts. Yes, I did indeed trap the crew of *the Lasting Peace* in a transporter loop. The purpose of doing so was not to torture the crew – rather, it was the opposite. It was my military duty to escape from captivity..."

"You were not a captive, you were our guest, and you repaid our hospitality with torment and murder!" the Korlivilar shouts, and once again the room disintegrates into defiant, patriotic applause.

"With all due respect!" I work my way to the edge of the platform. "If you believe that confinement to narrow spaces, involuntary drug treatment and forced interrogation constitute hospitality, then..." And that's when I hear the voice of T'Doroth in the back of my head, and I calm down. "It was clearly no one's concept of hospitality but your own. I escaped alone, outnumbered by many hundreds to one. I could have transported your crew into deep space; if I were the sadist that you say I am, I would have kept a couple of Rovillians alive and disposed of the rest so I could be assured of safety.

“You’ve accused me of being an evil genius. If I were a genius, I would not have taken such a foolish risk. My actions were a stopgap measure designed to prevent the needless deaths of the Rovillian crew.”

They jeer. Some of them spit on me. To say that it’s getting tiresome would be to put it mildly, but the stronger they attack me, the more likely it’ll be that I’ll earn the respect of a few members of the Concordium, so I ignore the spittle burns and continue my rebuttal.

“The attack on Meska was ordered by Starfleet, however I should point out that such an act is not considered a war crime by the United Federation of Planets. The ISC has had numerous opportunities to enter into negotiations with the Federation and find a common ground in treating the differences in our military code. Indeed, given Federation concerns over the treatment of those citizens you hold prisoner...”

“You are distracting us from the issue of your conduct,” the Caupyleum says, its accompanying swarm buzzing angrily. “By attempting to put the blame on us.”

“Are you aware there is no war between us, Mr. Said?” a Veltressai adds. “We are conducting a Pacification Campaign, not a war. Wars are for primitives. We have no prisoners, merely guests.”

The assembly does a collective nod. “With all due respect – and forgive me if I do not know the common form of address for your station – when you attack Federation installations with a military force, we think you’re committing an act of war. We do not recognize your moral supremacy to conduct such actions with impunity; neither you, nor the Organians have spoken to us on such matters. However, I would like to draw your attention to our choice of targets on Meska. You know the potential destructive capabilities of our weapons, what we could have done to the general populace. One plasma torpedo, set on an atmospheric burst, and we would have killed half the planet. Instead we chose military targets, which were unlikely to produce civilian casualties, and we sent warnings to each target to give them time to evacuate their personnel.”

“You consider that generous?” a Prohounlite snorts.

“We consider it standard procedure, according to the rules of war,” I reply, noting that the gathering’s slowly starting to get a little more civil, though I suspect that will soon change. “As for the commercial facility, they hit us with a tractor beam. That attack marked them as a military target. We gave them fair warning to release the beam – I suggest you check your transmission logs if you doubt it – then hit them with our lightest armament, focused as tightly as possible.”

“And what do you say to those who lost their merge?” the Caupyleum asks, a reference clarified a few seconds later by the universal translator as “loved ones”. (I’ll give them credit for not messing around with the translation to make me look back – they’ve badly misinterpreted me, but they haven’t mistranslated me.)

“Words are vulgar ways to express these feelings,” I reply. “I know, because I lost someone very precious to me scant weeks ago, and though I consider myself a poet, the words do not come easily. It was as if my breath had been stolen by a thief, and I was choking, and I had no idea why. Every second I stood, I wanted to fall; every second there were no tears in my eyes, it felt like they would burn in their sockets. My stomach had become transformed into a creature over which I had no control, which writhed and convulsed of its own accord. My mind was incredibly focused and numb at the same time.”

“You wanted revenge?” the Veltressai asks.



“Honestly – yes, I did.” I know I’m damning myself by saying words that can easily be twisted out of context, but I will tell the truth, I will make them feel the truth. “I wanted revenge on a people who refused to listen or communicate, a people who believed their antiquity gave them a license for blind arrogance, a people who paid homage to the Organians on one hand, but when my Captain begged your Captain to spare the Crysian’s life...” I suddenly realized that I’d been avoiding talking or even thinking about the Crysian for weeks, and now, at such a critical moment. “...yes, I wanted revenge. But my revenge was to be written in the molten wreckage of your installations and a blow to your more than ample pride - not in the blood of non-combatants.”

“So you would not attack the installation if you had to do it over again?”

“When they tractored us, they became a military target. That tractor beam made us vulnerable to any ground based missiles you might have launched at us. We could not afford to ignore them. But no one took joy in their deaths, and given that we’re hardened soldiers who live to experience victory, that should tell you something of our perspective.” I take a deep breath, and I turn to the one whom I guess is the eldest of the Meskeen. “Sir, I would like to ask you a question.”

“He is not the subject of the trial,” the Korlivilar lickspittle is quick to come to his aid.

“I somehow doubt he would find himself guilty,” I try to reply with humor. “But I need to demonstrate certain differences between our cultures, and who better to query than a being who was born when my ancestors were young?”

“Ask.” The Meskeen Elder’s voice booms and reverberates around the hall, and the glass shudders. He’s more cooperative than I suspected he’d be, but then, a man with four aces often has nothing to lose when he shows his hand.

“What’s your assessment of the Federation?” I ask.

“A young collection of races,” the Meskeen’s voice continues to shake the hall. “Born from a mix of desperation and good intentions. Lofty principles that are not followed by its war-weary officers. You badly need our guidance if you are to achieve your hopes of peace.”

Aside from the last sentence, not an inaccurate assessment. “We see you as ancient, mysterious, and arrogant meddlers. Your devotion to peace might earn our respect if you had stayed in the neutral zone, and didn’t capture our people, and didn’t brainwash them...” I sigh.

“We do not see ourselves as meddlers, Mr. Said.” The lead Veltressai says. “Violence squanders life. The wisest of your kind also embrace this truth. We merely have a greater conviction of our own belief, hence we have nothing as absurd as your Prime Directive.”

I glance over at Greg, who’s nervously looking down at his hands – no, I can’t be distracted, not yet. “Why do you think the Prime Directive is absurd?”

“Because if your principles are sound, and if you believe in them, then you should share them with the younger cultures.” The Veltressai answers.

“But if your principles are universal truths, won’t the younger culture discover them on their own?”

“They might, after millions have died, or been enslaved, or been forced to listen to impure thoughts,” the Veltressai answers. “How can your culture be so cruel?”

“Because we respect freedom as much as we respect life.” I answer. “It is our experience that people achieve greater things when they have a free and open society. Thus we give the younger races a gift of freedom, in the hopes that will evolve into a society, in ways we could never imagine, that can take its place beside the other galactic races.”

“Achieve?” The Korlivilar scoffs. “Why are we even listening to this criminal? What has his race ever achieved that holds the slightest interest to us, or compares even remotely to our own great works...”

And that’s when the lights flicker, and every screen in the chamber is covered in a white burn. Immediately I look toward Greg, who looks just as confused as everyone else. Then the holomitters suddenly display the image of Ivan Hazard, who – and don’t ask me how – has somehow gotten access to the Desskyie communications system.

“My apologies for interfering with this pack of lies you call a trial. Allow me to answer that question,” Ivan says, nestled in both the Captain’s chair and a very uncomfortable looking neck brace. “May I suggest you perform a sensor trace on this message and trace its point of origin?”

“Ivan!” I shout, looking up at a large hologram above my head. “Are you insane?”

“Maybe. Maybe I’m even... delusional. Or maybe I’m broadcasting from the one place the Meskeen have never been able to get, the interior of Desskyie, your precious Dyson Sphere!”

Kollos. She must have navigated the unnavigable maze, the conduits between Outer and Inner Desskyie. I’m suddenly swept up in a wave of jubilation – I’ve got the solution. Greg was right – there’s no way to negotiate ideals with someone as pragmatic as the Meskeen. However – Allah be praised – Ivan has just given me the one bargaining chip that means anything to these people. Now all I have to do is stop Greg from blowing them to the next kingdom.

Greg is cradling his hands, trying to keep a low profile. I immediately skip off the platform and run toward him. To say the crowd erupts into a furore would be an understatement of galactic proportions, but I don’t care.

“Greg!” I shout, getting in front of him and screaming wildly at the top of his lungs. “I’ve got it, Greg! I know how to beat them! Greg!”

Greg opens his hands, and I can see both of them glowing with a green light – whoever operated on them turned them into a plasma conduit, and they’re pumping energy into them.

“Sorry, Kenneth,” I can sense he guesses my plan, and he even thinks it’ll work. “I’m the weapon, but I’m not the one who decides when to pull the trigger.”

The sight of the glow that’s starting to surround Greg is panicking the spectators, and the heat is unbearable. “Move, Kenneth, now!” Greg barks, as his arms begin to burn with incandescent energy. Damn whoever did this to him – he’s become a living energy relay, drawing energy from subspace and turning it into a stream of plasma to fry the Meskeen Elders.

“Greg, why be their assassin?” I say, not moving a muscle. “This isn’t the Federation’s fight.”

“Delta-Thayvo made a deal.” Greg tells me, referring to the Grazerite Admiral who had been his mentor for so many years. The heat is starting to become unbearable. “She saved my world. I owe her everything, Kenneth.” Once again, he tells me nothing I don’t already know. The Grazerite means as much to him as the Crysian does to me.

“I’m not moving, Greg.” I insist, doing my best to ignore the blisters that are starting to form on my hands and arms. “Just as we begun, so it ends: you against me, *mano o mano*, locked in a struggle of wills, love, and downright stubbornness. And I’ve got a Vulcan in my head, so there’s no way you can be more stubborn than me.”

So this is it, the moment of choice. But more than that, it’s the moment of love; not the love of two people who want to couple their bodies together and see how swollen their sexual organs can get, it’s the love of two people – *colyroj*, Greg called it in the death message that Argos showed me so long ago – who challenge each other, and who make each other’s life worth living. That’s why I fought so hard to find him when I lost *Ark Royal*. I’ve heard it’s said that every man has a

mate, and I know with everything that I've got it's T'Doroth, but I also remember the Braavi myth says that every man has a true brother as well as a mate, and for all his faults, Greg Jensen is it. There's no way in Hell that I will leave him now, and he knows it.

"Fine," Greg moans, resigned to his fate. Then he screams, takes several steps backward, and with a jerk, he raises his hands into the air. A blast of pure plasma, originally intended for the Meskeen, shoots into the air, a blue-green flame that not only blinds anyone who looks at it, it makes a perfect hole in the glass. Greg falls to his knees, hair charred, face covered in third degree burns, his arms now cauterized stumps cut off just below the shoulders, but by some obscene effort of will, he manages to keep projecting the stream upward, since one falling arm could melt the floor, ignite the methane, and send us all to that great frog pond in the sky. After ten seconds, the plasma flow finally stops. Greg collapses to the ground. Wouldn't you know, I can actually see that he's still breathing. And here I thought Ivan was tough!

"Medic!" I shout, looking around. "Medic!" I scream louder at the elder Meskeen. They calmly sit on their stumpish frames, looking like nothing's happened. Although the flush, the color change in their bodies, indicates they just experienced intense fear.

"Let him die," the Meskeen proclaims.

"The hell you will!" I snap; if I can face down Greg Jensen, there's no way a pack of trimillennials is going to stop me now. "You will get him medical assistance – now, and then we need to talk, in private!" I insist. "The situation's changed. You understand the implications of *Galatea's* message as much as I do, don't you?" I don't think my voice has ever conveyed as much anger in my life, a cold anger that would make even Suria recoil.

"All transmissions to the outside world have been cut," the Meskeen tells me. "State your offer."

I guess that's as private an audience as I'm going to get. "*Galatea* is inside Desskyie. You've wanted to know what's inside the Sphere for fifteen hundred years – now's your chance. Tell us what to scan for, and we'll get you as much data about what's inside as possible. And – once the war's over, and there's peace with the Federation – we'll get together on a joint expedition."

"And in return?"

"You'll provide healing for Greg. And when *Galatea* gets back, Greg and I will get aboard our little ship, and you'll safely escort us to Gorn space."

"The people may not understand."

"How about... you examined the evidence carefully, and the evidence of war crimes were fabricated by Romulan elements trying to undermine any hope of peace between the Federation and the ISC?" I suggest. The Meskeen says nothing, and I have no idea, looking up at that creature who's almost three times my height and many times my size, just what thoughts are coursing through a brain that's as calculating as it is ancient. Undoubtedly he understands my grudge against the *Tal Shiar*. Perhaps he even respects it.

"And the conspiracy to assassinate us?" the Meskeen's eyes show a disturbing amount of keenness. "Your mind is well-shielded. But Captain Jensen, though formidable, is not quite as adept."

"That's your problem," I say. "But you've survived for three thousand years. Just between the two of us, my money's on you."

The Meskeen does not smile; it probably can't under the weight of those sagging jowls. "I agree to your terms, Kenneth Said. You and your comrade will be granted healing." I've been ignoring the fact that I'm pretty much covered in second degree burns myself, a fact that's

quickly becoming a painful reality. “Your ship will be allowed to leave; and trust me, if it, or any of your quadrant’s ships ever reenters our space during time of war, they will not last a single day. Oh, and your name shall be cleared of wrongdoing. Is there anything else which you wish to speak about?”

“How about peace? And communication? And basic reproachment?”

“Our goals in your quadrant remain unchanged,” the Meskeen says, and my burnt heart suddenly sinks. “But perhaps we can avoid the further escalation of tensions in Federation space...”

In the end, the Meskeen is even better than his word. Ivan agrees to serve as proxy to my bargain with the Meskeen, and gathers a rather impressive sensor package of the machinery on the inner side of the sphere. When they return through the maze – a challenge even for Kollos – the ISC releases thirty Federation prisoners as a gesture of good will. It’s not going to entirely be a blessing – their loyalties are as much to the ISC as to the Federation. But even Lars agrees we can’t leave a Starfleeter behind.

A week after *Galatea*’s return from inside the Sphere (an incredible, almost religious experience, I’m told) I’m mostly healed. As for Greg, the scars on his body will heal, and there are techniques on Earth to regrow lost limbs. Whether they’ll work on a Gwaiian, with their bactal infected bodies and superhuman physiology, is a question for the ages.

Once my burns (and Greg’s) have completely healed, Greg and I head back aboard *Galatea*. We’re the last of a long train of officers to board, which includes my old chief engineer, Rand-Alph Teller, he of the third eye in his forehead, who gave all of them (and his heart and soul) to the ISC. It’s going to be as hard to rehabilitate his injuries as it is to heal Greg and Ivan’s. I’m ashamed to admit it, but I don’t want to have anything to do with him. For now, the memories of his participation in the ISC propaganda campaign against me are just a little too vivid.

The Meskeen keep an eye on us, and send a representative to see us away when the escort arrives, though interest in our departure is visibly small. Greg and I finally beam back to *Galatea*, Greg shrouded in a big robe draped over his body to conceal his missing arms. We look much the same as we did before our ordeal, except I’d swear Greg looks older, with pronounced lines around his eyes. These lines, the scars of time which all aging creatures accumulate, give his face a certain character. Naturally, he hates them.

We materialize aboard *Galatea* to find themselves facing an honor guard of security and engineers, and other bridge officers, all in formal dress. Ivan, still in a neck brace, and hobbling on a cane, walks slowly toward us. He looks incredibly fragile, except for a look in his eyes that would cow the wildest Klingon. Ivan always was the master of overcompensation.

“My apologies, Captain Hazard,” Greg says. “Mr. Said requested that I shake your hand, but it seems that I’m unable to do so.”

“Why the hell would I want to do that?” Ivan smiles. “You’re the shoddiest damn chiropractor I ever met.” Allah, thank you for preserving Hazard’s sense of humor. “Mr. Said,” he says, turning to me with a much larger grin on his face. “It looks like we actually got out of this one alive.” He pauses and holds up a trembling hand. “Even if, like Mr. Lars says, the people around you tend to end up maimed as opposed to dead.” The remark comes uncomfortably close to the truth. “Nonetheless, you’ve done some small service to *Galatea*, and it’s time to thank you.”

Ivan turns to Lars, who gives a signal for his team to stand at attention. This crew has never acted in such a military manner in my life, and I approve. Ivan pulls out a whistle, unsuccessfully attempts to blow it, and then calls for the ship's klaxon to be played in its place.

"Three cheers for Lieutenant Said!" he shouts. "Hip! Hip! HOORAY! Hip! Hip! HOORAY!"

And the surviving voices of *USS Galatea* shout that age-old chant loud and proud, thirty voices in unison, so it reverberates through the entire deck, through the Jeffries' Tubes, and can be heard all the way down in engineering.

Tears in our eyes, Ivan does his best to embrace me, damning the advice of our good medical officer. "You did it, you son of a bitch."

"Watch the language," I warn him, carefully prying him loose. "It didn't go as I planned, though."

"How so?" Ivan wonders.

"I wanted to appeal to their best instincts," I explain. "Instead, I had to appeal to their sense of pragmatism." I shake my head. "It's not how I planned it."

"Kenneth, every great principled nation that's ever existed: the Grecian democracies, the United States, the Martian Colonies, even the Federation itself, was built on a bedrock of principles, but was largely constructed on deals, compromise, and pragmatism. Don't knock the ulterior motive, it's how the universe works."

I gently pry myself away from him, trade a respectful nod with Lars, and head over to Kollos. The half-Medusan is looking radiant, basking not only in my return but in a personal triumph; according to T'Doroth the problem of the Desskyie maze required navigation in not three but *six* dimensions (don't ask me how), and apparently represented the most formidable challenge ever faced by a Medusan navigator. This won't just put her at the top echelons of Starfleet helmsmen; it'll make her a legend among her father's people.

"Thank you for saving my ship, Mr. Kollos," I say.

"Thank you for saving my life, Mr. Said," she answers.

Next, I embrace Francis, who tells me that he just won a lot of credits because he bet the entire ship that I'd find a way to escape with my skin intact. Good for him, the neglected middle brother of our meld. Last of all I turn to T'Doroth. She looks at me with a raised eyebrow. "Surprised to see me?" I ask. She says nothing, but touches my face lovingly. Vulcan intimacy is very tender.

"You can have your *katra* back," I tell her, and as she draws her hand over my face, I feel her take back a piece of her soul. Later I find out just how hard it is to pull off that trick. "Now, T'Doroth," I say, awestruck by her presence. "Will you *please* marry me?"

"No. You have not met my conditions, Kenneth Said," she says and then, in a moment I'll cherish forever, she smiles with more joy than I've ever seen on a human's face, let alone a Vulcan's.

About the most exciting event of the return voyage was my long-promised boxing march with Ensign Rigney; I didn't expect him to seriously want to go through with it, but he does. Despite being on the short end of both muscle and enthusiasm, I knock him senseless in the sixth round. As with most security officers I've known, the combat is a bonding rite. It also disgusts the brainwashed ex-ISC victims so, as Francis succinctly puts it: "for once brutality actually serves a positive function!" Greg, who's been avoiding contact with the crew (except for me and

Francis) takes a fraternal pride in my victory; for a day or so, he's the happiest person on the ship.

We return to Earth to a hero's welcome, though Starfleet's a little confused about what actually happened during the trial. They can join the club; it's easily the most surreal experience of my life, and I've had more than I can count. The attack on Desskyie doesn't turn into the big propaganda victory Starfleet had hoped; instead, people (that is, the press) wonder aloud why a lone ship was sent so deep into enemy territory with little hope of survival. It's fun to watch the admirals dance around that one.

*Galatea* was never a commissioned ship, which saves them the trouble of decommissioning it. They send us on a month-long propaganda tour of the inner colonies, which drives Ivan half-crazy (he wants to get back to the war immediately) but allows the rest of us to relax. And I finally get a chance to return Roger Price's effects to his family on Westminster. I trade stories with Roger's son Gordy (who's even more hulking in person than in his picture), but he'd rather hear tales about *Galatea's* voyage than his dad, and he asks an endless stream of questions about starships and their military capabilities. Roger's ex-wife Altricia tells me in no uncertain terms that she was more than happy to never again be reminded of Roger's existence. I completely understand her reasons, but those words constitute one of the most depressing things I've ever heard.

The propaganda tour is cut short. *Galatea's* engineering logs are examined by Starfleet, who declares her an expensive failure (though an interesting one), mothball her, and stick her in the Smithsonian. No Starfleet vessel is ever going to be built with a PPD again (praise Allah), and I doubt we'll be using plasma torpedoes any time soon either.

T'Doroth and I transfer from Starfleet's exploratory branch into the technical, and we leave space for a long time. I do indeed pass T'Doroth's tests, and we marry in a small ceremony held in the Vulcan monastery of Bra'sheaa, that is, it *would* have been a small ceremony had the entire crew of *Galatea* not suddenly transported inside the chapel during the middle of the service. A few weeks after the ceremony, my grant from Starfleet is approved; T'Doroth and I set up a transporter technologies research lab on the shores of a Vulcan blood-red ocean, near T'Doroth's grandparents' place. Eventually, the lab plays a critical role in unlocking the secrets of the Andromedan Displacement Device, but that would be telling.

After eight unsuccessful grafts, Greg finally gets arms that actually like being a part of his body. He, Francis, and Nagura (who's finally released from the sanitarium near Elba II) want to remain close to me, so they leave the Fleet and retreat to the Vulcan monastery of Win'Chapella, about six kilometers from the lab. After two years, they decide it's time for friends to depart, so Greg uses his contacts to get them a large, well-armored merchant ship to explore the galaxy. It was, of course, Francis's idea. It hurts to see them go, but when you don't want people to change, you're killing them, and the wounds caused by the meld have largely healed over the course of time. I suggest they recruit Gordy Price for their crew, but apparently he's gone off to pre-admission for Starfleet Academy. His dad would have hated that. I keep an eye on him as best I can, and discover - much to my surprise - that I have a lot of pull in Starfleet, which I use to make sure the kid gets the best possible training and ship placement.

I'm not sure what happens to Lars - I heard a rumor that he was going to become an Academy instructor, but I don't hear anything after that, nor do I receive any death notices from the *Galatea* grapevine (the survivors keep in close touch with each other for the rest of our lives).

Lars's fate remains a great mystery to all of us (though I always suspected Ivan knew far more than he was telling).

Ivan's successful run commanding *Galatea* revigorates his career; he's immediately restored to the rank of Commander, and becomes a Captain within a year. He finally grabs the Captain's chair of *USS Constellation* and doesn't let it go for twelve years. Kollos rises to even loftier heights; she eventually becomes an Admiral, then gets appointed as Starfleet Chief of Staff, though long after the Andromedan mess has been resolved.

Ah, the Andromedans. The terror which the Organians so greatly feared, and rightly so. They arrive right after the ISC war dies down, three years after our return from Desskyie. I could tell the tale of how the *Galatea* survivors regrouped and became the first Starfleet officers to board one of their vessels, but we'll save that story for another day. I could also bring up the story on how Gbeji, Kollos, T'Doroth, and Francis helped to break up the last Orion Animal Women smuggling ring, but that tale's far too sleazy and disgusting for me to tell.

So let us fade to red, the red Vulcan sun in a red sky, which projects red ripples on the scant, precious Vulcan seas. T'Doroth is in my arms, and I am in T'Doroth's, the woman for whom I'd freeze a star to save her life. There is a profundity to be found in the simplicity of the universe, and I have found that profundity in the simplicity of her expression. When I look into her eyes, the universe becomes that place of perfection that Allah intended it to be. How could it be otherwise?

END

## About the Author

Scott Bennie is a freelance writer and computer game designer currently living in British Columbia. He has numerous Star Trek game design credits, including *Star Trek: Twenty-Fifth Anniversary*, *Star Trek: Judgment Rites*, *Starfleet Academy*, *Starfleet Command*, and *Starfleet Command II*. This story was originally serialized on the Taldren Fan Fiction board, to which Mr. Bennie is occasionally a contributor. He is currently working on supplements for the *Lord of the Rings* role-playing game by Decipher Games Inc.





## **A Life Destroyed!**

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