

The Sound of Distant Thunder

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From Story ideas by Frank Terrible*

In the early days of Earth's exploration and colonization of the Milky Way, the people who went out into the vastness were the hardy sort of souls that first spread out across the Atlantic from Europe to colonize the New World. The voyages in the first warp-powered starships still took many months to all but the nearest stars, and many years for the most adventurous expeditions who wanted to see what farther suns had to offer. The people of Earth grew accustomed to not hearing from their explorers for periods of years, and more than one expedition had been long forgotten by the home planet before word of their progress arrived from dozens of light years away by radio or laser. Most of these voyages ended in colonization by necessity; once a crew had been sealed into a spaceship for so long, if the planet they found was habitable, a return trip in such isolation was almost unthinkable. Thus were Earth's first colonies settled, to be visited only decades later by new expeditions with faster ships.

But if stay-behind Earthlings forgot about successful expeditions, so did they forget about unsuccessful ones. Space was still a strange and untamed place – like the Virginia wilderness in the 17th century. Not a few ships vanished without even a cryptic message carved into a pine tree for a clue.

Thus, when most of those on board the civilian colony ship Harrington's Home were killed without ever reaching their destination, eight years after leaving Earth and 440 light years away, no one back home ever knew about it.

1



Commander Daniel McKinney lay on his bunk. The lights were out so his quarters, not being possessed of a window, were pitch black. Still, he stared at the ceiling he couldn't see. And still, he couldn't sleep. He wondered absently if there would ever come a day when starship crew quarters would have windows, even if only in officers' quarters. But that wasn't what was on his mind. It was the mission, of course.

From the time the Federation was incorporated, Starfleet's ships had provided defense, exploration, and diplomatic services. The last was perhaps the least desirable duty for crew who mostly considered themselves professional explorers, or professional soldiers. For many of them the ways of politics were arcane and frightening, where a misspoken word or an unconscious gesture – perfectly proper in one culture but insulting in another – could precipitate an interstellar incident. McKinney didn't envy the captain her job, for the captain of a starship was the one person aboard who had to be soldier, explorer, and diplomat all in one. As First Officer, McKinney's duties related more to acting as liaison between captain and crew, although he had to be on the spot often enough with the occasional visiting dignitary.

Still, McKinney did want to command a ship of his own some day. It was a conflict; to avoid diplomacy he'd have to avoid command, to embrace command he'd have to embrace diplomacy. He knew he was awkward in such matters, so he wondered if he'd ever manage to convince Starfleet that he was up to his own command.

Captain Dubronin apparently thought McKinney should start getting used to the duties of a captain, since she'd put him in charge of the needs and comforts of their guest for this trip. That meant direct and frequent contact with a diplomat from a foreign planet – and royalty no less! One would think that by the time a person achieved the rank of Commander, and the position of First Officer of an Excelsior class starship, he'd be beyond schoolboy butterflies. But his stomach ached, and still he couldn't sleep.

The dress uniform itched, naturally. Anything you only wear twice a year itched. McKinney took comfort in the fact that the rest of the department heads had to suffer along with him. Captain Dubronin herded them all into a proper line in front of the transporter operator's free-standing console, facing the round alcove of the transporter unit.

Lieutenant Commander T'Lar, the ship's head of bioresearch, made a point of falling into line next to him. McKinney was a little above average human height at 188 centimeters, and T'Lar matched his height within a few millimeters. It had taken him a few months to get used to being the same height as a woman – T'Lar was tall even for a Vulcan woman – but her obvious decentness showed through her habitual Vulcan stoicness, and the two had become friends. “Did you sleep?” she asked, getting right to the point.

“Oh, like a baby.” He shrugged. “Like an awake, staring baby.”

“I wish you would allow me to teach you some basic meditation. It will help you sleep. It will at least help you clear your mind.”

He snorted. “yah, right.”

She examined his face for a moment, unsure. “Was that agreement?”

“No!” he said, a little too sharply. “I'm sorry. It was a sarcastic reply based on my, uh, inability to picture myself meditating,” he explained.

T'Lar shook her head slightly. “Sometimes you confuse me greatly.”

He smiled. It amused him to confuse her.

“If your sleepless trend persists, I encourage you to get something from the doctor to help.”

“I'll be all right eventually. It's only a week's trip to Groningen. Once we drop the princess of and she's out of my hair I'll be fine.”

“And yet that will be seven more days with too little sleep,” T'Lar reasoned. “Added to the previous seven, from which you are already – as you have said – ‘ragged out’...”

He made a face that said he didn't want to talk about it, but knew it wouldn't do any good. Besides, he knew she was right. The doc could give him a tablet and he'd sleep for exactly eight hours and awaken as fresh as he needed to be. What was keeping him from doing that? Probably a cross between his usual stubbornness and his usual pride. She was about to continue her scolding when he said, “Ah, hell, you're right, Lara.”

She nodded once, sharply, in triumph. “It distresses me that you may have thought otherwise.”

McKinney laughed. Whoever had said Vulcans had no sense of humor didn't know many Vulcans. Or maybe it was only Vulcans who'd been around humans for a long time that developed – or *re*-developed – their humor. The medical department head, Dr. Alejandro, was three people to his left in the reception line. It would be too awkward to talk to him about it now. He'd put it off 'til just before bed.

A tone sounded from the transporter console. The technician checked a telltale and announced “the princess' party signals they're ready, Captain.”

“All right, everybody,” The captain said in her mild Russian accent, “Best behavior, best trim. At attention.” Feet stamped the floor in quiet unison as everyone in the room came to attention. The captain gave McKinney a meaningful look that told him he was doing something she didn't like. When he couldn't figure it out right away she crooked a finger at him and pointed to the deck at her side. *Oops*, he thought, *almost committed a social faux pas*. When he'd taken his place at his captain's side she said to the transporter operator, “Ensign, energize.”

The familiar hum filled the room, and a swirl of coalescing atoms sparkled brilliant blue on the raised platform before them. Pretty to look at, McKinney always thought, like a waterfall. When the swirling stopped, four people had been rebuilt from their most basic particles, and stood waiting. On the left, a human male of middle age and seeming importance, dressed in some kind of formal business attire. To the rear, a woman of around the same age, in the feminine version of the same type of clothing. At right, a severe looking young man in apparent military uniform with a phaser at his hip. The obvious subject of the mission that had been keeping McKinney awake for a week was on the foremost pad: a young woman in her late teens, dressed elegantly in a properly royal-looking suit, and quite thoroughly pregnant.

Captain Dubronin stepped forward a pace and courtesied expertly, though it would have looked better in a ball gown than a stiff uniform. Upon rising, she said to the young lady, “Your highness, I am Captain Valentina Dubronin. On behalf of Starfleet and the United Federation of Planets, welcome to the starship U.S.S. Breitling.”

The young woman stepped gracefully from the platform and approached the captain. She offered her hand and gripped the captain's lightly in a manner closely resembling a handshake without the shake. She smiled brightly, inclined her head in a partial nod of greeting and said, “Hello, Captain, I am Elayna.

Please, don't feel compelled to call me 'Your Highness'. I'm just the simple daughter-in-law of a figurehead monarch." She smiled winningly.

The captain produced an amiable grin and replied, "All the same, Your Highness..." the princess tightened her grip and raised her eyebrows in good-natured warning. "Shall we settle on 'Princess Elayna' then?" the captain asked.

McKinney thought he should be taking notes. This was the kind of banter that he blanked on.

Princess Elayna smiled even more and said "Thank you, Captain Dubronin. I don't feel very regal these last few months." She released the captain and used her hand to pat her belly. Then she swept her arm to indicate the gentleman now descending from the transporter stage. "My personal physician, Doctor Van der Roll."

The man bowed slightly when he took the captain's hand and smiled. "Anthony," he said. "A pleasure to meet you."

The princess then indicated the other woman, who stepped from the platform to meet the captain. "My personal assistant, Melody, without whom I'd be lost in a sea of political doublespeak." Melody gave the princess a smile of maternal affection as she shook the captain's hand.

The military type had assumed a position next to the princess. He'd briefly scanned the room and the people in it for threats and, finding none, continued to scan the room and the people for threats. Elayna said with a wry smile, "My shadow here is Lieutenant Dockray, my personal guardsman. We are attached by an invisible umbilical, so please take care not to get tangled."

The lieutenant closed his eyes as if bearing up under an insect bite and intoned flatly, "Thank you, Highness." He met the captain's eyes then and bowed from his at-ease stance, hands still firmly clasped behind him. "Thank you, Captain, for allowing me to go armed aboard your vessel. I'd appreciate a meeting with your security chief at his convenience."

"Not a problem, Lieutenant," Dubronin nodded. "assuming we're all on the same side here." The armsman actually smiled when he nodded acknowledgement.

The captain "presented" McKinney as her first officer to the princess. He took her hand and bowed, maintaining eye contact and smiling as he'd been briefed. The smile came easily in light of the young lady's simple prettiness and her charming demeanor. Possibly her personality was the result of polishing by a social education at the hands of professional tutors, possibly it was natural. It would be impossible to tell unless she let slip a darker side, which was unlikely in the short time she'd be aboard. Nevertheless, McKinney would treat her as kindly as he knew how. Or as kindly as his social awkwardness would allow him. He said, "It's a great pleasure to meet you Your Highness."

She gave him a "now-now" look and said, "Now, Commander McKinney, your captain and I have already decided 'Princess Elayna' would suffice. I will hold you to that also."

He froze for only a moment at the unexpected change of script, but her beaming smile broke his uncertainty quickly. He smiled back reflexively, repeated his bow and said, "Princess Elayna" as firmly as he could manage. "Welcome aboard." He greeted the others with a handshake – reflexively shaking their hands rather than just holding them as he'd seen them do – then gratefully fell back into the captain's shadow as she presented the rest of the department heads in the receiving line. Oddly, now that he had a first impression of the princess and she seemed to be not at all threatening, his butterflies were quieter. It would be just like him, he thought, to spend a week working himself up into a worry over nothing.

They'd prepared the largest of their guest quarters ("supercargo" was the official technical term, signifying space reserved for excess cargo and "supernumerary" persons, though it would be rude to tell the guests this) for the princess, with the neighboring quarters for her party. Doctor Van der Roll himself had followed Dr. Alejandro directly to sick bay to get himself acquainted with the place, and to share the princess' medical records with the ship's computer. There was of course no obstetrician aboard a starship, so Van der Roll would remain the princess' official doctor during the trip. Alejandro was versed in all forms of medicine for several Federation species, but he'd remain in an administrative role where this was concerned. McKinney accompanied the captain and Princess Elayna, with Melody alongside and Lieutenant Dockray in tow, directly to her quarters on deck seven, eschewing an immediate tour of the ship in deference to the young lady's condition. After showing their guest around the three-room suite, Princess Elayna invited them to sit for few moments. "I certainly have to," she joked. She dismissed her armsman, who went to get settled into his own quarters across the hall and meet with the Breitling's security chief.

Falling back indulgently into the room's single easy chair, the princess sighed and said, "I hope my need to return home isn't interfering too much with your patrol routine, Captain Dubronin,"

“We were in the neighborhood,” the captain assured her. “In fact you would be surprised how many of our orders include the phrase ‘you’re the only ship in the sector’.”

This produced a gentle little-girl laugh from the princess which made McKinney smile despite his nervousness. *Yes, he thought, I guess this isn’t going to be so bad.*

Princess Elayna rested a hand on her bulbous tummy. “Did your people tell you why I need to get home so urgently?”

“Not specifically. They mentioned you were with child. I assumed you simply wanted to have the baby at home?”

“Oh, it’s more than that I want to, Captain. I’m not so self-important that I would ask the Federation council to reroute a starship at a personal whim. I am the wife of the King’s firstborn son, and my son will be the heir to the throne of Groningen after my husband. But our laws of succession are very strict and they require that an heir to the throne be born on the homeworld.”

McKinney looked reflexively at her enormous belly. My God it looked like she was about to pop! They’d never make it. The princess saw his expression and giggled. While his face reddened she told him, “I’m not due for two weeks, Commander McKinney. Please don’t panic.”

He lowered his eyes in embarrassment. “All the same, ma’am, I think I’d better tell the engineer we’ll be pushing his engines hard.”

They laughed together, and suddenly he felt the ice break.

“May I ask,” Captain Dubronin said cautiously, “What brought you here to Pelora Three so close to your time?”

“I think the expression is ‘affairs of state’ isn’t it? We have a very old trade agreement with Pelora and I was pledged to officiate at the commissioning of a new trade ship before I became ... expectant. Then there were the usual delays. The ceremony was only concluded two days ago your time, I’m afraid. And my family’s yacht...” she shook her head. Her short, light brown hair was tightly curled and the curls bounced like coiled springs. “... for all her venerability and luxury, she can’t go much faster than warp four. The trip home would take three weeks.” She shrugged. “The Federation has always been a friend to Groningen – we are after all an old Earth colony – and the council was very cooperative when we asked for help getting the future King...” pat the tummy again “... home.”

“Well then, we’re glad we can help,” the captain said.

The princess asked if the tour of the ship could be put off until she’d had a good night’s sleep, and Dubronin and McKinney took their leave of her.

On the way to the turbolift McKinney mused, “An old Earth colony, yet a monarchy. I didn’t think there were any monarchies left on Earth when space flight and colonization began.”

“I don’t think there were,” Dubronin answered. “Groningen was settled by an expedition of Dutch and Belgian pilgrims in the late twenty-one-hundreds.”

Dutch, McKinney thought, That’s what the princess’ accent was based on. Should have realized when I heard the ‘Van Der’ in the doctor’s name.

Dubronin was saying, “They had probably intended to set up a democratic society, but somehow a benign monarchy formed around the group’s leader, Johann Demerest. There are some heroic stories of how he tamed the wilderness and aboriginal natives.”

McKinney was startled. “They displaced indigenes? That’s horrible!”

The captain nodded. “We would say so now, but keep in mind this was before Starfleet and the Prime Directive. The ships were slow and limited. The trip had taken years. Once they’d arrived they were forced to stay. There was some fighting at first, but I’ve heard it said that the locals and the colonists live together with little incident even to this day.”

Captain Dubronin went on to the bridge, and McKinney went to sick bay to see if Doctor Van der Roll was ready to be shown to his quarters. McKinney was feeling considerably better than he had that morning. The “diplomat” had turned out to be a delightful young woman who didn’t seem to be about to cause trouble. The mission seemed a milk run, at least on the face of it. No way would it take two weeks to get where they were going. Maybe he’d even get more than three hours of sleep tonight.

In the turbolift car, with deck level indicators flashing past the little frosted window, the doctor said, “I was surprised at the size of your ship, Commander.”

McKinney tried to project pride, but he hated talking about the ship with civilians. “Yes, Sir. The Excelsiors are the biggest ships in the fleet.”

“I hope it is fast as well.” The man shook his head in mild frustration. “I told Elayna not to wait so long to leave, but a princess can be a willful creature.” Now he smiled affectionately before going serious again. “I hope your ship is fast enough that we can avoid disaster.”

This brought McKinney up short. While he’d understood the need to get Princess Elayna home in time, nothing in her demeanor had hinted at disaster. “What disaster?”

“Her child must be borne on Groningen of course. If he is not, He forfeits the crown. The laws of succession are very strict on this point. In a way, the future history of our world depends on you, Commander.” The doctor smiled playfully.

No pressure.

“What happens to the princess if that happens? Nothing bad I hope?” He was picturing her banished to an asteroid or beheaded – this whole ‘king’ and ‘princess’ business had him thinking positively medieval!

The older man sighed. “No. But the nature of royal marriages can be uncertain. Elayna and Roger married more for political reasons than affection. I think they do love each other in their way, but they are very young and he is very temperamental. I wonder if he might not divorce her if the child is born offworld.”

Prince Roger?

The turbolift stopped near their destination. As the two men stepped out into the corridor, the princess’ bodyguard was himself heading toward the party’s quarters. He nodded as he fell in step with them. “Gentlemen.”

“Lieut – Leftenant,” McKinney responded. “Anthony was telling me about Groningen laws of succession. No offense, but this off-planet rule seems awfully strict, considering the modern interstellar community.”

“Strict,” Dockray agreed. “I would ask you make good speed for home, Commander. This worries me.”

“I think we can get you there fast enough to avoid a royal divorce, Lieut – Leftenant.”

The guardsman looked at the commander sharply. “Divorce?” Then he looked at the doctor. “That’s all you’re worried about Anthony?”

McKinney felt his stomach roll again. “Why? Is there more? No, wait, I don’t want to know. Oh hell, yes, I need to know. What else?”

Dockray had to shake his head to clear it of McKinney’s fit of rambling, but he answered promptly, “There are militant factions within our government who would love to see the monarchy fall. There are still other factions who don’t care about that, but dislike Prince Roger and his potential heir. The royal family has other, younger sons who don’t already have their political agendas fixed in stone like Roger does. All these factions are looking for an excuse to start trouble.”

The doctor interrupted. “Do you have something concrete?”

“We have some... things. The government isn’t as mired in dogma as some people think – if the baby is born offworld, it’s possible that the traditional laws may be amended. Everyone likes Elayna, there may be enough support to allow the baby to assume his heritage. But he’d face hell governing as an adult with that stigma. But if that happens, though – if the baby’s born off world and the government allows his succession...” he drew an uncomfortable breath “...the Royal Guard has reason to believe it could be the trigger for the Antiroyalist faction to attempt an assassination of Prince Roger. Maybe more.”

“More?” McKinney croaked.

“The Chorks?” Van der Roll asked.

“The Chorks?” McKinney said in confusion.

“The Chorks,” Dockray said. “The natives. I suppose they’re vaguely comparable to the Indians of old Earth – a developing bronze age culture when we landed and took the planet. Never been happy with us humans. It may not be an all-out revolution, and they may not be able to get a lot of modern weapons, but it would be real ugly.”

McKinney decided he *would* go see the engineer. Let’s see if the ship can manage warp eight for the whole trip. He also decided he might not get as much sleep as he thought.

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“You surely project confidence, Elayna,” Melody said as she ticked through her princess’ schedule book. “Is any of that real?”

Elayna toshed her friend’s affectionate jibe. “I’m a princess royal, my dear. Confidence is in the job description.”

“That’s not what I asked,” Melody chided. “I like this job; I’d hate to have to look for another princess to take care of at my age.”

Princess Elayna sighed and shifted in the easy chair, trying to find a comfortable position for the baby, who was apparently playing soccer in there. She and Melody shared an affection that Elayna hadn’t felt with her own mother. Duchess Van Blarkum had been far too wrapped up in her high society intrigues and social maneuvering to spend much time with her daughter. She had Melody for that. When she’d first joined the household as a nanny, Melody’s talent for organization quickly showed that she was useful for more than just babysitting. Though the Duchess hadn’t noticed, Elayna’s father had. He was a far sharper businessman than her mother was a socialite. As Elayna approached maturity and responsibility, and needed a nanny less and a secretary more, Melody – who knew her charge’s mind better than anyone on the planet – became the natural choice to promote into the job.

After a considerable silence that betrayed her unease, the princess said, “They’ll get us home in time.”

Melody sat on the edge of the bed and put her papers down. “Honey, I’d like you to do me a favor, and just spend a little thought on what you’re going to do if they *don’t* get you home in time.”

Elayna seemed rapt in adjusting the way her bathrobe fell over her lap, but her pinched expression showed that her mind was working and she was considering avoiding the question. Melody knew her too well. “Elaynaaaa,” she warned.

“You know I’m not the kind of person to avoid things I have to do, Melody,” the princess said at length, “but I’m going to avoid thinking about that until I have to. I don’t need anxiety on top of pregnancy, especially after spending the last week being the good little politico representing the Crown.” She apparently settled on an arrangement for her clothing and stopped fidgeting. She still hadn’t met Melody’s eyes. “I’ve heard,” she began brightly, as if it were time for a whole new subject, “that there are girls my age back home who have nothing to worry about except what to wear, who to go out with, and whether school will be snowed out tomorrow.”

“Does it get to you very badly? The responsibility?”

“Oh no! I was just thinking, those poor things have no idea how much *fun* they’re missing!”

Melody barked a most unladylike laugh. “A moment ago you were complaining about having to be the good little politico, now you’re pitying the people who aren’t.”

“I’m pregnant,” she joked, “I have mood swings.”

Melody picked up her paperwork to get back to it, shook her head. “That you do!”



The bridge screen showed a schematic of the route between Pelora and Groningen. Captain Dubronin and McKinney stood side by side before it, considering the fastest route, while the navigator operated the display. The two star systems were separated by a convoluted expanse of dust clouds and emission nebulae and several hundred stars of types ranging from main sequence through dying red giants. The comfortable route taken by the Groningen royal yacht, blissfully avoiding the whole mess in a wide hyperbola swinging to galactic “down,” was marked as a red line. The navigator rotated the view to many angles to give his commanders a complete sense of the area.

McKinney mused, “No wonder it takes them three weeks.”

“Any reason not to follow their route?” the Captain asked. “Even at a comfortable cruise of warp six we can be there in just over one week.”

“Have you spoken to her doctor and her guard? They’re so nervous they’re making *me* nervous. The lieutenant is afraid of an all-out coup if they don’t make it in time for the birth. I’d just as soon find a more direct route and crank this puppy up to warp eight. We have a huge advantage in shields and deflectors over their yacht; we could cut through the thinnest parts of the dust cloud...” he pointed with a stylus and the screen traced a line “... then maybe hop over this denser area of the emission nebula. From there it’s a straight run to Groningen. It could cut the trip down to three or four days; that would certainly make the princess’ entourage happier.”

“That would be a bonus,” she agreed. “I’m not entirely sure I like my ship referred to as ‘this puppy’ though,” she finished with a smile.

“How about ‘this old scow?’” McKinney prodded. The navigator snorted.

Dubronin folded her arms in thought, still looking at the screen “I’ve been meaning to transfer more of my work over to you, maybe now is a good time.”

McKinney laughed nervously and pointedly returned to the subject. “In any case, that’s my recommendation for a course, Ma’am. We can cut a few days off the mission time and return this fine vessel – this shining example of technological superiority – to fleet duty all the sooner.”

The navigator laughed out loud, cutting it short self-consciously when he realized it was *too* loud. Dubronin smiled. “Very well.” She turned to the still-smiling navigator. “You have your course Mister M’Fosa, when you gather your wits, please plot it.” M’Fosa cleared his throat and went about his work. “Helm,” Dubronin continued, “Warp six. Adjust for best safe speed when we encounter the dust clouds.”

“Only warp six?” McKinney asked.

“I see no need to strain my ship. Six will do, with time to spare.”

“Yes Ma’am,” he conceded.

“And, engage, please, gentlemen,” Dubronin ordered.

2



First Officer's log. Two standard days into the mission and, believe it or not, no glitches. We have to pass through the fringes of a nebula this afternoon, which should at least be pretty to look at. We have to slow to warp 4 for the transit, which should last about a day at that speed. With shields at full I don't foresee any difficulty. As I'm saying that, of course, I'm thinking things like "famous last words" and "don't jinx it."

The princess has, oddly enough, struck up a friendship with T'Lar. I swear I saw Lara almost smile once or twice – oh, we've been having formal dinners in the officers' lounge every evening. The senior staff, with the princess and her people. I think I'm almost getting to enjoy it, though I'm still not very comfortable with the formality. The doctor's a good guy, he's easy to get along with. The security guy too, but he's necessarily a little – well, guarded, in his demeanor.

Only a few more days. Then we can get back to star charting and other nice, uneventful pastimes.



McKinney's intercom beeped. As it always happens, he was two paragraphs from the end of a chapter in the book he was reading. "Bridge to First Officer," the captain's voice announced.

"McKinney," he acknowledged, hitting the com button.

"Daniel," Dubronin said, "Something interesting. Come up here, please."

Interesting usually meant mysterious and possibly dangerous. *That'll teach me to think everything was going well*, he thought.

"On my way."

"The signal is so weak," the communications officer, Koike, was saying, "that I almost thought it was background noise from the emission nebula. We're getting a lot of that across the bands."

They'd been inside the nebula for less than two hours. The main viewscreen wasn't entirely useless, as they'd feared – visual cameras still worked fine – but electronic sensors were out of commission from the nebula's energized hydrogen clouds. The main screen showed visual information, but blurs of gas flaring off the deflector shields at warp four were almost unbearable to look at, almost like having a sparkler jammed against your eyeball. The screen's gain was tuned down to keep the flashing lights from making the bridge look like a dance hall.

It was a radio signal they were hearing. The bridge speakers laid static over the room, with only an occasional, barely recognized syllable, sounding like English, squeezing itself from between the roar of white noise.

The comm officer's burly face was pinched in concentration. He touched a control, slid a vernier, tapped another pad. "Hear that echo effect?" he asked generally. Dubronin shook her head. McKinney concentrated harder. It *was* possible to hear the same – phrase? – repeated at least three or four times in an echoing effect. "I think the nebula is acting like an echo chamber," Koike postulated. It's an RF signal, maybe bouncing around inside the hydrogen cloud.

Koike sighed. "It would be easier to hear if we could drop out of subspace for a moment. We're outrunning the signal on one side, and running into it too fast on the other." He looked an inquiry to the captain.

She shook her head. "No. After we drop the princess off, we can come back this way and try to pick up the signal again. But first things first. Any RF signal bouncing around in here must be decades old, just to get from one side of the nebula to the other."

Koike nodded, "Possibly."

McKinney felt those old familiar butterflies again. "What if... no. Never mind."

Dubronin eyed him. "Finish, Daniel, you know how I hate that."

He smiled. "I just imagined – well, maybe I read too much fiction, but – what if this signal is an old warning from someone who encountered some danger up ahead? They've been dead for decades, and we sail into the same trap because we're not willing to listen."

There was an uncomfortable silence. The comm officer could be heard to stifle a snicker. Dubronin continued to eye her first officer. Then she said, “Helm, all stop.”

The image on the viewscreen resolved from a manic blur to an uneven rose-colored glow. They were inside a hot blob of hydrogen, after all. But the molecular hydrogen cloud was not so dense as to be opaque, or navigation through it would have been impossible. Stars pricked their shining presence through the diffuse mist.

At once the static’s pitch changed. The voice underlying it increased in volume. It was still all but indiscernible as words, like listening to everyone talk at a party all at once, with frequent dropouts of nothing but hydrogen hiss. Koike spiked another control, tuned down the squelch on the service noise. Eventually, as he played his controls like a concert pianist, voice fragments began to emerge from the mist of static.

“...*Harr...*”

“...*unkno...*”

“...*energ...*”

“...*stran...*”

“...*why?...* ”

“...*all thi...*”

“...*down to...*”

“...*may...*”

That last syllable caught McKinney’s attention. Was it...?

“...*repea...*”

“...*this is...*”

“...*home...*”

“...*mayday...*”

It was!

“...*day...*”

Dubronin hung her head. “Well, that’s that then. We can’t ignore a mayday, no matter how old we may think it. Mister Koike, can you track the signal?”

A look of mild panic flashed on the officer’s face and he swallowed. “I’ll do my best, ma’am. But in here? It’s like locating a voice in a cave. It’s all echoes.”

“Well, do your best then,” she said mildly. “It’s probably many years too late for whoever it was, anyway. But we have responsibilities.”

“Yes ma’am,” Koike nodded, obviously relieved that the captain understood the futility.

McKinney knew what he had to do as well. “I’ll go tell the princess there’ll be a slight delay,” he said. “It *will* be a slight delay, I hope,” he finished, not expecting an answer. He got none.

“Oh, you’re making me *very* nervous, Daniel,” Doctor Van der Roll said.

“You don’t have to tell *me*, Anthony!” McKinney answered emphatically.

The princess was all light and reason, a beaming smile on her bright face. “Please relax, Anthony,” she said, putting her hand on his. “A small delay to help some people. How can we not?”

Leftenant Dockray’s expression looked like an overcast promising rain. “If the mayday turns out to have any substance, this could require you to mount a rescue, yes?”

McKinney nodded. “Of course, if there are lives at stake.”

Dockray uttered a low rumble. Thunder? “All right. Well. It can’t be helped, obviously. We still have plenty of time, as you say, Highness.”

“Can you call in another ship?” The doctor asked – nearly pleaded.

McKinney shook his head. “Not from inside the nebula.” The doctor’s shoulders slumped. Melody remained quiet through all this, but watched Elayna closely, probably for signs of stress.

Elayna sat heavily in the easy chair in the main room of her quarters. To McKinney, she looked more ready to pop out that baby than ever. He tried to give her an encouraging smile, and when she saw his expression she smiled and waved a hand in royal dismissal. “Don’t worry about me, Commander. You do your job as you need to. Things will attend to themselves.”

He bowed slightly. “Yes Princess,” he said uncertainly, and retreated from the room.

Koike pressed his earbug deeper into his head. A screen on his panel showed a schematic of the surrounding area – as best the ship’s sensors could produce in the jamming environment of the nebula –

with a series of complicated colored tracks flashing in and out of existence. The computer was trying to determine where the strange signal was coming from.

“Not so much a voice in a cave,” the comm officer said, “as a bullet ricocheting around a room.”

McKinney watched the screen on the comm panel. Certain parts of the paths were common to each other. The computer had figured out the most recent ricochets, and was trying to fill in the earlier stages.

A technician at the science station spoke up. “Ma’am?” he addressed to the captain. “The signal strength seems to have a general upswell in one particular direction.” Dubronin crossed to the science station and examined the readouts. “It’s not as specific as we’d like,” the tech went on, “but – well, it’s like an RF glow in this general area, maybe seven light years across.”

“That makes sense,” Koike added. “The tracks seem to be converging on that area as well.”

McKinney asked the navigator, “Tomba, what’s in that direction?”

She switched the main screen to a sensor schematic. It was much more sparse than McKinney was used to seeing, owing to the massive degradation of the nebula. But stars – the strongest energy sources in the area at any wavelength – showed plainly enough. “Three stars, sir,” Tomba said. “All within the fringe of the nebula. Two are a binary system, the other about three light years from the binary. Can’t get a read on planets in all this.” She swept her hand to indicate the clouds outside the ship.

Dubronin turned to Koike and the science tech. “Are any of those stars near where the signal may be from?”

“Yes ma’am.” Koike said, “The single.”

“It’s nearly dead center to the RF glow,” the tech added.

The comm officer postulated, “If someone were broadcasting a general omnidirectional mayday, while at the same time beaming a directional message toward home, that would account for the two different types of signals we’re receiving.”

The captain grunted understanding. “Helm,” she said, “come about to – two-seven-nine mark four-zero. Proceed at warp two.”

Princess Elayna was wearing an extremely fluffy bathrobe and matching slippers. McKinney hoped it was because she was feeling comfortably informal around him. The robe was perfectly fitted so it still closed over her belly, saving him from having to pretend not to see Her Highness’ slip. If in fact she was wearing... no, leave *that* thought where it belongs. The ever-present Melody was folding clothes on the bed in the other room, visible from the couch in the quarters’ front room, where McKinney sat. She glanced over her shoulder when the first officer had come in.

“I was surprised there’s an actual laundry aboard, Commander,” she said pleasantly.

“Rarely used,” he admitted, “except for guests and our dress uniforms. I’m not sure why that is, though; the dress maroons aren’t made of anything that isn’t in the duty kit.”

“I know most starships use – whatever you call them – recyclers?”

“Yes, it’s a transporter offshoot. It beams the dirt out of the clothing, basically. Good enough for service clothing.”

“Well, it’s a pleasure to find the *real* laundry. We’re used to packing a *great* deal of clothes for long trips on anything but the royal yacht. We got caught short this time; not knowing we weren’t taking the yacht back, we only packed a few days’ worth.” McKinney had seen the princess’ luggage beamed aboard. There were trunks enough for him to pack everything he ever owned. But he admittedly didn’t own much.

Elayna asked, “How’s your search going, Commander?”

“Ah,” he said, pointing at her, “Exactly why I stopped by.” Then he hoped it wasn’t too rude to point at a princess while speaking to her. Was there a royal etiquette book somewhere in the ship’s library? To atone for the pointing, he braced his hands behind his back in a formal at-ease posture. “So far, it looks like it may only take us a couple of days total to check this out. We’re on our way to the source of the signal, with an ETA of about ten hours.”

“But then you may have to rescue God-knows-how-many people,” she said in a half-question.

“We really don’t think that’s likely, Princess. Best odds are the signal is very old, and has been bouncing around these gas clouds for centuries. But Starfleet regs still require us to check it out.”

McKinney was proud of himself for projecting a confidence he didn’t feel. Maybe his diplomatic muscles were just rusty, and flexing them for the last few days was getting them back in shape. Deep inside, he was scared as hell that they were going to find a lost star liner with six thousand people needing rescue, or a Klingon task force aiming their torpedoes at him, or a whole planetary population with only two days to live unless the Breitling crew found a way to save them.

He really did read too much fiction.

Melody came out of the back room for a moment. “Commander?” she asked. “Forgive me, but Elayna’s *my* most important consideration. What if there’s something dangerous? Shouldn’t you be more concerned with Elayna’s life than an old radio signal?”

McKinney felt the walls of diplomacy closing around him, threatening to crush his chest. Despite that charm that the princess radiated and the down-to-earthness (if one could say that in space) of her manner, he knew it was possible to offend anyone in the universe with a careless word. “Her safety is never out of my thoughts, ma’am,” he said earnestly. “And whatever we find, we *will* get you folks home in time.” He hoped that sounded heroic enough. Or at least he hoped it sounded more confident than he felt. Princess Elayna favored him with a confident smile, almost forcing him to relax by will power. He smiled back involuntarily and sighed, “Really, Princess, there’s not much in the galaxy that can hurt one of these ships. And our own regs in this case are clear and, frankly quite sensible. At least we think so.” That sounded a bit too flippant, and he regretted saying it at once. But the princess wasn’t offended.

“I agree, Commander, though Doctor Van der Roll and Melody have their doubts. You do what you have to. Saving lives is... well... *good*.” She smiled lamely, realizing that words had failed her and even a princess can sound stupid. McKinney’s smile went ear to ear for a split second before he managed to reduce it to something more polite.

Van der Roll and Dockray sat together in the deck six officers’ lounge, sipping coffee that neither of them especially liked, and attempting to force down reconstituted chicken sandwiches. The two men had never been friends, but needing to collaborate during the princess’ pregnancy had created a working relationship that bordered on civility. Dockray still wore his sidearm, even though he knew as well as anyone aboard that he’d never need it on a Federation ship. It was, at this point in his life, as much a part of his clothing as the belt that held his pants up, from which the holster hung. He’d been the princess’ personal bodyguard for her entire life and planned to hold that position for the remainder of his own life. The sidearm was one means to that end.

The doctor had been a part of the royal staff only since Elayna entered puberty, but he was no less trusted than Dockray. The bodyguard had no reason to dislike the man, but Dockray was never a very social animal. He enjoyed his time alone, working out in a gym, or at shooting practice. Most of his time was spent within fifty meters of wherever the princess was, except when she was safe in her own home on Groningen. Even now he was less than that distance from her quarters, a fast run down corridor A and the sixth door on the left. The deck layouts of the *Breitling* were committed to memory within a day of his finding out they’d be aboard her.

When he did get free time, those times the princess was ensconced in her chateau and his daily routine was satisfied, Dockray went out. Not to socialize, but to study. As a bodyguard, he felt, he needed to be a student of people. In a crowd of hundreds, pressing the princess for a look or a moment in the Royal Presence, Dockray needed to watch the faces, and from those faces, find the one that had the desire to hurt her behind it. So he went out some nights and cruised the night spots. All kinds of night spots. He learned to recognize the people with good hearts who enjoy others’ company, the frauds who want something from you, the sad people who need someone to pay attention to them, and the bad hearts who enjoy hurting. And all the types in between.

The doctor was a good man who wanted to take care of the princess, of that Dockray had no doubt. But in the few hours since the ship’s course change, the security officer’s senses had spotted a subtle change in Van der Roll’s aura. The man was nervous about getting the princess home in time, and he was letting it *get* to him.

“Anthony, you’re a doctor,” Dockray said flatly.

Van der Roll looked up in surprise with half a sandwich in his hands and a fresh bite in his mouth. Dockray waited for him to finish chewing and speak. “I *knew* you were good at your job, Dockray,” he said. “When did you discover my secret?” Dockray chuckled. “You need some medical advice? I warn you, you’re not my specialty.”

“Actually,” Dockray said, “I wanted to give you some.” Van der Roll’s eyebrows tweaked upward in curiosity. “Doctor... *relax!*”

“Ah,” Van der Roll said, putting his sandwich down. “I know. It’s difficult. I’ve always had this little anxiety problem, but it’s not very often that anything this stressful happens to bring it out.”

“Oh, I sympathize. Don’t think I’m not worried. I haven’t exactly slept a full night since we came aboard, and I doubt it’s the strange surroundings. But I think the captain deserves my professional courtesy, though, to have enough confidence in her to get the job done. I imagine she feels the pressure too.”

“Do you think so? I imagine if she doesn’t get Elayna home in time, she can just go on to her next assignment and leave us to clean up the Well.” He was going to say “mess,” but as he was saying it, a vision of the worst case scenario bloomed in his mind’s eye – Elayna and Roger butchered by a mob of antiroyalists. “Dockray, I make no secret that I love that girl like my own daughter. I couldn’t bear anything bad happening to her.”

“And you have about five hundred people working to keep that from happening right now. Try not to worry. Let the captain worry about it, and you just worry about your end of things.”

3



“This is fascinating!” the science officer grinned. “It’s a bubble of clear space, blown by the star after it formed in the nebula.”

“Blown by the star?” the captain asked.

“The solar wind. When the star condensed and ignited in the middle of this gas cloud, the pressure wave blew the nebula material away, forming a bubble. Now the stellar wind from the star maintains the outward pressure, and you have a slowly expanding bubble of empty space for about a three hundred AU radius around the system.”

“Hmm,” Dubronin hmed. “Planets within?”

“Yes, but I can’t get clear readings yet. Once we break through the wall of the pressure front, out of the nebula and into the bubble, we should have full sensor capability again.”

“All right. Helm? How long to that pressure front?”

“Two hours, Ma’am.”

“Fine. Before we cross it, drop out of warp. I want to go through that wall at one half impulse. Comm, is that signal any clearer?”

“Stronger, Ma’am, but no clearer. Still only word fragments. It’s definitely coming from up ahead.”

“All right. Steady as she goes.”

The princess was tucked in, as it were. Beta shift was just ending; twilight on a starship, and time for bed. The captain had decided to stay on the bridge for a while, along with most of the dayshift bridge crew who were too curious about that old mayday to relinquish their posts to the next shift. McKinney’s normal duties were running a bit behind due to his job of minding the princess and her people, so he was presently making his rounds of the ship’s departments, gathering data for his daily report.

McKinney liked Dr. Van der Roll. The man worried like an old lady over his princess, but he reminded McKinney of an uncle he hadn’t seen in about ten years. Uncle Max had been little Daniel’s main source of fun, taking him to parks and museums, playing games with him, chucking a ball around, during those weeks that McKinney’s father had to spend off Earth. Bryon McKinney, Daniel’s father, had been a crewman on a passenger starliner based at Earth. The old Astral Queen was away on her runs for weeks, sometimes months, and little Daniel had wanted to go along with his father. But he had to stay home with Mom. Uncle Max, Mom’s brother, would take pity on him and keep him from missing his father too much. His father retired from the spaceline just in time for Daniel himself to go off to Starfleet Academy, so now they saw even less of each other. But the elder McKinney was proud and beaming that his son was the first officer of an Excelsior.

The bodyguard, Dockray, made McKinney a little uneasy though. Dockray reminded him of the vice principal at his high school. Always serious, always looking around for trouble. Getting kids nervous enough to *look* guilty even when they weren’t doing anything. It made it hard for him to talk to Dockray without being nervous himself. He didn’t want to be rude and avoid the man – never be rude to an armed man, his uncle had once told him with a chuckle – but he found it hard to be friendly. Well, he would only have to worry about it for a few more days.

The last stop of the evening was main engineering. The chief engineer, Lt. Commander Tchalabi was sitting in the office adjoining engineering when McKinney arrived.

“Just putting the last touch on my report, Sir.” Tchalabi said as McKinney entered.

“How’s it going, Dennis?”

“All’s well, Commander. We had to shut down the bussards this morning, though.”

“Anything actually wrong with them, or were the tanks just full?” Running the hydrogen scoops in a dense hydrogen nebula was indeed overkill. McKinney hadn’t thought of that before the engineer mentioned it, but then that’s why the engineer was there.

“Full to busting, Sir. They were about to auto-shutdown in fact; the system closed off the tank feed and was about to kill the collectors when I saved it the trouble.”

“Fine.” McKinney noted it on his clipboard. The reactor’s matter tanks were usually not a hundred percent full unless the ship had been topped off at a starbase. A few days of normal warp propulsion would reduce them immediately. But the bussards collected enough interstellar hydrogen molecule by molecule to keep them hovering between fifty and seventy-five percent full. This nebula was a little bonus to have them full up. McKinney was suddenly attacked by a yawn so wide it almost cracked his jaw. He covered his mouth with his clipboard.

Tchalabi looked at the chrono on the wall and raised an eyebrow at the commander.

“I know, I know,” McKinney said, “I’m going.”

He only had to put his daily report together now so it could be in the captain’s terminal first thing in the morning, 2200 hours. He should be in bed by midnight. Not too bad, considering he probably wouldn’t sleep much anyway.

“Warping down, Captain,” the helmsman said.

Dubronin assumed her center seat. “Very good, Mister Shankar. One half impulse.” The helmsman repeated the order and keyed the speed in. The comm officer boosted the volume of the strange signal so the whole bridge could hear it, jumbled and unintelligible as it was.

Dubronin tapped her own comm pad on the chair arm. “Daniel,” she said, “We’re about to pass through the cloud wall into the bubble.”

After a pause, his voice sounding very sleepy, McKinney responded, “I’ll monitor from my quarters, if that’s all right, Captain.”

She smiled. She hadn’t noticed the time, nearly midnight. “That will be fine,” she answered. He’d mentioned that he needed to grab a couple hours of sleep before they reached the signal location.

On the viewscreen the star they were approaching was a blazing, actinic spark burning a pinpoint hole through a vermilion curtain of diffuse hydrogen tendrils, highlighted by auroral glows of hot gas being shoved aside by the ship’s deflector screens. The density of the surrounding gas cloud increased as they approached the wall – matter held in abeyance by the pressure of the star’s light, piling up before dispersing backward into the nebula. The ship had been bucking occasionally as it passed through varying thicknesses of gas and dust all the while they’d been inside the nebula. Now it bucked a little more as the acceleration compensators adjusted to the thicker medium. Starships generally weren’t designed to move through anything at all, but the gas was so thin even here, it posed no danger of damaging the ship.

The helmsman counted off, “three minutes.”

“Sensors?” Dubronin asked.

“Not yet,” from the science station. “The gas density at the interface is even higher than the rest of the nebula.” Dense is a relative term. The gas was thin enough to see through like sheer window curtains, hardly enough to even cause drag on the ship despite the occasional pocket that bumped them gently. Yet from a distance of many light years the nebula had looked like a solid cloud.

“Once we’re through, slow to one quarter,” Dubronin ordered.

“One quarter, aye. One minute to breakout.”

Bump. They passed through a particularly thick mass of hydrogen compressed by stellar wind, flaring the shields mildly.

And then they were through.

Howling banshees screamed in the air of the bridge. Dubronin clamped her hands over her ears reflexively and Koike yelled in pain and yanked his ear bug out. It fell to the deck and bounced. He groped in panic at his panel. The science station tech tried to stand, but stumbled over his chair and fell, adding to the general confusion and cries of “what the hell?” from the bridge crew. The screaming, Dubronin suddenly realized, was the mysterious signal, now in the clear and unhindered by the nebula’s interference. But the ricocheting effect inside the cloud was amplified a thousandfold here inside the clear bubble with its compressed gas walls, and what they were hearing was the mayday signal in its full force, doubled and redoubled upon itself, overlaying itself a thousand times, bouncing around inside an echo chamber for who knows how long. Still unintelligible. And Koike had his gain turned up full trying to hear the original weak signal. In his groping, he managed to crank the volume down to where the sound assumed a moderate buzz.

“Sorry,” he smiled wanly.

“I think we’ll survive,” Dubronin answered through an annoyed sneer. “Can you read it now?”

“I’ll need to filter the repetition. Just a minute.”

Shankar reported, “Sensors show two planets on this side of the star, Ma’am.”

A different science station operator had joined them at the shift change, but he'd been briefed on the situation. "Captain, the source is clear now. It's coming from the innermost planet."

"Well then. Mister Shankar, set course at one half impulse. I think we can take the shields down too, now that we're out of all that." She waved her hand and aftward at the nebula. "It may help clear up the sensor picture."

Shankar acknowledged, and aimed the Breitling on a simple elliptical fall toward that planet's gravity well. The impulse engines accelerated the ship to a quarter of light speed.

Koike turned abruptly to face Dubronin, his face pale. "Captain?"

As she turned, he cranked up his volume again. The message had been sorted, enhanced and clarified. The sound was a little staticky, with some unavoidable flutter. The voice was urgent, afraid:

"Mayday mayday. This is the SS Harrington's Home. We have been attacked by an unknown alien vessel. Unknown energy weapon. Very powerful.

"Why did they attack us? We came all this way and now this! This isn't fair! The ship is totaled from one shot. One shot! Half the colonists dead!

"The ship's boats will make it to the planet. We're going down. Maybe we can. Make it.

"I don't know if this will even get out of the nebula, but if it does... Send warships, Do NOT come without firepower. This thing is terrible.

"Repeat, this is the SS Harrington's Home. Mayday, mayday...."

Koike let it play one more time then cut it off. The bridge was silent as a funeral.

McKinney, wearing off-duty casuals, sat in stunned silence at his workstation in his quarters. His desk screen was split between a repeater view of the main view screen and the security camera overlooking the whole bridge. He heard himself say "wow." So much for sleeping! The first thing he'd have to do is a library computer search for the ship's name; it certainly sounded like an Earth vessel. He wondered how long ago.... oh.

"McKinney to bridge, Koike."

"Um. Yes Sir?"

"Does the message have a time tag?"

He saw Koike fumble for a moment with his controls. He was clearly shaken. Whatever this was didn't happen yesterday, but it was still unsettling coming across someone's epitaph like this. "It's... Wow, Sir, it's ... ninety three years old."

McKinney heard the captain say "Oh my," and a number of bridge crew exclaim in surprise.

Then,

Shankar's singsong voice rang out urgently, "Captain -- "

Like they'd hit a wall, the ship lurched downward against its compensator fields so hard that McKinney felt his chair drop from under him and he banged his knees on his desk.

The sound from whatever it was rumbled through the ship's spaceframe.

The pain from his knees shot through him. At the same instant the lights went out and his flailing for purchase took on a horrible flare of panic as he lost his orientation.

Then the red alert claxon joined the melee of confused sensations, the sound coming simultaneously with his room's low-level emergency lights.

He found himself on the floor, and picked himself up immediately. His screen was blank. No, not blank, black. Service noise, no signal.

The claxon cut off, not as if turned off, but as if *cut* off.

"Bridge, what hit us?"

No signal.

"Bridge, McKinney, what *was* that?"

No signal.

"Captain? McKinney to Captain?"

No.

"Crap. McKinney to engineering."

Still.

He launched himself toward the doors. They didn't open and he crashed into them, bruising his shoulder.

Damn. There should be power to the doors, even in a total power out. They still had gravity, but that may just be because it took a long time for the gee generators to spin down. Or their batteries were

working. He popped the bypass panel open and cracked the manual latch. He had to work his fingers into the crack between the doors, but they gave easily enough and he yanked them open.

The corridor was lit only by the emergency battery-powered lights every few meters at ankle level. Other crew were spilling out of their quarters asking each other what was going on. There was enough light to see each other. Some sharp souls even had flashlights. He commandeered one of the lights.

“Commander?” someone recognized him. “What the hell, sir?”

“I’m not sure.” But there was only one course of action open. “Listen up everybody. Either we collided with something or something fired on us, I don’t see any other explanation right now. Either way, the best thing to do is hit your battle stations. You all heard the red alert, so let’s take it at its word.” Some started moving immediately, but some crew still dithered in confusion. “Let’s go people,” McKinney said in his command voice, “Battle stations! This is not a drill!” *I don’t think so, anyway.* “Pass the word as you go.”

His first order of business was to get to the bridge. He went to the first turbolift. It didn’t open. Well, if the doors don’t open the lift car sure as hell won’t take him anywhere. He tried two more lifts just to be sure. As people ran by or popped their heads out of their rooms, he ordered them to General Quarters. Somewhere in the back of his conscious mind he realized the sounds, the vibrations, that the ship made every minute, weren’t there. He wondered if they were just masked by the general confusion of noises that the crew were making as they ran up and down the corridor – feet swishing on carpet and banging on the decksole, people chattering and asking each other if they knew what had happened. But it was the missing “thrum” you could normally feel through your feet that convinced him. The ship had died around him.

What was a dead starship? The recruiting literature called starships “cities in space.” Without power, without a way to recycle air and food, or pump water. The city in space became a mausoleum in space.

When the lights had gone out and the ship lurched, he felt fear, but it was tempered by the expectation that whatever had happened was immediately explainable. He was already beginning to worry that that might not be the case.

A crewman jogging past saw him standing forlornly by a closed turbolift door and said “They’re all offline, sir. All over the ship.”

“How do you know? Comm’s out. Isn’t it?”

“Yessir it is, but...” she lifted a communicator to show him.

He actually smacked himself in the forehead. The crewwoman’s eyes goggled at seeing her commander do that. He held his hand out for it. “May I?”

She handed it to him, said “Keep it, Sir,” and continued running off to her station.

He flipped it open. “McKinney to bridge.”

Still nothing.

Crap.

He jogged to the nearest ladderwell, recessed in the wall at the corridor junction. Only five decks up to the bridge. He opened the hatch sealing the deckhead. He climbed.

With the main lights out, the ladderways were lit by a long red trace light running up the wall behind the ladder. It made the rungs easy to see in an emergency, but cast the narrow tubular shaft in a baleful, claustrophobic glow. McKinney hadn’t experienced the tubes in this light. He wasn’t really claustrophobic, but the sense of emergency was ripe in him, and the urgency of not knowing what was happening churned his stomach. He kept his flashlight turned on and climbed with one hand.

At each deck the ladderway shifted its own diameter to one side, then back, to keep anything falling from going down all thirteen decks and killing a bunch of people on the way down. Each level had a hatch to go through for much the same purpose.

Also to prevent decompression between decks. In case the hull was breached.

The hatch to deck two would not open.

Claustrophobic or not, now he was scared. The ladderway tube got smaller, it seemed, around him, and the hatch above felt like the weight of tons of rock was holding it closed. If it was decompressed up there, the reality was the opposite: if he opened it, the pressure in the tube would blow him up, into vacuum. He took his hand away from the latch sharply.

He shined his flashlight on the little readout panel next to the hatch over his head. He saw its battery light was on. No power to it from the ship’s main line, but its standby power source was engaged.

Atmospheric pressure on the other side: zero.

God.

He was still well outboard of the bridge to starboard. Maybe they were holed *next* to the bridge. He wouldn't accept that the bridge was gone until he saw it. Maybe they were only holed in the compartment directly above him.

He swapped the flashlight to his off hand, awkwardly leaning against the wall to free his good hand to draw his communicator. Awareness that a fall would only be five or six feet didn't reassure him. "McKinney to bridge."

His voice rang hollowly in the tiny, dark shaft.

No one.

This was awful. This was supposed to have been a milk run. The princess...

Oh crap, the *princess*! He should check to see if she was all right.

No, first things first. Engineering.

"McKinney to engineering."

Nothing. But the lingering humm of his own voice fading in his ears. "Engineering, Sir, this is Tchalabi." Oh thank God.

"You on a communicator too, Tchalabi?"

"Yes, Sir. Ship's main power is offline. We're on it. Everything shut down when the main computer went. We need a half hour to get everything routed to the secondary computer. It's damaged too, there was an EPS flashback..."

McKinney realized Tchalabi was kind of babbling nervously.

"Dennis, hang on," he said. "The main computer went? How? No wait, never mind. I'm trying to get to the bridge through the ladderways. I show decompression on B deck. Check your deck schematics. How bad is it?"

Tchalabi breathed into his mic for a moment. Then his voice was a lot less in control than even his babbling had been. "Don't you know sir? The main computer went the same time the bridge went! I'm looking at the deck schematics right now. Sir... Sir, we've got decompression through... Sir, something punched a hole straight through the saucer top to bottom!"

What?

"What?"

"Yessir. The hole's about... I don't know, about... ten meters. Like a something punched right through. An asteroid maybe. It looks like it hit the bridge clean, at an angle, then blasted through the main computer core, all the way through the saucer and out the bottom. *Everything* decompressed from the hole out to whatever airtight doors managed to shut."

"The bridge is..."

"Gone, Sir! It's *Gone!*"

The bridge was gone.

The captain was dead.

And now everything, every *one*, not just the princess –

Was his responsibility.

McKinney suddenly felt as cold as the vacuum beyond the hatch.

4



McKinney found the princess' quarters open, and her full entourage with her, huddled in the dark. No, Dockray didn't huddle. His weapon was in his hand, though he had the presence of mind not to point it at McKinney when he appeared in the doorway. The security man was nervous, but not paranoid. McKinney figured the lieutenant had read up enough to know how to get the door open, and yelled instruction through the door. So it was pointless to ask. Two of the ship's security guards stood at either side of the door with phasers. They snapped to attention and McKinney nodded to them and smiled a "well done" to them.

Dockray said, "Just tell me we're not being boarded."

McKinney was surprised by the specificity of the question, but shook his head. "Not to my knowledge, but that doesn't cover a lot of ground right now. I assume you commandeered these men as they ran by?"

"Hope you don't mind," Dockray smiled.

"I'm just ashamed I didn't think of it myself in the confusion. Sorry." He addressed the apology to the princess.

"Were we attacked?" Elayna asked.

"I don't know. We're dead in space. I have to assume that they – whoever – would have finished us off already if that was the case, for whatever that's worth."

"Not worth much, Daniel," Van der Roll groaned. "If it's the Chorks, they'll want Elayna dead, and by Almighty God, Daniel, if that happens I'll find a way to take Starfleet down..."

"Anthony!" Dockray snapped, "Overreact much? The Chorks don't *have* spaceships. They're lucky if one of them can scrounge a *car*." To McKinney he said, "Commander, I wouldn't tell you your business, but in your place, I'd assume an attack, and the enemy would be boarding."

McKinney sighed. "You're right." Into his communicator, he called, "McKinney to security."

Once again, an annoying lack of immediate response. The equipment's usual efficiency had left him too used to instant gratification.

In a moment, though, "Security, Lieutenant Karr, Sir. What's going on, Sir?"

"In a nutshell, something punched a hole through the saucer section, the bridge is gone, the captain's probably dead, and the ship is dead in space. *If* it's an attack, and that's a big if," he looked reassuringly at the princess with that, and she smiled a thank you at him. "... the lack of follow-up attacks could mean the enemy is either done with us or will be boarding us. That's all I know, Lieutenant, but I'm ordering Security Condition One. Comm's down so use communicators. Arm your staff with phaser rifles and body armor and assume there will be boarders. If I'm wrong about that, well, good. Get on it."

"Yessir, we assumed the same. We're halfway deployed."

Thank heaven the crew knows their job. "Excellent. McKinney out." To the security men beside him: "You two got that?" They snapped simultaneous yessirs. "Good. Close these doors, keep them safe." He saw the two men had communicators on their hips. Was he the only one who didn't think of that? To the princess' group: "Stay in these quarters. Nobody get trigger happy; as far as we know there's nobody aboard but us. I have to get to auxiliary control and see if we can still fly this puppy. This ship." He thought about Dubronin – don't call my ship 'puppy.'

Crap.

Fourteen levels down, through ladderway after dark, red, ladderway. McKinney's impatience grew with each deck. He was dropping most of the distance to each deck by the time he was through the ship's neck section. His impatience, and his anxiety, grew with each level.

He wasn't ready for this. It's only been a year since his promotion to first officer. It's not that he didn't know his stuff; know his job. He knew the Breitling inside out, even where it diverged from other Excelsiors due to upgrades and field mods. He knew how to do his job. But responsibility. Responsibility was the thing that worried him. He'd never had much of that in his life. Starfleet had trained him for it, exposed him to it, taught him how to handle it. No one who knew him knew his fears, he wouldn't let that show through, not even to T'Lar. Responsibility and dealing with VIPs – there were the two big ones. Maybe he'd thought that by embarking on the path to command he'd be able to overcome them through having them forced on him. Yeah, good plan.

He wasn't ready for command of a ship, and he sure as hell wasn't ready to command five hundred people on a crippled starship during a crisis with a princess aboard.

Right through the saucer, Tchalabi had said? *God, how many people did it kill?* Whatever it was. It hit dead center and went almost straight through. The bridge, quarters on several decks, some labs. *Sick bay!* The medical complex wrapped the saucer's central hub all the way around, it had to be holed at some point. *Lara!* The bio sciences section was attached to sickbay, T'Lar would be there. *No, wait, it isn't her shift.* But she works whenever she has to, not following any shift schedule. Would she be there?

He had to find out. At deck twelve he stopped on the ladderwell floor and drew his communicator. To his surprise, his voice wouldn't come. Strange that, after a year aboard the *Breitling*, Lara was the only one he thought of as a friend. The only one he could relate to was an alien woman who kept her emotions in strict seclusion. What did that say about him?

"McKinney to T'Lar," he said into the tiny box in his hand.

Would she think to get a communicator? What would her logical mind decide was the best course of action? Stay put? Go to her general quarters station? *Why isn't she answering?*

He climbed down the last few decks one-handed, leaving the communicator open in case she answered.

Responsibility. It was tugging him toward the control room when his conscience was screaming to find out if his friend was alive. He didn't like it.

Auxiliary control was down in the secondary hull, centrally located away from the outer hull to protect it in a fight. It was there in case what happened to the main bridge... happened. Now that it *had* happened, auxiliary control would be McKinney's bridge. He tucked the communicator away and dropped to the corridor outside the control room. The main doors were open. Faces turned to look. The control room was fully manned. Everyone must have gotten the word about general quarters. He looked at the five faces turned to him, panting from his exercise on all those ladders. His first thought was, *why is everybody looking at me?* He froze for a second, then nodded his approval to them. A good crew. Better than him, he thought ruefully.

Lieutenant Eng, normally the gamma-shift helmsman, was in the center chair – somebody had to be. The lean Chinese man vaulted out of it the instant he saw McKinney. "Commander, thank heaven. What's happening, Sir?"

McKinney gave his nutshell summation again. There were gasps and a choked moan at the word that the captain and the bridge crew were dead, and who knew how many others. A look around the room showed nothing lit except the red emergency lights. "Does *anything* work?" he asked desperately.

"No, Sir."

He sat heavily in the command chair. A part of him was grateful it wasn't the main bridge. He'd feel thoroughly awful taking the captain's own chair when she was...

No time to mope. He pressed comm buttons on his chair's arm, knowing they probably wouldn't work. They didn't. Use the communicator. "McKinney to engineering."

"Tchalabi," after a pause while the engineer picked up his own communicator.

"Status." Too tired and nervous to be polite.

A sigh from the other end. "Okay. Sir. Um... The only problem is a control circuit one. Nothing's physically damaged down here. But an EPS plasma surge completely burned out the propulsion control circuits. The intermix chamber is fine. But the safety systems ejected all the antimatter tanks when the EPS surged. So there's nothing we can do to make the reactor run at the moment. We'll need about a day to regenerate enough antimatter. Luckily there's plenty of hydrogen for that."

Swell.

"Impulse engines?"

"About... six hours. The fusion reactors shut down cold. Plus the control system damage. It would be asking for an explosion to start them up without a thorough checkover."

Meanwhile he had no way of controlling the ship, and didn't know where they were in relationship to things they could hit. McKinney was trying real hard to not think about that.

"Okay. Thank you. Can you get us lights? Sensors?"

"Yessir, we should have the power generators back in about a half an hour. It's all tied to the main computer, and all we have to do is get the backup computer on line. We're having a bit of trouble getting it to boot up."

Typical.

“Okay, we wait then. If you can, keep me updated. If you have to stop working to update me, don't bother. Thank you, Dennis.”



McKinney thought about going to check on the princess, but the thought of climbing those ladders again – not just the physical exertion, but the depressing shafts they were housed in – changed his mind. He settled for calling the security guards outside her room. They assured him the princess' people were all where he left them. The doctor had wanted to come find McKinney, but Dockray had planted a hand on Van der Roll's chest and made him sit down, with some unambiguous warnings. Fine.

Check-ins with the rest of the security personnel had shown no sign at all that the ship was being boarded. The quiet showed that they weren't being attacked. He'd thought about sending crews out onto the hull to get an eyeball look at the situation. But without first checking with cameras, he didn't know if he'd be sending them out to their deaths. Too many variables and uncertainties. He was going with the asteroid impact theory for the time being, but he didn't want to be responsible for getting people killed.

The room lights came up. The doors snapped shut with a startling hiss and a clap.

Only 20 minutes since Tchalabi had said half an hour.

A collective sigh of relief hissed from the control room crew. The dead silence was quickly replaced as all the sounds of readouts and equipment ramped up to its normal volume. McKinney had almost forgotten how loud it could be. He started to reach for his communicator, but realized it wasn't necessary now. He tapped the comm button on his chair.

“Good work, Dennis! Thank you!”

Sounding slightly giddy on the other end, Tchalabi's voice answered, “It was nothing.”

He punched up intraship speakers. “Commander McKinney to crew. I don't know how much of what's happening has managed to get around by word of mouth, but it's like this:” Again he recited the nutshell rundown. “So,” he concluded, “Maintain general quarters until I say otherwise. I'll keep you informed. Out.”

He looked at the crew around him. They were all busy getting their stations booted up. He tapped another key. “McKinney to T'Lar.” He closed his eyes.

The silence seemed to stretch, the bridge sounds pause.

“Yes, Commander?” she answered.

She answered.

“You all right?” he asked.

“I am well. Thank you for asking, but I'm sure you have other priorities.”

“Yes I do. Where are you?”

“In my quarters. I found my duty station unreachable.”

“Good. Um. Do me a favor. Would you go to the princess' quarters and look after her? Somebody from the ship's company should be with her besides security guards.” That was more of a quickly invented excuse for calling her. She might not understand that he was actually concerned. Plus he did feel he ought to post someone from the staff with Elayna for political decorum, and not just leave her and her people wondering if they'd been forgotten. And Lara and Elayna liked each other.

“Of course, Daniel, I understand. And thank you for your concern. T'Lar out.”

She could still surprise him.

A small island of relief in a sea of anxiety.

To business. “Viewscreen on, please.”

The sudden appearance of rapid motion was startling. The viewscreen showed the nebula wall, swirling past. The system's star, much closer now, whizzed through the screen at a diagonal. The ship was tumbling. The star went by again. One tumble every ten seconds. The ship was made for worse stress. The helmsman, Eng, was already working on it. In fact, recovering from a tumble was a one-button operation. *If* the computer was working.

“Status, helm,” he asked.

“Tumbling, sir. I've... got it.” The spinning image on the screen slowed and stopped. The ship assumed a “rightside-up” attitude in relation the galactic up and down. Eng checked some readouts. “Impulse engines not available, but thrusters are all green.”

The navigator, Zaccaria, interjected, “Sir, we're falling on a gravity track toward the innermost planet. The ship must have been set up for orbit insertion when the power failed.”

"Okay. May as well continue to orbit. It'll be easier to get crews out and do damage control when we're not worrying about navigating in a system. Are we set up for orbit insertion as well?"

Zaccaria checked. "Oh damn. Damn. The track wasn't finalized, but..." (checking) "but we're going in at..." (checking) "four-tenths Cee." His voice went up an octave. "We need the impulse engines to brake for orbit, or we'll hit it."

"Hit it? The planet?"

"Yessir."

McKinney rolled his eyes. "God, *give* me a break! how long till we need the engines?"

Checking. "Four hours forty-five, Sir. Four forty-five."

Everyone in the room had heard the engineer earlier.

McKinney punched his intercom button. "Tchalabi, I have a new time table for you," he said.

"Beg pardon, Sir?"

"We're going to hit a *planet* in four and a half hours. Put everybody on the impulse engine problem."

"Oh, for ... yessir. Out."

Where there would have been a science station on the main bridge, auxiliary control had a tactical station, assuming that if auxiliary control was being used it was a military situation, not a research one. The tactical station compiled sensor data to develop what had been known as "Situational Awareness" since the days of jet fighter pilots – meaning, basically, knowing everything that's going on around you so you don't get killed. Greengrass was the name of the woman at tactical.

"Greengrass," McKinney said, "Can you scan for what hit us?"

Greengrass shook her head. "Commander, I've scanned the whole system. The only sign of anything is a cloud of debris from *us* a few hundred thousand kilometers astern – where we were hit."

McKinney sighed. "Comm, what about that mayday signal?"

"Just getting my panel working, sir," the young woman, Medoff, said. "Here we are." She tapped a key. The unfiltered cacophony of the multiply-layered repeats of the message played. "Ah!" she exclaimed.

"Ah?"

Medoff reported, "It's easy to get a bearing on the origin now. It's not coming from the planet, it's coming from orbit."

Greengrass scanned. "A ship. No, a wreck."

"Can we get a visual at this range?"

Greengrass put a long range visual sensor picture on the main screen. The ship was in a few pieces, apparently joined together by a few structural members that hadn't torn. The perspective was distorted from the telephoto effect, and the ship itself showed up very small on the screen from the extreme range. The planet behind it was desert tan with a smattering of clouds, filling the screen and emphasizing the tinyness of the ruined vessel floating above it. A spherical forward section, tubular secondary hull that had been blasted to ruin, and one remaining nacelle wrenched to an odd angle.

McKinney recognized it – recognized the design, anyway. But Eng beat him to it.

"Sir, that's an old Daedalus class. It must be a hundred years old!"

"Ninety three, Lieutenant," McKinney said, remembering Koike's last words to him with sad wonder. Which reminded him.

"Medoff," he said, turning his chair to face her. "Can you access our main bridge recordings?"

She looked puzzled for a moment, as if trying to remember if she could do what was asked. McKinney had to remember these people were not regular bridge crew. This was their GQ stations, so they didn't get as much experience at it as the regular crew rotation. He hoped that wasn't going to bite him in the ass later. She turned to her controls without comment.

After a few moments: "I have them sir. A copy is streamed to this console live, so there's a backup even without the main computer."

"Play back the last five minutes available."

They watched. What they saw was whatever the main bridge screen had displayed. What they heard was sound recorded from an omnidirectional microphone at the center of the bridge ceiling.

Hydrogen clouds parting like curtains as they entered the void. The glaring pinprick eye of the star, still too far away to be seen as a disk. They listened as the transmission screamed before Koike – the late Koike – turned it down. The view on the screen was the same view McKinney had watched on his desktop screen. Nothing unusual but the star and the nebula around them. He listened to the familiar conversations, he heard Shankar say "Captain" as if about to warn her about something. Then the screen went dead.

He was surprised by the degree to which his heart fell when the replay went dark. He couldn't breathe for a moment for fear of choking up. Greengrass, though, uttered a little sob, and he swore he heard Eng swallow hard.

Medoff, her voice unsteady, said to Greengrass, "Suzy, there's also sensor telemetry with this record."

Greengrass snapped into action getting the feed. "Yes. Something moved in right above us and matched speed."

McKinney froze. Not an asteroid then.

The tactician continued. "I get a spike in the Gamma spectrum. Very powerful. Then the sensors go offline."

He thought for a moment. He noticed he was shaking a little. He breathed out slowly, trying to let his muscles relax. "Okay. Just because it wasn't on the main screen doesn't mean one of our external cameras wasn't looking in the right direction. Medoff, run through those tapes. Play them on the main viewer."

The navigator turned nervously to face McKinney. "Sir?" he choked.

"Yeah."

Zaccaria licked his lips. "We're... going to hit the planet. Shouldn't we be worrying about that? Sir? I mean... there must be something..."

McKinney felt a strange surge of emotion that seemed to be a combination of panic and anger. Oddly, the panic wasn't over the danger they were in, it was that this kid was about to force McKinney to act like an officer and tell him to shut up. Hence the anger as well. McKinney reigned it all in – barely – with a held breath and a hand in the air to stop Zaccaria from talking. "Unfortunately, that's entirely up to engineering right now." Zaccaria started to 'but' him and McKinney said more firmly, "We can either sit here and wait with our thumbs up our asses, or we can do something. Right now the only thing we can do is try to find out what happened." Again the young navigator opened his mouth. McKinney's hand was still in the air trying to stop the kid from speaking. He bobbed it at him again and said, "Kapeesh?"

The kid looked very confused. "What does 'kapeesh' mean sir?"

That wasn't the response McKinney was looking for, but the silliness of it broke his anger. He sat back and answered more calmly, "It's an old slang for 'do you understand?'"

"Oh." The crewman turned around and resumed his business, chastised.

The viewscreen blinked and a slightly different view of their surroundings popped on. Medoff explained, "I've selected only the topside automatic cameras, and cued the time code ten seconds before the ... event? ... onward. Here's the portside number three camera."

Just the veil of nebula. Faint stars were visible through it. The view was locked down so nothing moved. It played for ten seconds, then went dead.

"Starboard upper, number four."

Much the same, and then dead air.

"Bow upper."

The camera was aimed straight forward, and was in fact the feed that the main screen had been displaying. Nothing new to see there.

"Bridge module external."

The view included the upper forward expanse of the saucer section at the bottom of the picture. McKinney could see the ship's name and number, albeit upside down from this perspective.

Something moved.

A streak. Only a streak at the top of the screen. It cued the camera's motion tracking routine, and the view tilted up quickly. There was an instant where something indefinable stopped abruptly, but before McKinney could make anything out it erupted into a blinding glare and the camera was killed. Medoff paused the tape, and began stepping backward through the data sets. McKinney was about to order her to do that. Looks like she'd pulled herself together and remembered how her console worked. When the flare had reversed back to nothing, she froze the tape. Against the magenta and rose hues of the hydrogen cloud, a tiny five-pointed star hovered, shining brightly – not of its own light, but by the light of the nearby star reflecting off its bright surface. Something built. By people.

"Enhance?" McKinney asked.

Medoff hit a key, and the object filled the viewscreen.

At first impression, it was a big white mechanical insect. McKinney got a faint chill. No, it was more like a ship with a lot of arms. There was a bulbous central body faced with some kind of dish. McKinney automatically thought of it as a sensor dish. From the body, five equally long ... arms? struts? ... extended.

At the ends of each of these was a singularly nasty looking pod that could only be a weapon, considering recent events. The hull was whitish green. The central dish glowed faintly in a brighter green.

Greengrass read from her screen: "Radius 27 meters through each arm. Composition metal, unknown alloy. And that's all I can tell you from this."

"Step forward slowly," McKinney told Medoff.

As the tape advanced, they saw the weapons fire in thousandths-of-a-second frames. Each of the five pods flickered briefly, not entirely in sync, then flared hotly into blue-white light. They each projected a beam which met the other in the center, at which point the presumed sensor dish suddenly exploded into sun-bright radiance. And the picture went away.

"Wow," Eng whispered. "Not phasers, for sure."

Greengrass analyzed, "Gamma radiation spiked when it went off. I'm guessing some kind of nuclear reaction directed into a beam. Vaguely like an old H-bomb -pumped X-ray laser, but more ... alien."

Zaccaria muttered, "What's the difference?" to himself. Eng shot him a warning glance. McKinney let it pass.

So there was a hostile enemy spaceship outside. Just flaming wonderful. Well, there was no way he was sending damage control crews out on the hull with a hostile who-knew-where. Phasers were inoperable as long as the fusion reactors were offline. Torpedoes were probably useable, but problematic at close range – too little time for them to maneuver on a fast target, and one whopping big explosion that could kill *them* as well as the opposition.

He sat back in the chair and rubbed his eyes, too tired to think straight.

Eng spoke up. "Sir? If that... thing that attacked us is from the planet we're heading for, I'm wondering if we should *not* go into orbit. They're pretty clearly hostile. Look what happened to that Daedalus."

Damn. "Good point. Damn good point." He sat up straight. He thought he should try to look like a captain. Sound like a captain. But he wasn't thinking things through. He needed a sounding board – or to be a sounding board. The captain bounces an idea off of him and he tells her how to improve on it; bounce his idea off the captain, and she tells him what's wrong with it. Getting it complete and right all by himself didn't come easily. Hell of a time to identify yet another command shortcoming of his. "Okay, Eng, Zaccaria, the minute impulse power comes back, get us into a trailing stellar orbit to the planet. Hang back in its orbit to the LaGrangian point." That should put them a few hundred million kilometers down-orbit, almost certainly out of any sensor range of the planet.

Eng acknowledged. Zaccaria wrung his hands.

And there was still a ship out there that had killed his captain.

5



They fell. Technically they were falling toward the star itself, being drawn in by its immense gravity. But as they got ever closer to the planet, its smaller – but closer – gravity well would pull at them more insistently. Without propulsion they had exactly the same chance of survival as any other piece of space flotsam that fell into a planet's atmosphere: none. An Excelsior class starship would certainly make an impressive meteor. The density of the atmosphere they hit and the angle at which they hit it would determine how much of the ship was left when it blew a crater in the surface. It would certainly break into pieces as it slammed into air at almost half the speed of light. Would any of the ship make it to the ground? More likely at this speed, it would convert much of the mass to energy and create a Tunguska-style fireball high above the ground, and wipe out everything in a 50 kilometer circle. At least there was no antimatter aboard.

McKinney had received the damage control teams' report within an hour after power had come back on line. It was as bad as he thought. The beam had indeed blown a hole straight through the saucer, but the wound wasn't clean. The colateral pressure caused by the blast had blown walls out between sections and traveled down corridors and turbolift tubes before pressure doors had closed. So rather than a neat 10-meter hole, there was death and damage for 50 meters around it as well, on every deck in the primary hull. Doctor Alejandro's report of the injured was equally as bad. Many were radiation burn victims exposed to the mystery beam's high gamma dosage.

And the dead. They had to be listed as missing, although they would never be found.. Sixty-seven souls. If McKinney himself was furious with the fates over turning this milk-run into a disaster, he imagined how those poor souls would feel. The thought at least forced him to feel ashamed to indulge in self pity, and thus snapped him out of it.

He felt less than useless sitting in the captain's chair in auxiliary control.

Doctor Anthony Van der Roll stood. Lieutenant Dockray eyed him speculatively. The doctor raised a placating hand to the armsman. "I'm sorry for my earlier outburst, everyone," he said. Melody and the princess cooed comforting rebuttals, and Dockray nodded an acknowledgement. Van der Roll continued, "If everyone will excuse me – Elayna, if you don't need me ..."

"Of course I need you, Anthony," she smiled.

He responded with a smile that seemed to fight its way through clouds of gloom. "Thank you, dear," he said sincerely. "If you all don't mind, I think I'd like to go to my quarters and – at least *try* to relax."

Dockray nodded. "It'll probably be some time before we get any news."

Melody jibed, "Take a pill or something, Anthony. You're too wired."

He nodded without looking at her. "Well," he said, putting a period on the discussion. He went through the door without another word.

The two guards were still there. They said hello and asked if he was all right. He told them he was just going back to his quarters. The guards exchanged questioning looks. One said, "Our orders are to keep an eye on all of you, sir. I'll escort you."

That's not what Van der Roll had wanted to hear. "I'm just a few doors down, officer..."

"'Crewman' is fine sir. I'll get in trouble if I don't."

"Oh all right."

It was only a walk of twenty yards, but the guard positioned himself behind and to Anthony's left and shadowed him. Van der Roll felt himself stiffen a little more. The guard made him nervous – a reminder that they were in a crisis. Not that he needed a reminder. "Have you gotten any word on what's happening?" He decided to ask the crewman.

"Just a little, sir. We're pretty sure we're not being boarded, and that the attacks are over for now. So you and your party should be safe enough."

Safe as the ship itself, anyway. Well, that was something. Van der Roll nodded thanks, and by that time they were at his door. The guard said “Have a nice night, sir,” and took up a vigilant position next to the door. The doctor stopped and stared for a moment. “You’re not going to stay there, are you?”

The crewman looked mildly insulted. “I’ve got orders, sir.”

“Yes.” Van der Roll sighed and went inside.

The guest quarters were a two-room affair. Anthony assumed they were similar to officer’s quarters. A sitting room with a desk and workstation, with a gridded decorative partition separating a bedroom, just big enough for the single bed. There was a lavatory attached to the bedroom with a sonic shower. Compared to Anthony’s home it was a claustrophobic closet.

The Van der Roll estate on Groningen covered forty hectares adjoining the Demerest Chateau grounds. It was granted him upon becoming Physician to Elayna shortly after her birth. It featured a main hall whose roof was entirely transparent skylight. The sun that blessed Groningen with five percent more light than Earth’s sun, and stayed in the sky for twenty percent longer each day, painted cut glass sculptures in the foyer and reflected faceted highlights onto the beautifully patterned wallpaper. The house, patterned after a classical European mansion, had fifteen rooms on three levels and its own fusion bottle for power. His wife had a whole wing devoted to her crystal sculptures, and all the rooms had enormous light-gathering windows, with views looking out over many kilometers of fields and forests. Anthony loved the sunlight, and the views, and the green.

He didn’t mind space travel while he was part of Elayna’s entourage, but he didn’t choose to travel at all, given the choice. He found spaceships confining and dreary. He’d much rather be at home, or at his work. This little cubicle (though he was told it was among the larger guest quarters aboard), pressed in on him, squeezing beads of sweat from his brow. Maybe he should have stayed with the others. Maybe company would help him feel less closed in. But he was ashamed to let them see him getting more and more nervous. It wasn’t only the enclosed space of a ship, it was the uncertainty of the situation. It was fear for Elayna’s safety if the child came too soon. Fear for Elayna’s life if the ship was in danger. And firmly gripped over it all like a stranger clutching his arm in a dark room, was the fear for his own life. He felt himself shaking.

He wished he could think of something to do about all this.

Leftenant Dockray found himself staring at the closed door that Van der Roll had left through. The poor guy was a nervous wreck., trying hard not to show it. Dockray didn’t think anyone in the room hadn’t noticed, though. Years in the Army, and further years in the service of the Royal Court, had taught the bodyguard how to deal with uncertainty, and how to sit through long periods of doubt like this. Few people had that advantage. He gave the princess credit – most girls her age would be gibbering with fear in her position. Yet Elayna kept a calm face and an even voice. Some day she’d rule Groningen very competently at her husband’s side. If she got the chance. Even Melody was holding up under the strain, but Dockray suspected that Melody’s strength came from her love of the princess, and the maternal need to be strong for her. If Elayna wasn’t here, maybe they’d *all* be gibbering with fear! Well, for all that, if Elayna wasn’t here, *none* of them would be in this situation.

△ △ △

“Commander,” Zaccaria’s voice quavered. “If we don’t do something soon it’ll be too late.”

The planet that would kill them soon filled the view screen. It was already too late to fall into a trailing LaGrangian orbit; their only option now was to orbit the planet itself, with whatever aggressive enemy there may be down there on it. They still had time to make the course and velocity changes for that. But Zaccaria’s panic told McKinney that he was being a bad commander. He should be able to think of something to keep these people busy with something beside worry. But then, he thought, they should be professional enough to not fall to pieces.

Who was he kidding? His own stomach felt like a sailor was practicing tying knots in it. He’d told the engineer not to bother him if it would distract him from the work, and he’d look weak in front of the bridge crew if he initiated a call down there.

Zaccaria whined, “We have about 20 minutes, and it’ll be too late to correct.”

Eng looked at Zaccaria as if trying to decide what to say to him.

McKinney decided to save him the trouble. “Thank you, Mister Zaccaria. How long after that until we hit the atmosphere?”

Zaccaria looked over his shoulder at the commander, his expression wide with disbelief as the dispassionate way he'd asked. *You don't hang out with a Vulcan for a year without learning something*, McKinney thought. The navigator sputtered a few syllables, then checked his readouts. "Five minutes, plus or minus one. Sir."

McKinney nodded. Calmly, he said "Thank you, navigator." Use calm to engender calm. Yelling at the guy would just make him more frantic.

Everyone in the room would be put at ease if McKinney checked in with Tchalabi, he realized. It only served his ego to keep waiting. He hit a key on his chair's arm. "Tchalabi."

"Yessir, we've almost got it, sir."

"We have ... fifteen minutes, Dennis."

"If you don't have it in ten, my resignation will be on your desk in the morning. Out."

Zaccaria almost shrieked: "We're going to die and the engineer is making wise cracks? What the hell...?"

Eng's grip on his arm stopped the smaller man in mid sentence. But Zaccaria yanked loose. "Don't you grab me! I'm not—"

"Zaccaria!" McKinney shouted. He immediately knew he shouldn't have, but a person can only take so much before he loses it – as they were both demonstrating."

"Zack, wait," Medoff said from her station. "Didn't you hear the engineer's voice? He wasn't worried."

"Wha..."

McKinney almost yelled at Medoff for interrupting, but realized what she was saying through a haze of anger.

Medoff went on, "He cracked a joke because he knows he can make it. He's incredibly tired and maybe it wasn't the best judgement to say it, but it means we'll be all right."

McKinney realized she was right. She was a pretty good communications officer after all. One had to know more than how to route calls. He realized he was sitting up in an aggressive gesture toward Zaccaria. He sat back, a little more hopeful.

Zaccaria looked at Medoff. "You think so?"

"You can read stars, I can read voices," she shrugged.

The navigator glanced at McKinney, then turned back to his console.

McKinney told him, "Keep updating the insertion track, will you? Be ready at a second's notice."

He looked over his shoulder again, gauging his commander's mood. At last he said "Aye, Sir," and turned to his work.

Tchalabi's voice rang over the control room speakers: "Impulse power on line, Commander!"

The chrono showed ten minutes to spare. Ten minutes between safety and death wasn't much, but it looked like forever now.

"Mister Eng, Mister Zaccaria, do your stuff." He said with a laugh that released four hours of nervous tension. "Thank you very much, Dennis!"

"Coming about," Eng said.

Tchalabi's voice, exaggeratedly blasé: "No problem, Commander."

The Starship Breitling's navigational thrusters puffed gas into the void and spun the ship on its vertical axis. The screen-filling ball of the planet slid sideways out of the viewscreen. The picture of empty space was quickly replaced with a schematic graphic showing the planet's gravity field, the Breitling's track, and the course she needed to correct to for orbital insertion. A second series of puffs checked the rotation with the ship's impulse engine exhausts aimed in the direction the ship was falling, and angled to change its direction precisely. The icon on the screen representing the ship blinked green. Figures appeared in a window on screen.

"We'll need a 157 second burn at one half impulse, Sir," Zaccaria reported.

McKinney nodded. "Execute." As Eng activated the maneuver, Zaccaria cast a strange look at McKinney. Daniel was about to get mad when he realized what he'd said. "Okay, maybe 'execute' was the wrong word." A chuckle made its way around the room as they felt the rumble of the impulse engines transmitted through the hull into the seats.



Out in the nebula, past the wall of hydrogen and dust held at bay by the star's ionized winds, hovering unseen, a sensor detected, a program ran, a propulsion system came to life. For the second time this day, a sleep that had lasted ninety three years was interrupted.

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"One minute," Eng called out.

"On track," Zaccaria added happily. "Orbit in ten minutes."

Greengrass sang out, "Movement in the nebula at three one five mark four zero."

McKinney felt his heart sink. He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment against the world, then opened them and accepted it for what it was. "Let me see it."

Greengrass took over the viewscreen and moved a camera. The image stabilized, zoomed. "Wait," she said, "it's gone to warp... warp two. Shifting to subspace sensors."

McKinney didn't wait. "Shields, maximum," he ordered.

Greengrass complied and muttered, "I'll be damned, they're working," as if she didn't expect them to. McKinney sympathized; he had expected to be dead by now.

The image on the screen resolved. It was the ship that had shot them before. It had been lurking out in the nebula, waiting ... for what? Why didn't it finish them off before? What made it come back now? The impulse engines! They'd been on during the first attack, and the second one was coming after they were fired up again. They're sensors must have keyed on the plasma exhaust.

"How long till it gets here?"

"forty seconds."

"Phasers."

"Not while it's at warp, sir, can't get a lock."

"The moment it downwarps, then."

Zaccaria read off their impulse burn as it ended, counting down from twenty to zero. The engines cut off.

The alien ship came out of warp a thousand kilometers away and bore down on them at high sublight speed. Then it paused.

It aimed at where they'd been when the engines cut off.

Greengrass said, "Phasers locked."

McKinney raised a hand, "Wait. I think it tracks our impulse exhaust. It may not see us."

"Well that's just silly," Zaccaria said, "Why wouldn't it have other sensors?"

The alien abruptly rotated toward them. The viewscreen flared like a nova.

Zaccaria screamed at the same pitch as Medoff. Eng and Greengrass muttered curses. McKinney grabbed his chair arms with a death grip and thought it was a crying shame that his first command had to end this way.

The ship bucked. But not as severely as the first time.

And that was all that happened.

McKinney opened his eyes. They were still alive. "Eh? Um. Report!"

"Peripheral hit on the aft shields," Greengrass read from her screen. "Same beam, same power as before, but a glancing blow. We're rotating off axis a little, Mister Eng."

"Oh." He collected himself and corrected with thrusters.

"Orbit achieved," Zaccaria said rather sheepishly.

Greengrass continued, "The alien has warped away! He's heading for the nebula wall again."

"What the hell?" several people said at once.

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"Can we get alongside that shipwreck without using the impulse engines?" McKinney asked.

Eng and Zaccaria checked some figures. "Yessir," they both answered. Eng finished, "It'll take a lot of orbits with only thrusters – about ten hours – to catch up to it on thrusters only."

The disparity of speeds in space was one of the things McKinney always marveled at. Cross a stellar system in minutes at warp, but once you're in orbit of a planet, you have to stay within the relative snail's pace of its orbital velocity. Too much faster and you leave orbit, too much slower and you fall. What would take you seconds at the ship's cruising speed takes hours in orbit.

"Okay, do that please," McKinney ordered. He keyed his comm. "Planetary sensors section."

"Sensors, Aye," replied a disembodied female voice smartly.

"This is the first officer. Everything working down there?"

A chuckle of disbelief. "No, Sir! The main sensors were on the bottom of the primary hull, which, I'm told, has a big hole in it, Sir." When McKinney didn't answer right away, the technician rightly assumed he was formulating a creative way to end the tech's service career, so the woman continued quickly, "But, uh, the backup suite in the belly is functional. It's much more limited, Sir."

McKinney let his breath out and decided the technician could continue to live. "I'd like as thorough a scan of the planet as possible. I want to know if anybody lives down there. Level of technology and potential threats in addition to the routine stuff."

"Aye sir," McKinney expected a "We'll do our best," but the woman wisely added only, "Out."

He swiveled his chair to face Greengrass. "Sue, get everybody in the tactical section working. I want you to keep an eye on the surface. Keep the shields up, keep scanning for threats. Do you still have that alien ship tracked?"

"No Sir," she answered, "I have the location where it re-entered the nebula, but I lost it after that."

"Right. Damn. Well, have your people keep an eye out for that thing too, all right?"

She nodded and turned back to her console.

What else? He realized he was actually functioning pretty well. The decisions were coming pretty naturally and the busier he got, the less nervous he was. Was he forgetting anything?

"Engineering," he called, "What's the antimatter situation? How long till we have warp power?"

Tchalabi's voice came after a moment. "We're starting the antimatter generators up now, sir. We dropped everything like you said to get impulse power on line, so we're just starting on the warp problem. Still have that control circuit problem to the intermix chamber anyway. I'll still estimate it at the better part of a day."

"Okay. Keep me posted."

"Aye, Sir. Out"

McKinney wondered if he should have taken a hard line there and demanded Tchalabi get it done faster. *A day? You have 12 hours, mister, now get cracking.* What good did that do? Tchalabi knew the situation as well as he did and McKinney didn't imagine the engineer would be inclined to drag his feet getting them out of there. McKinney was working on the theory that the alien ship would only attack if they lit off the impulse engines. If the alien proved him wrong, well, he'd have to rethink his theory!

"Bridge, sensor section," his comm chirped. He acknowledged.

"We did a fast preliminary scan Sir, from horizon to horizon. This hemisphere, at least, is devoid of any kind of civilization."

"Really?" He was genuinely surprised. With that ship out there he'd expected *something*.

"Yessir. Class M, breathable atmosphere. Heavy jungle in the tropic zones, high Oh-Two levels. One large ocean, so far, on this side. Nice place, but no people. At least not on this hemisphere, or in big enough groups to register on a general sweep. From the prelim atmospheric spectra, we can almost assure you there's no industry down there anywhere. Detailed scans will follow, Sir."

"Okay. Thank you."

Medoff had put a view straight down on the main viewscreen. He watched for a few moments. They were in a flat equatorial orbit, and the view was rather beautiful. Very like Earth over the Amazon basin – lush greenery, dappled with patchy cloud cover, highlighted by lightning-shaped flashes of sunlight as it glinted off stretches of jaggedly meandering rivers. Jungle too dense to live in, probably.

Looking at the screen, his eyes drifted up to the chrono above it. God, it was oh-six-hundred! He'd been getting ready for *bed* when this all started!

Drowsiness hit him like a phaser stun. How long had he been awake? His shift *started* at oh six hundred. He got up and moved toward the doors. "Okay, folks, we've been at this for ... six hours. If anyone wants to be relieved go right ahead and call your standby. I for one have been up for twenty-four hours, and I need a couple of hours of sleep before we catch up to the other ship." Not to mention a few hundred other things to check on. "Eng you have the watch, unless you'd like to call your relief."

"I'm fine, Sir," Eng said, "Now that the fun's over." That raised a nervous chuckle around the room. Rather than taking the center chair, he stayed at the helm. Quicker to react from there, McKinney presumed. "I don't have to tell you; call me if it goes sour." He turned to the doors to leave. Stopped. The captain would say something else to them. He turned back. "Good job, everybody."

For some reason he couldn't quite fathom, he felt good. In fact he felt *very* good. Almost cocky. They were still in deep trouble, but he'd managed to survive being in command during a real crisis. Maybe they were only in a pause in the crisis at the moment, but he had a feeling of success. He decided to ride the wave a little. He figured it would break soon enough.

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T'Lar was sitting, as she always sat, stiffly and formally, in the easy chair in the princess' front room. Her eyes were closed in meditation, hands folded together in her lap, but McKinney knew she was probably aware of her surroundings and his arrival. Melody was asleep on the couch, and the princess was presumably asleep in the bedroom. It gratified McKinney that the princess had felt safe enough to sleep. Dockray sat on the floor, back against a wall, arms and legs folded, eyes on McKinney. He'd probably been asleep too, but he must have been the one who told the door to open. The armsman took his hand away from his weapon, moved his eyes toward the bedroom and made a hushing gesture at the Commander. McKinney nodded and sat carefully on the arm of the couch at Melody's feet, trying not to wake her. He was too tired to keep standing, but he knew if he sat on the floor next to Dockray he'd probably be asleep before he could start a talking.

In a very soft voice, T'Lar said, "Good morning, Daniel."

He smiled. She was never unaware of her surroundings. "Hi, Lara," he whispered. "Thanks for VIP-sitting." McKinney briefed Dockray on their situation so he could pass on reassurances to the rest of the royal party. He knew he only had to whisper loud enough for Dockray to hear him, T'Lar, who's ears were evolved to hear long distances in Vulcan's thin atmosphere, would hear as well.

She rose and stretched, worked a kink out of one leg. "I should be helping in the bio-sensor section." He nodded his approval of her suggestion. "Have you gotten any sleep yet?"

"I'm on my way. I should be able manage a few hours."

"I shall walk with you and make sure you get to your quarters."

He laughed. Only he would realize she was showing actual concern. "I have to go to engineering first. Tchalabi deserves a personal thanks. Hell, he deserves a kiss on the lips."

T'Lar made an uncertain face. She shook her head. "Humans suffer greatly from non-cyclic mating habits. You crave physical contact and the most inopportune moments."

They heard the princess laugh out loud from her bedroom.

"Oh God," McKinney muttered. "I'm sorry we woke you, Princess Elayna."

They heard sheets rustle, and she appeared at the room divider in the same bathrobe he'd seen her in earlier. She was smiling radiantly. "Not at all. I really couldn't sleep. You think we're out of danger for the moment?"

He nodded. "For the moment."

She studied his face. "You, sir, look a wreck. You should get some sleep."

He rolled his eyes (and stopped himself from finishing the gesture with a start – *don't roll you're eyes at royalty!*). He cast a glance at T'Lar, waiting for him by the door. "So I've been told. But I have..."

"Daniel," the Vulcan said, "you are no good to anyone in your current state of fatigue. I am much stronger than you, even when you are fit and can stand without wobbling. Shall I carry you to your quarters?"

Dockray stared with utter disbelief. The princess giggled. Oddly, Melody hadn't been bothered by the talking and continued to sleep.

McKinney walked up to T'Lar, his fists on his hips. "You know, I'm tempted to call your bluff and make you do just that." She bent to grab him by the legs. "BUT," he continued, and she froze, "I'd never be able to look the crew in the eyes again if they saw that."

She gestured to the door and raised a tapered eyebrow.

She entered his quarters with him and stood at a formal-looking at-ease at the door as it closed behind her.

"You're *not* going to try to put me to bed, are you?" he asked worriedly.

"Certainly not."

He sat heavily on the edge of the bed and started to yank his boots off. "I *am* going to call engineering and check in with Tchalabi. Tell him to take a break too. We've probably both been up the same amount of time. His crew doesn't need him hovering over them to get the job done."

"That is logical." She watched him.

He sighed. "Don't worry about me, Lara, I couldn't possibly *not* sleep at this point. I am *so* tired."

She shifted her stance slightly. He recognized it as something she did when she needed to choose her words carefully. Anyone else would have missed it, of course. "I have seen how the human mind can – how *your* mind specifically – can override your body's needs. You were only *just* returning to a normal diurnal schedule after many days of sleeplessness. You allow your doubts to plague you to the point where it endangers your own health. It is absurd."

He tossed a boot into a corner, a little more forcefully than he'd intended. "Lara, I ... I agree! But I was brought up in Ireland, not on Vulcan. I can't throw a switch on the stress and go to sleep!" Her expression remained as neutral as ever, but he knew he shouldn't have said that. He tossed the other boot gently. "Don't tell me Vulcans never have self-doubt."

"Oh of course we do, Daniel. But it is simply not logical ... please stop laughing, it is the only word for it."

"I'm sorry. I know. It's become kind of a Vulcan cliché over the years, though."

"Ah. Like the way your people enjoy drinking themselves into catatonia."

"Point taken!" he slumped back onto his bed. He'd like to take his clothes off but he wasn't going to with Lara standing there. He'd probably fall asleep before he could get his shirt off.

"Daniel," she said as calmly and stoically as ever, "just because I have been trained to control and suppress my emotional responses does not mean that I don't have emotions."

He looked at her sideways through sleep-heavy eyelids. He must have upset her; she used a contraction! He wondered if she was going to realize she was defeating her own purpose by keeping awake to yell at him.

"And right now," she continued, "I am frustrated and concerned for you because you will not help yourself. Now ... well, I see you are in fact falling asleep. Good. Will you promise me that if you cannot stay asleep, you will contact sick bay for a sleep aid?"

His lids were almost shut. "Lara?" he said, his voice a sleepy, gravelly burr.

"Yes, Daniel?"

"I ... don't want to die out here. Out in the middle ... of nowhere. Where nobody'll ... ever ... find us."

The last thing he saw before his eyes closed of their own weight was T'Lar's face. She actually had an expression. It was pure surprise. He loved surprising her.

The last thing he heard in the fugue state between drowsiness and sleep was her voice. Was there a break in it? "Nor do I, Daniel."

He didn't here the doors as she left.

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First officer's log.

I did manage to get a solid six hours of uninterrupted sleep. God knows how that happened. I guess if you're tired enough, you just will. Or maybe ... I don't know, I think I actually handled yesterday pretty well. Considering. It's not like I had to do anything really difficult like deal with royalty. Ha ha. Still doesn't feel like I slept enough, but it'll have to do. I'm starting to think I really should let Lara teach me her philosophy, or at least some meditation.

Sensor section has given me their detailed scans of the whole planet. There isn't a sentient soul down there. There are, however, several buildings, covering a couple of hectares on the shore of one of the northern continents in the temperate zone. The only sign of habitation on the whole world. At First I thought it might be the base camp for whoever's piloting that ship, but closer scans show the buildings to be in ruins, and without any kind of power. The rest of the planet is jungle, desert, oceans. Plants and animals. A fairly primeval place.

Well, since we're in orbit, I'll give first priority to checking out the shipwreck up here. Following that, and I guess depending on what we find, I'll take a team down to those buildings. I was never very good at mysteries. I hope something obvious turns up. It always does in books.

There's been no sign of the alien ship since the last attack. I have an idea about that. Maybe what we find on the planet will confirm it. Or maybe it'll just confirm that, yes, I AM no good at mysteries.

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"Can we hold position without a tractor beam? I don't want to risk that alien ship detecting the energy output."

"Of course, Sir."

The colony ship Harrington's Home sprawled in orbit beside them looking like a corpse in an alley. It was fairly obvious that it had been hit by the same weapon that had hit the Breitling. Only the old Daedalus class ship was tiny beside an Excelsior, and a ten meter beam slamming into the unshielded cylindrical hull that was not even twenty meters in diameter had simply killed the ship outright. Decompression must have been total and instant in the aft hull. The hull had buckled from the impact, reminding McKinney of pictures he'd seen of dinosaur skeletons, their spine muscles contracted in rigor mortis till their heads were bent over their backs. The beam had hit aft of the neck, behind the nacelle attachment struts. One strut was bent wildly, the warp nacelle pointing off at a bizarre angle like a dead man's broken leg, some of its warp coils hanging in space by cables, spilled when the nacelle itself split in the middle. The other nacelle was nowhere to be seen. Probably long since fallen and burned up in the atmosphere. Surprisingly, the ship itself was in a high stable orbit, well outside the atmosphere, which was why it hadn't fallen in nearly two centuries.

The spherical primary hull looked intact. Possibly pressure doors had sealed it off before it too could decompress, saving the crew who were forward, who then sent the mayday. The mayday message had said they were taking the ship's boats – that's what they called shuttlecraft back then – down to the planet. Sure enough, the hangar doors were wide open on the stern, and the bay was empty.

"How the hell did they get to the shuttles from the front of the ship?" he mused. "They couldn't have had enough spacesuits for everybody to go through the voided hull at once."

Brancatelli, the tactician who had the morning shift, mused, "Remember those inflatable emergency balls? You could put maybe five people in one with a half hour air supply?"

"What," Medoff – back after a sleep break – said, "and the few people in suits dribble them back to the hangar?"

The A-shift helmsman had reported to auxiliary control too, and had spelled Eng. Her name was Krowl, a petite, pretty German woman. "Maybe they brought the shuttle around front and spacewalked from emergency hatches," she postulated.

McKinney nodded and hummed. "Medoff, is there any way to download their ship's log from here?"

She shook her head and gave him an apologetic look. "No, Sir. There's no power over there at all and no way to establish a link."

"I was afraid you were going to say that. Wait a minute – no power? What about that mayday signal, what's powering that?"

"Um. I don't *know*, Sir," she said. She apparently hadn't considered that. Neither had he, as a matter of fact. It wouldn't be unheard of for an emergency signal to have an independent power supply. But for a hundred years?

The largest open area in the Harrington's Home's primary hull was the bridge. Six people coalesced around its center in a swirl of sparks, floating a foot above the deck. When the transporter hum died away in the silence, McKinney pulled his communicator to confirm their arrival. The motion of his arm sent him rotating feet-up at once. It had been a while since he'd had zero-gee practice. There was nothing to grab onto nearby, so he shrugged and let himself drift while he called in. "Transport complete."

They'd been able to determine that the primary hull was still pressurized before beaming over. The air was stale, but breathable. They all wore breather masks just in case it was too thin. It was, in fact. One hundred years was too long to expect no leakage around airlock seals. At least they didn't need spacesuits. There should be enough air in the remains of the hull to last the six of them for a couple of days, if need be. But need wouldn't be. They were here for a purpose. Without ship's main power there was no point in even trying to get the gravity generators going. Everyone started drifting about until they encountered something to grab onto.

One of the party lit a portable lamp and latched it's magnatonic face to the ceiling, lighting the room quite well. Everyone pulled out flashlights nevertheless, to fill in shadows left by the single powerful light source.

The bridge was semi-circular, rather than the full circle favored by later designs. The front wall was windowed – a feature that startled McKinney at first. He was used to the huge main viewscreen of modern starships, but seeing the outside universe from a bridge through windows was something entirely new to him. The windows followed the curve of the ball-shaped hull, and the side walls came straight back. There was a back wall, and two corner walls forming a rough semi-circle formed of flats. There was a main viewscreen, but it was small and mounted above the windows. The walls were lined with screens, push-button controls and consoles. All dark and dead. It was quiet except for their breathing. It reminded McKinney of the minutes after the Brei'tling had been hit. Only this was ... spookier.

There was a captain's chair in the center, empty. The bridge had no raised area around like current ships. It saved space to have a low ceiling and one deck level. This bridge was not on the topmost deck like current designs, rather it was at the front of the spherical hull, halfway down. Helm and nav stations were where he was used to, right in front of the captain. Chairs stood at all the empty consoles, none of them even fallen over. Actually, they must have been bolted to the deck or they would be floating free.

One of the women had drifted herself over to the engineering console and was beginning to set up a power pack that connected to the console. She was fishing underneath for the connecting jacks.

"Uzimi," McKinney addressed the lieutenant. "What are the chances?"

"We'll know in a moment, Sir."

"Lara?" He'd requested T'Lar come as part of the party. A biologist or medical personnel was routine on such a boarding party, and it may as well be a friend who made him a little more comfortable.

She was scanning with a mission-specific tricorder. She should be able to read all decks from here. "No sign of any organic matter aboard, Commander. No bodies. No foodstuffs."

Uzimi had her connections in and the portable power pack running. The engineering console's lights began winking. Well, a few of them. None of the readout screens came on. Uzimi studied the console carefully. For some reason, they didn't label the controls back then. McKinney guessed the operator had to memorize what button did what. Eventually the lieutenant tapped a series of glowing amber lights, and that seemed to make more buttons light up. She looked at him with a smile of accomplishment and nodded affirmation.

"Okay," he said to two other crewmen with more portable powerpacks. "Get to the computer core and see what you can do." The men had to pry the bridge door open to get out – no easy job in zero gee where you needed a firm counter grip on something that wouldn't move. They got it open far enough and drifted out, bouncing off the opposite wall awkwardly. *Looks like everybody is behind on their zero-gee training*, McKinney thought.

Medoff had asked to come along, saying she felt like she had an investment in the operation. McKinney asked her if she could find out where the mayday beacon was coming from. She spun in a slow pirouette in midair while holding a tricorder at arm's length. "Ah!" she exclaimed. She was suddenly embarrassed that she couldn't stop herself from spinning, and tried to keep the tricorder pointed in one direction while her body rotated. "Um. Crap. That way, Sir." She pointed aft. "About a hundred meters.

"The hangar deck," said Marco, the engineering technician. Marco had been the one person in engineering who had claimed a historian's knowledge of Daedalus class starships. Not that McKinney had needed an expert to figure out that the hangar deck was a hundred meters aft of the bridge. Marco nodded "The recorder marker. It was housed in a bay under the hangar and ejected out of the stern. I guess they didn't eject it."

"Wait," Uzimi said as she tapped a series of buttons. "Here, Lieutenant Medoff, this should bring up the comm console."

Sure enough, lights flashed and screens came to life. Though, while graphics appeared on the screen, no actual information was available. Borders and blank fields only. The rest of the ship was still dead. Medoff had already floated over to the console. Now she looked it over and shook her head. "Totally alien to me," she pronounced. "Oops, wait." She hit a key and a screen flickered. The words BOOTING PLEASE WAIT appeared. McKinney rolled his eyes. Well at least it looked like it might work. Lines of text appeared one by one. "I think... the main computer's not functional yet of course, but the console probably has a record of whatever it did the last day." McKinney drifted over and looked at the button she'd pressed. It said "Help." From the text on the screen she scrolled to a line that read "Last record." Another menu appeared listing events by time hack for the last day that the system was active. She selected "Marker buoy" when she saw the words. A graphic picture of the buoy – a squat cylinder with three flat, triangular legs – appeared. The words ACTIVE appeared next to a text readout of the message that they were all familiar with. The next line beneath read LAUNCH FAULT. "Well, there you go," Medoff said with finality.

"Can you turn it off?" McKinney asked.

"Not from here. There's no connection."

"Marco, how could it still be transmitting after all this time?"

"Let's see, there would be a radioactive decay power source. But that wouldn't last more than twenty years. The buoy would be plugged into the ship's main bus while it was docked, but of course the ship's power is dead. That would leave the solar collectors, which were certainly designed to last this long. But if it's in a closed, dark launch bay, I can't imagine how..."

McKinney snapped his fingers and pointed at Marco. It was just an expression of realization, but Marco froze nervously anyway. McKinney waved an apology for startling him. "McKinney to Breitling," he said into his communicator.

"Breitling. Eng here."

"Eng, take a look at the aft end of the wreck. We're looking for the recorder marker launch bay."

"Stand by, Commander."

He imagined a schematic of the Daedalus class appearing on the main view screen as the Breitling's maneuvering thrusters flared. Eng would have to find out where to look before actually looking. It took a few minutes for the huge starship to drift back.

"Got it, sir. It appears to be open. We have a camera on it... I see the buoy inside. There's a blinking red light on top. Is that where the signal is coming from, Sir?"

"Yes it is. Thank you, Lieutenant. Out."

Well that was one mystery solved, anyway. The buoy's solar collectors would get a good dose of sunlight here in orbit if the bay was open. He could only imagine the crew's frustration that the tiny message buoy failed to launch. It may not have made it through the nebula, though. At that, it would have taken years to get out *to* the nebula without an FTL drive.

Uzimi had been at work routing power to the other bridge consoles that would give them the most information. The captain's chair and the two control consoles came grudgingly to a semblance of life. Not all their systems would struggle up from their deaths, and a goodly number of controls and screens remained dark. The sensor panel on the portside bulkhead flickered and some lights blinked. The sensors themselves would never see light again, but McKinney had learned these last couple of days that a disembodied control station could still tell tales. The environmental control panel spat a staccato series of sparks when the power reached it, and an inspection panel blew off spectacularly. Uzimi cut power to that panel immediately and froze with a startled stare, watching to see if anything else happened. But that was all. The blown panel ricocheted off the opposite wall, but it had hit flat and that took all the momentum out

of it. Marco managed to catch it as it drifted past him. He wedged it under the cushion of a chair to get it out of the way.

Other things floated in the air around them, but McKinney wasn't noticing them until now. Coffee cups. Dust and dirt. A pen. Nothing dramatic like body parts. He went back to not noticing them.

His communicator chirped. The technicians had gotten power to the main computer. It was booting up.

"Okay," McKinney said to everyone. "We want to retrieve as much as we can. Sensor logs, the captain's log, communications records, navigation records. Anything that can tell us what's going on here. Then we go back to Breitling and sort out what we can of these poor people's story."

His people went to their work. It startled him for a moment to realize that he'd actually thought of them as *his* people. He felt ashamed that he was so presumptuous. They were Captain Dubronin's people. He'd only been around them for a year, what right did he have to call them his people? He was in command, he felt, only on a technicality. If they could get themselves out of this situation, he fully expected to go back to being the first officer. It hadn't fully hit him that there was no one to be captain when that happened.

What would happen? Would Starfleet promote him to captain of the Breitling? That scared the hell out of him. If he wasn't ready yesterday, he still wasn't ready today – what made anybody think he'd be ready when they got back home? More than likely, they'd assign a new captain. Well, not right away. The Breitling was certainly looking at a few months in spacedock to repair the big Goddamn hole through her hull. Would they have him supervise that, he wondered? The whole crew would probably be reassigned during that down time. He'd no doubt see Lara shipped off to another ship. That would depress the hell out of him. Would Lara think it logical to keep in touch? Probably not. He knew she considered him a friend, to the degree a Vulcan could. But once they went their separate ways he couldn't imagine her feeling it necessary to keep in touch.

Starfleet would probably assign a new captain, and he'd be there on Breitling with a strange captain and a new crew, with no friends to speak of, remembering Captain Dubronin at every turn.

McKinney thought, if they got out of this, the best thing for him to do was ask for reassignment to another ship. Better yet, a starbase, they were safer.

Maybe he ought to just quit Starfleet altogether. What the hell good was he doing anyway?

Look around yourself, he thought. A dead ship, over a hundred people dead. Nobody even knew about it for a hundred years. Your own ship crippled, unsure about getting out of this. Will I get out of this, or will it be a hundred years before anyone finds the wreck of the Breitling in this little pocket of hell?

I don't want to die out here.

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"Is everything all right, Anthony?"

Elayna closed her bathrobe and sat up on the exam table. Half of sickbay had been lost when the alien weapon had devastated the ship, but, on the other hand, half of sickbay was perfectly intact. They'd lost the trauma centers and emergency rooms, and a selection of biological science labs. But the standard exam rooms and the operating theaters were all functioning almost up to spec. Doctor Alejandro had thirty badly injured people recovering in the one remaining ward, which had been designed for twenty. But he had graciously cleared an exam room so Doctor Van der Roll could give Princess Elayna her regular exam.

Van der Roll had been moody since this began. Elayna understood his fear and unease – she even shared it to a degree. She guessed she was still young enough that life and death situations didn't hold the permanence that they implied to older people. She was also intelligent enough to understand this, intellectually, even if that didn't make her feel any different about it.

"I'd like," the doctor began. Then he stopped and busied himself putting his examination scanners away.

"Anthoneeee..." she warned.

"I'd like your permission..." he withdrew a hypospray from his bag "... to give you a shot ..." and again he couldn't finish.

Elayna stared at the liquid in the phial as if she could recognize it. All she could determine was that it was red. "And..." she prompted, "this shot will...?"

Van der Roll sighed. It was clearly difficult for him. He looked at the hypo, then put it away in the bag. "No, never mind, Dear."

She grew angry. "Don't you dare do that to me!" He looked stricken. He hadn't meant to anger her. She continued, "Don't show me something like that and not explain it." He looked frustrated. He was upset that

he'd angered her. But he didn't want to say any more. "Anthony," she said, more softly, taking his hand in hers, "Please tell me. I'm scared too, you're not alone." Then she wondered what he was hiding – "It's not the baby is it?" she asked, suddenly panicked.

"Oh no!" he said, suddenly aghast that he'd scared her. "No, no." He relented, and removed the hypo from his bag again. "This will ... this will delay ... the birth. It will give us a few extra days."

She looked at him in shocked surprise. Her voice descended into a harsh whisper. "You know the laws as well as I do. This is *strictly* forbidden! The birth *must* take place on homeworld, and it *must not* be artificially delayed. Anthony!" She snapped his name at him like a thrown vase.

"I know, Elayna, but..."

"No! I strictly forbid it! You are *not* to give me that injection. And you're not to sneak it when I'm asleep or unconscious or... or.. whatever."

Now he looked truly hurt. "I would *never!*" he exclaimed.

She held his gaze in a firm stare nevertheless. She was very good at this part of her job – her determination was second to no one's. "I never thought you would. But I never thought you would suggest *this*, either. If the antiroyals or the natives found out, it would be all they'd need. I want my son to rule fairly and legally, with no Sword-of-Damocles secret hanging over his head to cause him trouble in the future."

Van der Roll dropped the hypo back in his bag. And snapped the plastic case shut.

"I should ask you to destroy it, or give it over to Doctor Alejandro."

Now he looked at her with what she could clearly interpret as the fear of loss. He knew then that he'd gone too far even mentioning the idea. "Oh. Oh, Elayna, I'm so very ... very sorry. I never meant... I was only concerned *for* the baby and you..." His eyes started to tear.

She sighed. She hated to have hurt his feelings, but she had to be sure. "I know that, Anthony. It's not that I don't trust you. But the very presence of that thing in your kit is incriminating." A tiny lie to help mend his feelings. She trusted him as far as any lifelong friend. But she was wise enough to know that people could be driven to do anything if they believed it was right, or the only way out of a jam. "Promise me you'll have Doctor Alejandro dispose of it?"

He nodded, squeezing his eyes shut against tears, which escaped anyway and fled down his cheeks.

7



Captain Chen, January 15th, 2201, 1422 hours.

We've decided to go inside the nebula and see what's there. We think we may be the first Earth ship to try such a thing. Only a few of the command crew – Marcus, of course, and his little clique of latter day luddites – dissented. The rest agreed that the scientific knowledge we could send back home is as important as getting our colonists to where they want to go. Besides, our happy bunch of popsicles won't even know we took a detour. The urge to find out what's in there is just too much to resist.

I know I haven't been out of cold sleep for the entire eight years the ship has been outbound, and I know that previous watches have found some interesting things to explore, but the twenty months that I've been on watch have been utterly, deadly, damned dull. This is the first sizeable astronomical object that's been close enough along our planned course to detour and check out, and still have sufficient supplies to get to the new world.

Shigeo suggested we could have been doing science right along, using less of the perishable supplies if more of the duty crew would go into the sleep chambers. Marcus almost ripped his head off for even suggesting it. How we got stuck with someone who's so afraid of technology on a spaceflight is beyond me. Why I had to get him as supply chief on my watch is just my typical bad luck. I'll have to ask my ancestors, when I finally meet them, what I did in life to deserve such treatment from the cosmos. In any event, the last watch has all the crew hibernation units occupied. There are no spares. I guess he was complaining that the designers didn't include enough for the whole ship's compliment. Maybe he just wanted an excuse to go back under and get away from Marcus. Heh. But I doubt we'd be able to run a ship this complex properly with less than twenty-five crew.

Our scanners can't penetrate the energized hydrogen clouds, but it's thin enough that we can see stars within. We may have a chance to observe a protoplanetary system up close. That would certainly be a first for Earth science. That would make it all worth it; give this starflight an accomplishment for the colonists to be proud of, some reason to be remembered back home.

Lanei came up behind the captain's chair. He hadn't turned around when the door to the bridge slid open. People were coming in and out on errands all the time. Captain Chen was watching readout screens around the bridge, pulling them up one-by-one on his own small repeater screen on the console beside his chair. Quietly, Lanei snaked her arms around from behind, trying not to move the chair to give him warning she was there. She had her hands under his armpits before he knew she was there. Abruptly, she grabbed his ribcage from either side and said "Kootch!"

Chen jumped and shouted. The whole bridge crew turned to look, and once they saw what was going on, they turned back to their work with wicked smiles, carefully minding their own business. Chen sighed and smiled, and shook his head at his woman. Eight years away from Earth, crew discipline wasn't even given a cursory thought any more. Especially since half the crew was sleeping with the other half. Lanei leaned her chin on the back of the chair and hugged Chen. It wasn't easy with the chair in the way, but she managed. She rocked it absently side to side a little as she looked at the bright rose nebula through the front windows. Sparks danced across the ship's force field as it bulldozed its way through the gas cloud at a quarter the speed of light.

She whispered to her lover, "So, what do you think people were doing at the turn of the *last* century?"

Chen shrugged. "Living in mud huts? Burning witches?"

She rolled her eyes and came around the side of the chair to stand beside him. "That would probably be the last *millennium*, not the last century."

"All the same to me," he said. "I just drive a starship, I'm not a history buff."

Lanei was a short, pretty Hawaiian girl, twenty-two years old when the Harrington's Home left Earth. Alternating shifts in cold sleep, and eight years later she was still technically only twenty five. Chen Zhu decided he may as well count the years as they happen to the rest of the universe, so he was hitting forty this year. At least by the ship's clock – he still wasn't entirely sure what year it was back home. Space warps notwithstanding, he wasn't completely convinced that they could travel this fast free of the effects of relativity. Especially now that they were barreling along at a quarter light speed.

The helmsman said, to no one in particular but in answer to Lanei's question. "One hundred years ago we'd already been sending deep space missions out for a couple of decades. It was only a few decades since space warp drive was developed.

"Two hundred years ago, on the other hand, we were only just getting started building space stations and nobody was even exploring the Solar System. It was only about thirty years or so since the first moon landing. Instead of getting excited and exploring the universe, most people thought it was a waste of money. It was decades before anybody got it together and went to Mars."

Lanei crossed her arms and huffed. "People were idiots back then."

"Sounds like Marcus would have loved it," Chen chuckled.

"Marcus is an idiot," Lanei said.

"That was my point, honey."

"I know, I just enjoy saying that."

Chen Zhu considered himself pretty lucky that Lanei had picked him. There were at least three other men aboard who'd tried for her attentions, Marcus Bedford included. And she picked a worn out old freighter pilot with love handles and a cybernetic leg. Chen thought his parents would have loved Lanei as much as he did. She was full of the spirit that had inspired Ernst Harrington to start this expedition. Lanei was their nutritionist, so it was her job aboard ship to watch everyone's diet, plan meals, and make sure the food recycling system was in working order. Once at their new home, she would be part of the food team, investigating any native flora to see if it was edible, while simultaneously trying to get a viable farm started with the grains and crops they brought with them. Chen had happily-ever-after visions of he and Lanei and a houseful of kids growing up on an exotic new world.



Shigeo Honda, Astrophysicist, January 20, 2201, 0923 hours

I am having the time of my life! I had hoped there would be some interesting things to examine during my time on this starflight, but this open bubble of space inside the nebula is most remarkable. We had seen such things from space-based telescopes back on Earth – new star systems blowing cavities in gas clouds – but this is most unexpected in the middle of such a cloud. I am most happy. We are able to engage the space warp drive for short periods out at the edges of the star systems without being in danger, so we have been able to, as Mister Carl says, "scoot around" at warp factor one and investigate all three stars and their systems.

It is at the single star that we have found spectrographic evidence of a habitable planet. This has caused a stir among some of the crew. Some say if it is so, we should stay here. They are tired of the trip. It is silly to choose to spend our lives closed inside a gas cloud. How in the world would I be able to study the stars when I can see only three? Most of the waking crew realize that we must continue on to the star system we had planned to colonize. We are sure of a livable planet there. Mister Bedford wants to wake the other two crew watches from hibernation and take a vote. As master of supplies, he should know better than to have seventy-five people awake, breathing and hungry all at once.

But the captain has that well in hand. Meanwhile, we are heading toward the location where we have detected the habitable planet. It may be that we will meet some new friends! Whether it is inhabited or not, we will at least have some interesting news to send back to Earth once we get back outside the nebula.

Bob Carl was the planetologist. While the ship was in transit he, like all the more specialized specialists, had more mundane assignments related to keeping the ship and crew running. But he was to get his chance to contribute in his chosen field once the ship had gotten to the New World. There, he would spend a great deal of time in orbit, even after the colonists had gone down to their new home, mapping the planet, doing remote geological surveys, in effect building a complete computer model of the planet so they could know their new home, inside and out, and all its foibles and virtues.

So he was surprised to suddenly have a subject to practice on.

He'd warmed up the scanner palettes on final approach, and his databanks were filling.

"Bob-san!" Honda smiled, entering the ship's science lab. "Are you having fun?"

The science lab aboard the Harrington's Home was a multi-purpose affair. Space on the ship was at a premium, and the ship's main purpose was, after all, transporting colonists in suspended animation, not exploration. But a certain amount of science was essential to get the people where they were going, and to

support them at their destination. So the lab could be reconfigured to serve a number of purposes. Honda had used its instruments for astronomical studies, and for his festival of research while they investigated the nebula. After their arrival, the ship's biologists and botanists would use it to examine flora and fauna at the new world. Now Carl had reconfigured the ship's palettes to scan the planet beneath them. He'd decided to examine this world as thoroughly as he would their new home. It would give him the opportunity to see if the scanners had any eccentricities or faults. The first order of business was to build a complete computer model of the physical terrain. He'd requested a specific orbit track that would take them over the entire surface, and they had just one more orbit to go before he could let the computer build its virtual globe.

"Well, after all these months of doing exciting things like, oh, monitoring the nutrients in hydroponics, yeah, it's nice to do what I was trained for."

Honda watched the large viewscreen inset in the main console. A river valley rolled through the picture, apparently in flood stage, filling rain forest to either side with standing water that glinted sunlight up at them. "Are there any signs of life?"

"We'll have to wait for spectroscopy to determine that, but with all that jungle growth, there simply *has* to be insects to support it and animals to live in it."

"I mean are there people?"

"Hm? Oh, no, none that I can see. There may be aboriginals, but there's no sign at all of a civilization."

"Oh."

"You sound disappointed, Shigeo."

"I am. I wanted to meet new beings. I have not even had the opportunity to meet a Vulcan."

"Well, I for one worry about meeting new people. Look at history. Every time a more advanced civilization meets a lesser one, they tend to express their superiority by wiping out the lesser one."

Honda was shocked. "We would never do such a thing! The ship is not even armed, and we have only hand lasers..."

"Shigeo-san," Carl interrupted, "I didn't say *we* would be the more advanced people."

Honda grew silent. He hadn't thought of that.

"Hang on," Carl said, suddenly seeing something, "What the hell is that?"

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Mili Bidura, science specialist, January 23, 2201, 0630 hours.

Somehow we didn't expect this. We'd expected either an uninhabited planet, or one with a civilization. We don't know quite what to make of this. At roughly the same time Robert Carl found the deserted shacks on the ground – five buildings alone on an entire world – our scanners picked up something in orbit above us.

There is a large satellite in synchronous orbit above the buildings. It answers no hails, and shows no sign of power. It's very oddly shaped. In this setting, it is most disturbing. The only sign of life on a totally primordial world being a satellite in orbit over some wrecked buildings. We asked Captain Chen to boost the ship into a matching orbit so we may get a closer look at it. We are now alongside a very unusual artifact!

[photographs and physical description appended to daily report]

Scanners can only tell us so much from a distance. This satellite appears to be many years dead, as do the buildings below. Our archeologist and some others wish to take a shuttle down to inspect the ruins for clues as to who was there. Meanwhile, I am petitioning the captain to allow me to spacewalk to the satellite and inspect it up close. I have no shortage of volunteers to help, but there are a few who think we should mind our own business. Guess who.

Marcus Bedford hurled an empty plastic carton against the bulkhead. It made a satisfying whack against the steel, but only bounced weakly to the floor rather than breaking. He didn't seem satisfied. "These idiots are going to get us all killed," he ranted in his thick Manchester accent. "Playing with strange alien machinery!"

Mandy Argush cringed at yet another outburst from her intemperate colleague. She picked up the box he'd thrown, folded it flat, and flung it back at him in a flat spin. As it struck him in the midsection she yelled, "Put it where it belongs! And what the *hell* is your problem *this time*?"

He stomped on the box and glowered at her. "I am sick of being confined in this tin can! We're only a few months from the end of this trip, and these space cowboys are stopping to poke around at things they don't understand! How long are they going to delay us? We only have so many supplies you know."

She shook her head at him, tisked and turned back to her work. "Marcus you're an idiot."

"What did you say to me?" He stormed up behind her.

She turned to face him, not intimidated at all. He stopped a few paces away, taken aback by her own aggressiveness. "What, are you deaf as well as an idiot?" she asked him.

His eyes bulged and his face reddened. "You insubordinate little trollop! I've had all I'm going to take..."

"What are you going to do, *fire* me?"

"No, but I'll bloody well slam you back in cold sleep!"

"Marcus," she smiled, "First off, I can't be insubordinate. We aren't in the military. We work *with* each other. Secondly, you can't put me in cold sleep because all the pods are occupied and anybody you wake up will be more pissed at you than I am. And so far only the people who are awake hate you – do you really want to add one more?" He opened his mouth to speak but she continued, "And *third*... you're an idiot!"

He shouted, "Oh you *bitch!*" as he drew his arm back to hit her.

Faster than Mandy's soft physique suggested, she lunged for his cocked arm, swung around behind him and pinned it painfully against his back. He howled briefly with pain, then twisted himself and managed to break free. When he spun on her she'd already picked up the two-meter steel pole they used to get to things off of the higher shelves. It had a wicked looking hook on one end.

She hissed, low and without punctuation, "So help me God you bastard if you ever hit me I'll rip your throat open."

He saw her stance. Many of the crew trained in martial arts to pass the long hours and keep their minds sharp. Marcus himself didn't care to do that kind of thing. "What," he said, "you think you can hurt me?"

It was pure bluster and they both knew it. He was afraid of the hook, and she knew she could take him down like a sack of leaves.

The door to the cargo hold opened. Marcus flinched. Mandy held her ground.

The Harrington's Home, not being a military vessel, didn't have a security force per se. But each watch had a person who was designated "security chief," and who could call on anyone among the waking crew for help in a situation. Will Schlereth walked into the room at a fast trot and yelled, "Hey! Cut it out you two!"

Marcus looked at the tall redheaded man with a moment's confusion before he remembered there were cameras monitoring every compartment. Someone would have heard them fighting of course. Schlereth was the person who was giving everyone martial arts lessons. Marcus didn't take the man seriously for his self importance. But he knew Schlereth could beat the hell out of him. Marcus sat down on the stool at his work table. Mandy laughed, twirled the stick with a showy flourish, and ended standing at attention with the stick vertically at her side. She bowed to Schlereth and said, "Sensei."

"Mandy, what the hell." He exclaimed. "What did I teach you about self control?"

She looked stricken. "He was going to hit me!"

"Marcus, what the hell!"

"Oh, shut up," Marcus said. "You're all idiots."

Before Schlereth could retort, Captain Chen stormed into the hold. "Marcus, what the hell!" he thundered.

Marcus rolled his eyes, "Oh God save me from self-important control fetishists."

"What the hell are you on about now, Mister Bedford?" the captain asked with a frustrated sigh.

Marcus hung his head and shook it side to side. "Don't you people realize we have a very specific allotment of supplies here? There are enough to get us to the New World, and enough to live on until we become self sufficient. But you keep making us stop and look at pretty gas clouds and dead stars. How many weeks behind are we? What if we can't get food to grow right away when we land?"

"You jerk," Mandy said. Chen shot her a warning glance and she nodded. "We have a 25 percent overstock in case of things like that. Plus the recyclers give us back more than half of what we eat."

"Oh yes, in protein pill form. Half of what we eat is already in supplements. Maybe you people don't mind *popping* your meals with a swallow of recycled urine, but I like *real* food."

Chen sat down on the stool next to Marcus. Schlereth caught Mandy's eye and nodded to the staff she was still holding. She put it back in its cradle on the supply racks. "Marcus," Chen said, trying to keep a reasonable tone. "We'll get there. We have only fifteen months left to travel. In fact, you and I have only

four months left on watch and we go back into hibernation. Just hold yourself together for four months, and the next thing you know, you'll be there."

"Fine, fine," Marcus tried to wave him away. But Chen wouldn't go.

"Just what did you sign on this trip for, anyway? You don't like technology, you don't like space travel, and you don't like being stuck inside this ship for all these years."

"Oh what would you know, Chen?" Marcus snapped.

"He just told you three things he knows, you moron," Argush laughed.

"Mandy," Chen said, "Come on, huh?"

She said "At least I only have to put up with him for four more months." She turned and stomped out of the room, saying, "After that I'll have a whole planet to get away from him on."

"Look, Marcus," Chen said sympathetically, "If this supply duty is too much drudgery for you, why not come up and take some shifts at the helm? You're cross trained for it, everyone is."

"Good God, no!" Marcus spat.

Marcus stewed for a few more moments. Then he finally met Chen's eyes. "Can't we just get on with it? Just take us to the New World. Stop stopping, thinking you're adding to mankind. Why do you think they care back on Earth?"

Chen looked surprised by the question. "Because *we* care. A lot of people think knowledge is the most important thing in the universe."

Marcus laughed. "Depends on how you use it, doesn't it? Do we learn from our mistakes?"

"I like to think so," Schlereth said.

"Then what are we doing out there? Don't you know how many people *died* doing exactly what we're doing, hundreds of years ago? How many ships were lost in the crossing from England to America, trying to find a better world?"

Chen looked confused. "But in the end, they succeeded."

"Cold comfort to the drowned."

Schlereth asked, "Then why *did* you come along?"

Marcus looked at them, apparently wondering if they were smart enough to understand.

"I just ... I just had to get away. From Earth. It is a bloody mess, you know. I wanted to see we could start over. Not bollix up a pristine world. Live without paving over the whole planet or covering it with steel towers."

Schlereth chuckled. "Not only a Luddite, but a primitive wannabe."

Marcus huffed, "I didn't expect the Philistine to understand." He got up and headed for the door.

"I understand, Marcus," Chen said, "Why the hell do you think I'm along for the ride?"

Marcus stopped and looked over his shoulder. Schlereth was staring confused at Chen. "Are you serious," Marcus asked.

"I'm not nearly as ... passionate about it as you are, but I'm here to get away too. I figure a few waking years in a soda-pop can is worth a lifetime in a better world. But I see technology as the way *to* these goals, not a devil to be run away from."

"Hmph." Marcus grunted. He shook his head at them and left them there.

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Bernard Wanderer, Engineering specialist, January 23, 2201, 1405 hours.

I've drawn three spacesuits from stores, and related EVA equipment. I'm very excited about this one. I've gone out on the hull a few times for service tasks, but this is something entirely different. Myself, Miss Bidura from the science section, and our xenologist Ken Tice, have volunteered to spacewalk across to the alien satellite! This is something entirely new. I mean, we've known we're not alone in the universe since we met the Vulcans, but none of us on board the Harrington's Home have actually ever met an alien. I kind of hope not to now, in fact, but I'm kvelling over the chance to be the first to examine a totally new alien race's artifact! They even woke Professor Harrington from cold sleep for this one!

Professor Ernst Harrington, late of the University of Cambridge, had a vision of living in a better world. Before interstellar travel, people with such a vision generally decided upon one specific area that they felt they had a chance of affecting, and then devoted their lives to improving it. Thus cleaner fuel sources, or methods to help handicapped people, or new irrigation systems appeared, developed by well-meaning entrepreneurs.

Ernst Harrington decided to do them one better and, rather than try to improve the world he was born into, go out and *find* a better world. Out there, in deep space.

For much of his youth, he wondered how he was going to go about that. Stow away on a starship? Join the fleet? He learned all he could about starships. As a young boy he'd thrilled to adventure stories about the Earth/Romulan war, and drew pictures of space battles he'd only seen in his imagination. After the war, Earth started sending starships out to explore the galaxy. Harrington ached to go with them and dreamed about what wonders he might find out beyond where mankind has explored. Unfortunately the only way into space then was to join the Space Probe Agency. As a young man, he found himself possessed of the wrong mindset for military service. But his hunger for knowledge propelled him through an education split between astronomy and business – the former as an obsession, and the latter as a means to an end.

Overflowing with energy and aching to share his lust for the cosmos with others, he eventually came to teach the subject at Cambridge, inspiring like minds to action. Simultaneously, he started a number of successful enterprises, made careful investments, and he worked toward building a financial base from which someday, he imagined, he'd be able to build his own interstellar warp ship.

Then in the year 2188 his stars must have aligned properly.

The Federation had begun decommissioning the Daedalus class ships that he'd romanced about in his childhood. By this time, his investments and companies had amassed him quite a respectable net worth, even in a world already on the obvious path to a global credit system. He approached the Federation Council, and the UESPA quartermasters, and anyone else who had anything to do with the disposition of decommissioned starships.

In the end, he had liquidated three quarters of his personal worth, and walked away with the almost-intact exploration cruiser U.S.S. Sheffield, whose pitted and worn hull hovered in synchronous orbit over San Francisco, waiting to be dismantled and recycled.

The Sheffield was a bit less than twenty years old. Her builders had planned for her to last at least another twenty before she fell to the breaker's torch, but her systems and design were already hopelessly obsolete compared to new starships on the horizon. A ball stuck on a tube with two warp field nacelles sticking out of the sides, the Daedaluses were like old 1930s biplanes sitting next to the first jet fighters of the 40s – another period of time when technology leapt ahead by orders of magnitude in a few short years. The understanding of warp field dynamics and how to sculpt a ship to fit the field better had blossomed in the previous decade. And Harrington found himself the beneficiary of that growing obsolescence.

He didn't care how fast the ship went, or how efficiently it plied the subspace corridors. He remembered how star flight had started back at the turn of the century, long before the space warp had been discovered.

So he searched the astronomical records for a place to live. He looked for space telescope readings that guaranteed a habitable planet, off the beaten path. Most colonies formed so far were sticking to the stars near home, with only a few daring to step out of the neighborhood. But wanted to be one of the first to spread mankind's existence far from its birthplace. And it didn't matter how far away, nor how long it took to get there, because everyone aboard would be asleep for the journey.

He found a star six hundred light years away. According to sightings taken from the deep space interferometer orbiting Luna, the star had at least five planets, and at least one had a spectrum that showed a clear oxygen atmosphere. At a conservative cruise of time warp factor four, the trip would take about nine years and four months.

He sought volunteers from among his students, and from the people who worked for him in three major corporations. He got far too many. Delighted to find so many like-minded souls, he held a lottery to narrow the choices down to two hundred. Couples were encouraged – they had a planet to populate, after all. But no one would be refused as long as they showed the hunger for knowledge, and the spirit of adventure, that Harrington himself harbored.

He developed a new corporation around his expedition and put his engineers and mechanics to a new task: Fit out the starship Sheffield with one hundred seventy-five cryonic freezer units, quarters for a waking crew of twenty-five, and enough supplies and recycling systems to last them for a ten year star flight. He didn't want the whole crew asleep for the whole flight. Lord knew what wonders they'd miss on the way. This was to be more than a conestoga wagon heading for California, this was to have a touch of Louis and Clarke as well.

Ernst Harrington had big dreams.

And here he was, 440 light years from home, surrounded by the cosmic beauty inside a nebula, orbiting a green jewel of a planet, staring at a long-dead alien-built satellite.

It doesn't get any better than this, he thought to himself.

"Did I do right waking you up, sir?" Chen asked, as they looked out of the bridge windows at the star-shaped artifact.

"Absolutely, Zhu," Harrington said. "I wouldn't have missed this for anything. "You say no life in the buildings below?"

"No sir. Everything has the look of abandonment long ago. The jungle has overgrown the buildings like some old Mayan city. I figured we'd check things out in the easiest order – the satellite first, then, with your approval, take a boat down to the buildings."

"Yes! Yes!" Harrington beamed. "It would be unbearable to leave without examining the buildings. Do we have anyone awake with any archeology training?"

"Not on this shift sir, I checked. Should we wake someone?"

Harrington thought. "No, no. Let's wait and see. We'll just look the ruins over for now."

Marcus Bedford stormed into the bridge. From his expression, Chen wondered if he pushed the button to open the door, or if his attitude forced it open.

"Professor Harrington," Marcus fumed, "Maybe you can straighten these idiots out!" the sweep of his arm took in the bridge crew. "A lot of the crew want to protest this damned delay and get on with the mission!"

Harrington stared blankly at the man for some moments. Marcus certainly had more to say, but the professor's blank stare must have brought him up short. "Ah," Harrington remembered, "Bedford, isn't it? Quartermaster from the Manchester plant. What delay?"

"Yes, well... some of us just want to get to our destination. These continual stops to look at pretty sights are just making this long, long flight stretch out interminably. It's intolerable!"

"Interminable *and* intolerable, yes, I see," Harrington laughed.

"Damn it, professor..."

"Clearly you've missed the point of this adventure, my friend," Harrington smiled. "When you take a Sunday drive, you do it to enjoy the trip. What was the old homily? It's not the destination, it's the journey?"

"Oh, God spare us from quaint homilies!"

Chen finally had enough. "Marcus, just shut up for once in your life."

Marcus' eyes bulged with anger until Chen thought they'd pop from his head. It was almost a cartoon expression, and Chen couldn't help but laugh at him.

"Ah," Harrington said looking out the windows, "There they are."

Marcus' expression went to puzzlement, and he looked out the windows just as Chen turned to do so also. He saw three spacesuited figures wearing thruster packs heading for the alien satellite.

"Oh no," Marcus groaned. "Please no. Please tell me you're not going to *mess* with it. Just how stupid *are* you people?"

"Okay, Marcus," Chen said sternly, "That's it. Either sit down and shut up, or get the hell off my bridge." Marcus stared at him angrily. "Damn," Chen went on, "If the old explorers had had people like you aboard..."

"What? They never would have killed all those Red Indians?"

"Just... sit down, will you?"

"Yes, please, Bedford," Harrington said mildly. "I'll listen to what you have to say afterward. Right now, there are discoveries to be made."

Marcus grudgingly sat at the environmental monitor station, which no one was manning at the moment. He watched the three tiny figures float toward the great unknown monstrosity with growing unease. Didn't these people know that most of those old explorers died at foreign hands, far from home?



Ken Tice, Xenologist, January 23, 2201, 1545 hours.

Well, I don't know what they expect me to be able to do, but the chance to be one of the first inside the alien satellite is too good to pass up. If they expect me to be able to spontaneously read a totally unknown language on a service panel, they're all in for a reality check. A degree in alien civilizations is one thing. Actually encountering a whole new one is, well, it's something else, all right! But maybe I do bring something to the table here – as the professor pointed out when I joined the expedition, my studies of off-world cultures has opened my mind to different ways of thinking. Most people, they think the way they

think, and they don't realize that other people may think differently. And not just a little differently – it's not unusual to find concepts of behavior 180 degrees out between two civilizations.

You don't even have to leave Earth to find disparity like that. Just look at the way people say their names. Some cultures put the given name before the family name, and some give the family name first. Most people in a given culture don't even realize there's a different way elsewhere.

Well, I'm not really sure that I can use my education in this situation, but I don't really care. I'm just dying to see this thing close up.

"Suit cameras on, everyone?" Bidura called on the intercom. The other two answered yes together. They each had a tiny video pickup on the forehead of their helmets, and a floodlight on each temple.

Wanderer said, "Let's hold here a minute," and puffed gas from his retro thrusters. They were each wearing a maneuvering backpack studded with tiny thrusters. It was controlled by hand grips on armrests that projected forward like the arms of a chair. "I want to get some hi-res pictures." He took out a still camera and started recording images of the object.

From their perspective it loomed hugely over them. Wanderer guessed it was fifty or sixty meters across its five booms, which radiated out from a central pod that was the size of one of their ship's shuttles. At the front of the central pod was a dish-shaped recess that Wanderer took to be a sensor antenna of some kind. That was probably what the pods at the end of each arm were also, although they had needle-like projections rather than dishes. "Communications satellite?" he wondered aloud.

Bidura studied it. "The dish antenna doesn't look big enough. Weather radar, perhaps?"

Wanderer had recorded several shots. "Mili, would you drift over and give me some scale for the pictures?"

"Certainly." She tapped her thrusters and jettied toward the central dish. With her figure next to the recess it was easy to guess that it was about three meters across. She examined the dish, rather than pose for the camera. "Hm. It appears porous," she said.

"Like a mesh?"

"Yes."

"Could still be an antenna."

"Yes."

Tice asked, "Can you see anything inside the mesh?"

She shined a hand light in. "Yes, shutters. Like an iris. Not what I would expect."

Wanderer guessed, "The shutter might cover sensitive detectors. It would open when it's in use."

Bidura made a noncommittal grunt.

Tice jettied over to the object and grabbed hold of one of the five arms. Despite knowing he'd never be able to decipher an alien language, he still looked for stenciling and markings. Not knowing what they might mean didn't make it any less fascinating to lay eyes on a previously unknown language.

The material of the arm was smooth and greenish white. He rapped his gloved knuckles on it. It flexed a tiny bit, more like a plastic than a metal. Pulling himself up to the module at the end of the arm, he didn't see any seams or fasteners in the surface. The pod at the end was an ovoid a couple of meters long with a solid-looking spike extending another meter forward. There was something like a grille on the outer side. The whole thing appeared to be molded as a unit.

He pushed off a drifted down to the main body. The arm seemed molded into it without break or seam. All the surfaces seemed smooth. At the back of the satellite was a bulbous module that had the appearance of a frosted glass bulb, a bit wider in diameter than the tube of the main body. "You know," he said, looking up and down the length of the object, "You really couldn't say what's front and what's back on this thing. Do you think that recess could be a drive system instead of an antenna?"

He saw Wanderer's helmet turn to look at him, and pictured a look of surprise behind the tinted faceplate. "Yeah, it could! A metal mesh like that would feature in an ion drive or a hydrogen peroxide thruster. What's at the other end?"

"Glass bubble. A cockpit maybe?"

Bidura chirped "Oh, that would be wonderful! Not a satellite but a spaceship!"

"Is there a door?" Tice asked, half to himself, as he scanned his eyes across the surface. It was not entirely smooth. There were raised areas of varying shapes. There *were* markings! Alien symbols! Tice felt an adrenaline rush. He pulled out his still camera to take some images of the symbology, not that, even with

years of study, he'd be able to decipher it from a few symbols. He focussed on the markings in the center of the largest raised panel, just behind the arms. "Oh for pity's sake." He said.

"What is it?" he heard Captain Chen ask in his headset.

"There are markings on a hatch. They're not written language, they're pictures showing how to open it. A *five*-year old could read them. God! I'm *so* disappointed!"

"Disappointed?" Bidura asked in surprise.

"Not exactly a major linguistic challenge," he muttered.

Wanderer had floated up alongside him. The engineer looked at the symbols. A three-fingered hand. In three successive cartoon-like pictures it showed that all you had to do was squeeze a latch under the edge. Wanderer reached under the lip and squeeze. The meter-square hatch popped open and hinged to the side.

"Hey!" Tice yelled in shock! "Should you have done that?"

"Why not?"

Marcus stood suddenly and shouted at Chen. "They shouldn't be messing with it. Captain! Professor, stop them!"

Chen eyed Marcus with a warning. Then his eyes narrowed as he considered. "You may be right."

"Oh, but *we must* look inside, Zhu!" Harrington exalted.

Chen called "Captain to EVA team. Let's not play with this thing just yet, all right? Um...As long as you have it open, take some pictures inside. But close it up after. Don't open any more panels."

"Roger that," Tice said enthusiastically. Bidura said "Professor, please! How can we not?"

Harrington let a breath out slowly, clearly frustrated, weighing the risks. "What can you see inside?"

Wanderer pulled himself to the opening. He didn't push Tice aside so much as he didn't remember Tice was there in his excitement. He shined a light around. "It's not a cockpit, it's a service panel."

"Don't touch any switches!" Marcus' voice said.

"No kidding," Wanderer replied mildly. "It's not so unfamiliar. We could probably figure out what everything does given enough time. There's a tank forward made of some kind of spun fiber. Or maybe that's insulation over a metal tank. There's a symbol on it. Ken?"

Tice looked. He clicked his tongue and chided, "Some engineer. You don't know what a hydrogen atom looks like?"

Wanderer laughed, embarrassed. "Okay, there's a hydrogen tank forward. Possible fuel. Some piping. The circuit boards look very odd, clunky. The rest is a lot of electronics in racks without clear markings. I mean it's writing, not pictures."

"Let me see!" Tice pushed in. And there it was, an alien language. He had no idea in the world what he was looking at, just as he suspected would happen. Oh well. He took some pictures of the text, then backed out and let Wanderer shoot some of the equipment. He bumped his backpack against something, jogged himself sideways, felt something give, and then was out of the hatch.

Wanderer went in, his feet sticking comically out of the opening. "Hm. That's funny."

"What?" Bidura asked.

"A panel is lit up here. I don't think it was before."

Chen called, "Are you sure?"

"I bumped something on my way out," Tice said nervously.

Bidura looked in. "I can't tell what it is. It may be a power panel, like a circuit breaker box."

Marcus' voice shrieked, "You turned it *on*?! You idiots!"

Chen asked, "Can you turn it off again?"

"Captain," Wanderer answered, "I wouldn't dare try without being able to read this." He looked around inside and out. Looked up at the pods on the end of the arms. "Nothing seems to be happening, though."

A crewman at one of the bridge monitor stations said to Chen, "Captain, I'm reading a power buildup in that thing."

Marcus was at the man's side instantly, looking at the readings. "Bloody wonderful!" he cackled. "Bloody stupid!" There was a rising edge of panic in his voice.

Chen said, "Okay. Bernie, Ken, Mili, close it up and get back in here."

Harrington noted, "If we study the pictures they took we may be able to see what they did and set it back the way it was."

"Yes," Chen said.

Through the window, Chen could see Bidura and Tice back off with puffs of thrusters. Wanderer braced himself against the satellite's hull and swung the hatch shut. When it contacted the hull he gave it a little push to snap it shut.

Then suddenly Wanderer was flying away from the object, down toward the planet, thirty thousand kilometers away. The moment the hatch had sealed, the alien object had apparently come fully to life. The bulbous glass aft section glowed a brilliant green. It swung itself sharply, clearly under its own power, and pointed the concave meshed end directly at the Harrington's Home. The motion was so abrupt that Wanderer was thrown like from a catapult. Bidura and Tice shouted his name, and the bridge speakers broadcast his own shout of surprise to the crew.

Marcus shrieked like a prophet, "I told you not to mess with it you..."

"Idiots, yes I know," Chen said. He tapped a comm key. "This is the captain, I need a crew for a shuttle boat *now*! We have a man adrift. Anyone available get the hell to the boat bay! Double-time, people!"

"What?" Marcus stormed to the front of Chen's chair and grabbed the arms, locking his eyes on Chen's and thrusting his face close to the captain's. He spat, "We have to get out of here, Chen, *now*!"

"I'm not leaving Bernie out there you heartless ass," Chen fumed. Then he repeated, "Mili, Ken, get in here, we're sending a boat after Bernie."

"NO!" Marcus screamed, and Ernst Harrington heard the mindless wail of a trapped animal in that word. A sound he knew always preceded a person doing something monumentally stupid. Harrington moved to grab Marcus, not sure what was going to happen next, but not willing to risk his dream on one man's foolishness.

But he was too late. Marcus was where he needed to be. He wheeled away from the captain's chair, grabbed the helmsman by the shoulders and hurled her from her seat. She tried to keep from sprawling in and undignified heap, but landed on her butt nevertheless.

The fusion impulse engines were on standby idle from their orbital maneuvering. All Marcus had to do was tap two keys to bring them to life.

The helmperson said, "Hey," and tried to get to her feet to grab at Marcus. Someone moved to help her up.

Chen leapt up and grabbed for Marcus' arm.

As the engines flared to half power, Marcus fired lateral thrusters to swing the ship away from the satellite. Marcus had a sharp memory. He hadn't drilled in use of his standby duty station in almost a year. But it wasn't that hard. Any idiot could pilot a modern ship.

Chen pulled him away from the helm controls.

Tice and Bidura could be heard to shout through the bridge speakers, wanting to know what was going on.

Tiny points of light flared like welding torches at the tips of the alien artifact's arms. They flickered a few times in the space of a second. But the ship had rotated and Harrington couldn't see the thing through the windows any more.

Bidura, still outside, could be heard to invoke the name of a deity that Harrington was unfamiliar with, just a moment before a sledgehammer hit the ship and the lights all went out.

△ △ △

"Mayday mayday. This is the SS Harrington's Home. We have been attacked by an unknown alien vessel. Unknown energy weapon. Very powerful.

"Why did they attack us? We came all this way and now this! This isn't fair! The ship is totaled from one shot. One shot! Half the colonists dead!

"The ship's boats will make it to the planet. We're going down. Maybe we can. Make it.

"I don't know if this will even get out of the nebula, but if it does... Send warships, Do NOT come without firepower. This thing is terrible.

"Repeat, this is the SS Harrington's Home. Mayday, mayday...."

8



In the standby briefing room of the starship U.S.S. Breitling, ninety three years removed from the disastrous end of the Harrington expedition, Commander Daniel McKinney sat with a dozen other officers watching the end of one man's dream and a hundred eighty peoples' lives.

Now the final audio log of the man who organized the expedition, Professor Ernst Harrington, resonated from the walls of a room that seemed smaller than when they started. His voice echoed across ninety-three years like the eulogy on an ancient tombstone.

I blame myself for this tragedy. Perhaps Mister Bedford was correct that we should have traveled straight to our destination. I had hoped to add to mankind's knowledge and make this a true venture of exploration. Was it my ego that has killed everyone? I must pray on it.

We do not know if a radio signal can escape the nebula, or even the bubble we are in. We placed all our records and a distress call in the ship's recorder buoy, but it will not eject from the ship. An EVA crew went to try to dislodge it, but it's drive is destroyed and it was welded into place by an electrical fire. I fear no one will ever know where we are. I have brought ruin to so many young lives.

Worse, our initial estimate that half the colonists were dead must now include all of them. Those that were not ... vaporized ... by whatever hit us, died later when their cryonic pods' emergency batteries failed. We could not get people into the damaged section fast enough. There just wasn't time to go through the wakeup cycle and get them out of there. There is a cloud of our own debris expanding beneath us, and every time I look at it I cannot escape the knowledge that it's composed partly of a hundred people who trusted me.

Miss Bidura and Mister Tice's bodies were recovered from outside. They were ... fried ... from the radiation of the alien weapon. At least we managed to recover Mister Wanderer. One of the crew was fast-thinking enough – got into a spacesuit and got to one of the shuttleboats in time to rescue our errant engineer. He will be all right. As all right as any of us will be, in any case.

The remaining twenty three of us will salvage what supplies we can from the ship and take the boats down to the planet's surface. It is far from the paradise of the world we'd intended to live on, but we should be able to survive. Although, twenty-five people is not nearly enough to start a viable colony. But with all that jungle down there, there must be food we can eat. Perhaps those buildings we saw will be our new home.

As for the alien device. After it shot us it retreated out of the star system. We have no idea where exactly. Why it only took one shot, I do not know. It could have finished us. Perhaps it only HAD one shot. Thank God it did not, but we will live knowing it's out here and could come back at any moment.

Captain Chen and I are discussing coming back up to the ship after we are settled, and bringing down all the remaining bodies. It will be bad enough looking up at night, knowing the wreck of my ship is here. None of us want to have the corpses of our friends hovering over our heads. I think I would certainly go mad knowing that. And digging so many graves will at least give us something to do for a few days. That sounded harsh, didn't it. Damn. Excuse me, I am not myself. But I must find ways to keep everyone's minds busy.

In any case, this will be the last recording on the ship's system. We have dumped all the ship's data to the portable computer system we will take down with us. Then we will shut down the Harrington's Home forever. Perhaps someone will find it someday. I hope our fate helps you avoid the same fate.

“Amen to that,” McKinney said after a prolonged silence. “I think this confirms one of my suspicions. I noticed that the weapon first hit us when we were coming into the system under impulse power. The second

time it hit us was when we used the impulse engines to brake into orbit. When we cut the engines it was confused for a moment, but then it adjusted to follow an estimated track where we might have gone. That shot hit us peripherally, not dead on, which I think confirms that it tracks on nuclear plasma exhaust. What we saw on the tapes here was that it fired on the Harrington's Home, not just when they activated it, but when the ship fired up its impulse engines."

"But what the hell is it?" someone asked.

McKinney nodded to Greengrass and said, "Susan, you have a theory."

"Yes, Sir." She leaned forward to explain. "I think it's pretty clearly a sentry robot of some kind, designed to guard the planet. Based on the hydrogen tank they found inside, I'm guessing it has a limited number of shots, and it retreats into the nebula to scoop up more hydrogen, which it uses both as fuel and to power its energy beam."

"So it's still out there," Tchalabi said, "waiting for us to start up the engines, at which point it dashes in and kills us?"

No way to sugar coat it. "Yeah," McKinney said. "Except I don't think 'waiting' is the way to put it. It doesn't care if we're here or not, it's just designed to destroy any ship using an impulse system."

"Commander," the engineer went on, "Impulse power is all we've got right now. We keep running into new problems – that thing really screwed us up good. Plus that second hit we took? It may have been peripheral, but it gave the starboard nacelle a hell of a jolt. I don't think we'll have warp power for a couple of days. With a space dock and a trained repair crew working on it, maybe it could be fixed in one work shift, but out here, with limited replacement parts..."

"Would it help if I ordered you to get it done in twelve hours?"

"Hell no! Sir."

"Didn't think so," he smiled.

McKinney had invited the princess' armsman to sit in on the meeting, since it concerned his job as well. Now Dockray rubbed his eyes. This was the first time McKinney recalled seeing him look worried.

"I know, Lieutenant," McKinney offered. "It's frustrating not to be able to do something."

"Oh, yes!" the man agreed emphatically. "That it is! I know I don't have to remind you, Commander..."

"That my first priority is to get the princess home? No you don't. The minute the warp engines are on line I plan to blast out of here and leave that monstrosity behind."

There was a general murmur of agreement around the room. But Greengrass said, "Sir? Shouldn't we try to destroy it while we're here? It still poses a danger to anyone else who might encounter it."

"If we were a hundred percent, and if we didn't have the princess to consider, I might agree."

Dockray spoke up. "Yes, you can send a message to your fleet the moment we break out of the nebula. They can send enough ships to kill it. Correct?"

"Correct," McKinney agreed. "Meanwhile, since we have a couple of days to kill ..." he shot a meaningful glance at Tchalabi, who responded with a weary shrug. "... I say we try to solve the mystery of this thing."



Three parties of six materialized, one after another, in an open court amidst a complex of buildings on the planet's surface. The complex had seemed smaller from the orbital photos. Down within it, in an open central yard that probably measured about a hectare in area, it sprawled around them like a large industrial complex.

From orbit, the buildings appeared as collapsed ruins. Down here, McKinney could clearly see the signs of ravagement. These buildings didn't collapse – at least, not all of them – they were blown up.

He found himself a bit light-headed and short of breath. The air was thinner than the ship's. He took in a deep breath.

McKinney called up the orbital photo on his clipboard, and overlaid a graphic showing the landing party's location. There were ten buildings in a roughly circular layout with a central court. Each building was built in an arc to conform to the circle, but they were not placed with any symmetry. Probably the people who built the place used a central point as a guide and just built the structures where they needed them without regard to aesthetics.

"Okay, spread out," McKinney ordered. "Nobody get out of sight of another person, we don't need to go hunting after lost crew too."

A low, asynchronous whine registered as people drew tricorders of varying purpose and began scanning. McKinney moved up beside T'Lar, as much for the comfort of being near a friend as to check her findings. "Earth-tropical," T'Lar muttered. "But thinner. Oxygen content only fourteen percent. Trace elements a bit too heavy for Human or Vulcan physiology."

"Not good to live in?"

"I would expect a fifty percent higher rate of occurrence of cancers and heavy metal poisoning."

"I imagine fatigue would have been a common problem."

"For a time, until their bodies adapted. A second generation would not have such a problem."

"Well," McKinney mused, "If they came down here there must be sign."

And there was.

It was easy to see that the crew of the Harrington had used these buildings. The first they examined seemed to have been converted into some kind of communal dining hall. McKinney rapped his knuckles on the mud brown surface of the structure. It seemed to be similar to industrial thermofoam sprayed over a plastic framework. He'd seen the like on a dozen Federation and alien worlds where people put up temporary buildings. It was unusual to see one that had stood for a century. He wasn't even aware the foam would last that long. In fact, pieces crumbled off at his touch. Then again, neither the buildings nor the foam were of human origin, and may have been much older and sturdier than they knew. There was nothing so dramatic inside as plates of half-eaten food left in a sudden emergency – the dinnerware, some apparently crafted of local clay – was neatly stacked in dilapidated cabinetry, and the brick oven and microwave cookers looked like they'd been cleaned before a century of dust had settled on them. Rows of tables and chairs filled the warehouse-sized building. A good number of them were well made out of local wood, by the hands of a craftsman. There were many more than the twenty-five survivors would have needed.

Simmons, the archeologist, said, "Looks like they lived long enough to have a bunch of kids, huh?"

McKinney nodded. "I wonder if it's possible that any of their descendants are alive on the planet. Maybe they traveled away from here."

T'Lar answered, "We would have registered them on the planetary scan. We saw only lower animals."

"But the main planetary sensor suite is gone. We used the backups, with much lower res."

"Possible, sir," the historian, B' Akula, speculated. "But this all reminds me of the Bounty."

"As in 'Mutiny on?'" McKinney asked.

"Yessir. Not the mutiny part, mind you. After they took over the ship, the crew sailed the Bounty to a tiny island. There they set up what they figured would be a paradisaical lifestyle. But there weren't enough of them, and the island didn't have enough food. They fought among themselves, and their little colony pretty much died out in a generation."

"No descendants?"

"Some, yessir. But they only survived with outside supply lines."

If there were surviving patches of descendants somewhere out there in the jungle, they wouldn't be found by the Breitling's crew unless they jogged into the compound and said hello. There was something else for a follow-up ship to do – a thorough scan of the planet with a non-destroyed sensor suite.

Two of the other larger buildings had been converted to apartments. It looked like some of the crew lived there together, but many had then been reconverted to storage, or just left empty. There were the apparent remains of individual wooden houses scattered about the periphery of the compound, now overgrown with jungle plants and trees.

"Over here, Sir!" a crewman shouted. She was in line of sight of the Commander, and he trotted over. She had pulled open a sliding door that covered most of the side of a building.

Slanting sunlight from the weak, distant sun illuminated the nose of a single antique shuttlecraft. Having been in the shelter, the pale blue-gray paint still looked fairly new. McKinney felt a twinge of affection at seeing such a pristine treasure. He got his handlight out of a coat pocket and shined it around the interior. Some sort of flying creature the size of a robin, not quite a bird, flitted away at the disturbance. Behind the first shuttle was a second, though this one was more forlorn looking. It looked like it was being cannibalized to keep the first one running. Ultimately that had failed – the first shuttle had open service panels and missing interior parts too. There were a couple of other ground vehicles, such as tractors, parked inside with piles of crates and odds and ends. Combination hangar/garage and storage shed.

There was a road, of sorts, leading out of the compound and into the jungle. Maybe it had once been the colony's route to a water source, or farm fields, or maybe even some of them had set up homesteads away from the center of their "town." McKinney, with T'Lar, walked as far as the edge of the radius of buildings and looked outward, wondering what it had been like here a hundred years ago. Wondering where else they found to go, that they needed to make a road. Or maybe the road had been here when they landed. He just didn't know.

"Oh," he said as his eye caught a shape in the brush. He found that if he stood at a certain spot and looked a certain way, out away from the edge of the compound, he could see even rows of marker stones disappearing into the jungle growth. Of course, there would be a cemetery. He walked to the edge, a hundred meters of scrubgrass and relatively young trees from the last building in the compound, and read the first stone. It was a simple rectangle without religious icon of any kind. Olef Kristensen, Medic. *Hello Olef*. Next to it – McKinney yanked a root away that blocked the name – Helga Kristensen, Medic also. Wife? Sister? It didn't say. Assume wife. The dates on the stones were a couple of years apart, Helga having passed before her husband. Olef's date of death was fifteen years after the Harrington's Home's own demise. So they lived here for a while, in whatever condition. He was only fifty-one when he died.

"Horrible," McKinney muttered to himself. To come all this way hoping for a new life, finding only death.

T'Lar scanned the grave. "The bones show signs of deformation. Possibly cancerous."

McKinney reached over to her and touched her tricorder, and her hand. She recoiled subtly from the physical contact. "It doesn't matter, Lara. Let them alone."

Clearly confused, she relented and closed the instrument, clipped it onto her belt. She assumed a respectful pose similar to McKinney's own as he tried to see the remaining graves through the overgrowth. The graveyard was situated on a little hill, and the trees and scrub that had grown over it looked to be roughly the seventy years old that they should be.

"Daniel," T'Lar said, "Does it matter, to humans, where one dies?"

He hadn't expected such a philosophical question from his logic-bound friend. But then he remembered what he'd said to her in a drowse a few days ago. He'd forgotten it like a dream, but she'd reminded him.

"Maybe not to some," he answered. "We have many philosophies."

She "mm-hmmed" and nodded in pointed agreement.

"As for myself," he said in a lighter tone, "I hope to be buried in my family plot in Ireland after a damn good party, and I hope to be a very old human when I pass on."

"So in your view, these people would be tragic figures?"

"Oh dear God yes!" he exclaimed. "Aren't they to you?" He was almost aghast that she'd asked that question.

She considered. "Yes, I certainly see the tragedy – the wastefulness – in the overall event. I apologize if I've upset you, Daniel, but I don't always see events in the same light as you. It is ... unfortunate that this happened to these people."

He shook his head. "That's putting it mildly. We come out here to explore and experience new wonders of nature, and make friends with people we've never met before. Nobody comes out here to get blasted into oblivion or ... die of bone cancer."

"You sound angry."

"Goddamn right. Whatever that thing is up there, it just isn't right that it did this."

"You're speaking in that cosmic sense of right and wrong that you love to dwell on so much. It has no bearing on reality."

"Oh come on, Lara, I know for a fact you have a sense of justice, I've seen it in action."

She nodded. "Yes, I do, as much as any sentient. But this situation seems to have no sentience behind it. It appears to be entirely accidental – an abandoned security device happened upon by hapless travelers. Who is to blame? Surely not even those who left the device behind."

"Why *not* them?"

"They did not target the Harrington's Home. In fact, it appears they switched the vehicle off before leaving it. I assume they'd intended to return, but did not. Daniel, you can feel the need for justice against a mind who committed a great wrong, but to rage against happenstance is simply not logical."

He looked over the graves that he could see. Many repeated family names. A colony crew would have had couples, and more couples would have formed up after landing. And children would have come along.

"Maybe not, but it's human," he said. "Lara, I'm beginning to think we should try to destroy that thing before we leave here."

She gave him a warning look. "That would be unwise, I think."
He nodded. "I think so too. But sometimes the unwise thing is the right thing."
"There you go again," she sighed.

His communicator beeped.

"McKinney."

"Commander, this is Freeling." Came a heavy voice. "I think we've found a control center in building six. And bodies, Sir."

Bodies. "Human?"

"Yessir."

Of course. There would be nobody left to bury the last ones to die.

The buildings were arbitrarily numbered when Breitling's cartographers drew up the map of the compound. Building six was on the other side of the compound. Though T'Lar's Vulcan physique showed no signs of stress in the thin air, McKinney knew he'd be blowing hard if he moved faster than a walk. Besides, what was there to hurry about in a decades-dead archeological site?

When they arrived, McKinney saw that building six had been blasted. A single huge hole deprived the building of most of its roof. It didn't appear to be a structural collapse as much as the result of an attack. The building had been two stories tall, and fragments of both levels were piled like avalanches on the ground floor. The center of the building was nothing more than a crater, but outlying rooms were in various stages of lessening chaos. The room that crewman Freeling had called him to was missing its inner wall and showed scorch marks. Control panels on the leeward side were intact. Three skeletons lay about on the floor near overturned chairs.

McKinney recognized his two linguistics people pouring over the remains of smashed control panels.

Did I just think of them as "my" people? Hm.

One of them, Lieutenant Bedwineck, saw him come in.

"Commander?" she said, sounding surprised, "It's Gorn!"

McKinney wasn't sure he'd heard that correctly. "What's gone?"

She pointed at the panels. "Not gone, Sir, Gorn. The labels. The colonists had put English stickers over the original markings when they figured out what did what, but the original labeling is in Gorn."

"Oh," he said, embarrassed. "Would they have known that?"

"Nossir, first contact with the Gorn wasn't until the mid to late 2260s."

"Okay, what have we got, then? An abandoned Gorn military outpost?"

T'Lar said, "That would indeed be a logical conclusion."

McKinney sighed. The Gorn *would* do something like set an automated booby trap that gets innocent people killed. At least they'd stopped *intentionally* killing innocent people once Starfleet had pointed out how bad it would be for their collective health if they continued military incursions into Federation space. But that was only a few decades ago. This installation has been here forever.

"Gorn is pretty far from here," McKinney mused. "What were they doing out here? Have we found any Gorn literature or computer files that might tell us?"

Bedwineck answered, "Haven't looked, Sir, but we will."

"Good."

McKinney found himself looking at the desiccated remains lying nearest him. T'Lar had finished scanning it, but she withheld comment from him. The person's work jumpsuit was in tatters, with sharp, stark, white bones jutting from some of the tears. He automatically looked for a name tag, but this was a small community of people who knew each other. No one needed a name tag. For a discontinuous moment, he pictured his own name on the body's breast. He shuddered. He looked around to see which of his security people (*his* security people) were here.

"Connors, Shemanski, and...uh, Lechicki," He said, authority in his voice. The three security men, the strongest looking of the bunch handy to his eyes, snapped to informal attention. "There's a cemetery out that way, along an overgrown road leading out of the compound. I want you to bury these people out there. With their friends."

The three crewmen didn't look pleased, but they yessired and went about it. One of them immediately called the Breitling, explained the situation, and requested three body bags and some modern digging equipment. McKinney figured the departed were in good hands.

"Lara," McKinney said to his friend, "Take a walk with me. I want to see what's down that road."



“You should have beamed down a car, Daniel,” T’Lar advised him for the second time. “Or had a shuttle scout the road.”

They’d walked at least five kilometers along a strip of scrubgrass that could only be called a road by the most generous cartographer. The terrain was slightly hilly, but the ups and downs of what would be a gently rolling country road on Earth were amplified by the thin air. McKinney, never in perfect athletic condition by any means, found himself in need of another rest. He sat on a dead tree lying next to the path.

“Might miss something,” he breathed, waving a hand to indicate their surroundings. “It’s so overgrown.”

She stood at ease with her hands behind her back, eyeing his condition. “Please do not take this as insubordination, Commander, but I refuse to carry you.”

He laughed – or tried to. It ended in a wheeze. Her face was perfectly neutral, but he knew she was actually joking. She would only have said such a thing to him, and not with another soul in earshot.

Despite the road’s near invisibility, it was obvious that it had been cleared once. The planet’s dry, waist-high, yellow grass was as high on the road as anywhere else, but any bushes or trees were far smaller than in the surrounding jungle. McKinney carried his phaser pistol in his hand; several times the high grass had quivered, and once something at least the size of a dog had bolted for the trees at their approach. He looked around warily. The sounds of small animals twittered in the dense growth behind him, but nothing that sounded hungry for anything as big as himself. At a random thought, he inspected the ends of the log he sat on.

“Heh,” he chuckled, a suspicion confirmed. “Saw cut. Probably cleared from the road by the colonists.”

“Yes,” she agreed, “Everything I see concerning the road convinces me it was they who cleared it. It’s certainly not any older than one hundred Earth years.”

He nodded to indicate the equipment bag she carried slung over her shoulder. “Wouldn’t have any tri-ox in there would you?”

“No, I’m a biologist, not a doctor.”

He stood and began to walk again, his breathing steady again.

She added, “Perhaps we should have breath masks beamed down. The oxygen would supplement...”

“Nono,” he said quickly, “I’m fine.”

T’Lar shook her head in dismay.

“What?” He asked, “And I’ll bet your going to start with the phrase ‘you humans...’”

“...place stubbornness and pride before common sense,” she finished without missing a beat.

“Well, at least you didn’t say ‘logic’.”

“I felt I should, as you say, give you a break.”

He smiled.

Abruptly, T’Lar stiffened and drew her phaser. McKinney’s reactions were slowed by his weariness, but he saw where she aimed when she snapped her phaser up and pointed into the forest. He did likewise. Neither fired, and McKinney waited to see what she did. Her pointed, elfish Vulcan ears were designed for air this thin, so where he hadn’t heard a thing, she obviously had. She tracked a little to the right. He mimicked her move, keeping his eyes on the trees. Moments passed, and McKinney’s sleep-deprived, jangled nerves jittered in his chest and stomach.

T’Lar holstered her weapon as suddenly as she’d drawn it and said “Only an animal.”

McKinney didn’t drop his aim. “You scared the crap out of me.”

“I?”

He heard the brush flutter and saw a brownish mass, about bear sized, amble peacefully away from them into the deeper foliage.

He breathed again, and holstered his own phaser, shaking his head.

“I don’t see how you can find fault with me for reacting to a potential danger.”

“I’m an irrational Human, remember?”

“Ah yes.”

They walked on.



With the food processors up to full snuff once again, Princess Elayna and her staff were enjoying their dinner in one of deck six's peripheral crew lounges. They had the room to themselves, the crew still being on alert. What few crew had been grabbing a bite in mid-crisis deferred to the Royal Party and took their food on the run with them.

They'd moved two of the four-place tables together – so they wouldn't crowd each other – in front of one of the long windows. It was facing away from the planet, sadly, but they contented themselves with the baleful rose-petal glow of the surrounding nebula instead of the greens and blues and cloud patterns they'd hoped for.

Anthony Van der Roll sat with his hands in his lap, his fingers interlaced. Though he seemed placid enough, Dockray could see the man's hands were shaking. Dockray tried to conceive of any possible harm Van der Roll could cause, but he'd never known him to be anything but a steadfast friend to Elayna, albeit one with an anxiety toward star travel. The images he'd seen on the replay of the Harrington Home's logs haunted the security man. Anyone at all can cause a situation to go straight to hell, as Marcus Bedford had proven a century ago. But Van der Roll had no special knowledge of the Breitling or how it worked, nor access to the controls. Nor, as far as Dockray knew, any inclination towards violence and panic. He was probably a greater threat to his own nerves than to anyone aboard a starship.

The princess herself had suggested their meal in the lounge, since she knew there would be windows. Alas the view was not what they'd hoped, and the doctor had firmly declined to have the dinner moved to the opposite side of the ship on his account. He hadn't eaten but a few perfunctory bites, and seemed lost in his own head.

Elayna placed her hand on his, startling him. Their eyes met, and Van der Roll looked away. But he squeezed her hand in return. Dockray didn't know what private moment had passed between them, and it was none of his business. But she was obviously trying to console the man.

"Everyone," she began, "I know you're all worried about the baby and me. This is only the second day of our delay," she said to them with emphasis. "I just want to stress to you all..." and she squeeze her doctor's hand again "...that there is a very long time to go – a week at least – before anyone needs to worry. So eat. Please. Everyone." She fired that last word at the doctor.

He smiled at her, with pain behind his eyes. "Forgive me, but I'm just not hungry. Maybe later."

She was clearly frustrated to be unable to get through to him. She sighed and dug into her salad. "Well, *we're* hungry," she said, suddenly bright, patting her tummy with the hand she'd removed from the doctor's.

Dockray knew the princess was smart enough to know that false cheer wasn't going to turn Anthony's funk around, but he couldn't think of anything else either. He himself was starting to feel a bit anxious about the whole affair too. But he knew the only possible course of action for himself was to wait it out and let the crew do what they had to. Anything beyond that was interference, and aboard a starship that was dangerous. He just hoped Anthony would realize that. Or, maybe Anthony *did* realize that. Maybe that was the source of his depression – the inability to do anything. Dockray could understand that, being somewhat action-oriented himself.

As they walked back to their quarters, Van der Roll let the women get ahead as he walked alongside Dockray. Melody and Elayna talked animatedly about people back home, and some scandal that had been in progress when they'd left. To Dockray he suddenly said, "Anxiety is not a condition that one can just ... shrug off."

Dockray was taken aback by the non-sequiter revelation, no one having even mentioned the topic previously.

"You can't just take medicine and be cured," the doctor went on. "or spray dermaseal on it and declare it mended."

Dockray studied him. "You're speaking of yourself?" It wasn't exactly a Holmsian deduction.

Van der Roll nodded sharply. "The ancient 'fight or flight' instinct is imprinted on our genes. Civilization has unfortunately developed to where we can't do either in many situations. Anxiety springs from that." Dockray nodded. He knew this, but the doctor seemed to need to talk it out. "So, since there is nothing for me to fight, and no way for me to flee, I sit awake with my adrenaline surging in a primitive drive to do both."

"You have medication for this, no?"

"Yes, and I'm taking some. Again, it's not a cure, it just relieves the symptoms to a degree. It doesn't help me sleep, but it... evens out my temperament."

“I thought you seemed even mellower than usual.”

Van der Roll laughed without much emotion. “The only solution is to remove oneself from the causative situation. If we get out of this mess, I’ll be fine. Until then, you can expect me to be a bit of a mess.”

“Just don’t give me cause for alarm, all right, Anthony?”

Van der Roll look at him, confused. “What do you mean?”

“Just don’t try to do something we’ll all regret, like try to take over the ship.” He said it with a perfectly straight face.

The doctor flustered, and gobbled for a retort, but Dockray continued: “At the least it would cause an embarrassing incident that would embarrass the princess. At the worst you could get us all killed.”

“How can you... I wouldn’t... That’s insane...”

Dockray held a hand up in placation. “Think of what my job is, Anthony. I *have* to think of the worst case scenario and prepare for it. I meant no offense.”

Van der Roll let out a long, gruff grumble, not wishing to pursue the line of discussion. But Dockray thought his protestations were just a little too quick. While it was immensely improbable that a peaceful civilian like the doctor would be *able* to do something as melodramatic as taking over a starship, it was not beyond reason that a desperate peaceful civilian suffering from sleep deprivation would *think* of it.



“Aha,” McKinney smiled. “I thought so.”

“It was a sensible assumption, Daniel,” T’Lar assured him.

After a walk of roughly an hour, the jungle surrounding the little road had thinned rather abruptly and presented the travelers with a clearing several hectares in area. This had probably been an open patch of waist-high grass when the Harrington Home’s settlers had found it. Given another century or two, it would certainly return to that, but now, the remains of four houses in various states of decay stood like tired sentinels.

Two on the left and two on the right, each on a plot of perhaps a hectare. Apparently four families had decided to strike out from the main encampment and try to live on their new world in a more prosaic lifestyle than their shipmates. The homes were all surrounded by shade trees, which had grown to hang over the structures and, coincidentally, hide them from orbital photography. The first, on the right of the road, set back about thirty meters, had the look of a rustic, hand built frontier house. Which is exactly what it was, McKinney supposed. The Harrington’s Home must have had a talented carpenter among its surviving crew, for the house was framed with hand-hewn square timbers and surfaced with clapboards in the classic style. There seemed to be some kind of preservative coating – certainly not paint, which they couldn’t have made themselves in such quantities. Maybe some kind of plant pitch made into shellac. It was all that kept the wood from decaying to dust. If there had been glass or plastic windows, there were only holes now, gaping like eye sockets from the bones of the dead home.

The second and third were in much the same conditions, with variations in building techniques. One had visible lathe and plaster where the first had only planks. The third had a kind of adobe surfacing over a woven frame of fibrous plant material. That house had crumbled away, leaving wild explosions of grass-like material spraying out of many holes.

The fourth still stood. McKinney was reminded of illustrations he’d seen of ancient Roman houses, built of stone and brick and surfaced with plaster. Made of materials stronger than its three neighbors, it still stood after decades of neglect. It even still had its whole roof, unlike the others. The roof looked to be tiles chipped out of blue slate, possibly sealed with pitch. Very clever.

“Hm,” he grunted. “I’ll huff and I’ll puff.”

T’Lar looked marginally worried when she looked at him. “Pardon? You are not, as you say, ‘loosing it,’ are you?”

He smiled. “No ma’am. It’s a line from a children’s story about...” he thought about trying to explain pigs building houses to a Vulcan and stopped himself short. “It just concerns a lesson about building strong houses that last.”

She nodded, probably making a mental note to look it up at a future date.

McKinney looked at the scene around him, and abruptly felt terribly sad. Once again, the tragedy of these people’s story struck him. Even those that had tried to make a more normal life out here, put the tragedy behind them and carry on as best as they could, were doomed to end in death and decay. What,

indeed, was the point? He sighed a weighty breath into the thin air and wished there was another log to sit down on. He felt bone tired and more than a little light in the head.

“Well,” he sighed, “I guess we ought to search the houses for any information we can find.”

T’Lar called out to the stone house, “We mean you no harm.”

McKinney shot her a puzzled look. “You don’t think...”

“There *is* someone in the house, Daniel, I can hear them.”

Once again McKinney was reminded that he just *wasn’t* hearing normally in the rarified air. He looked to all the windows. No one behind them, but they were intact.

“It might be another animal,” he said.

“Then it speaks English,” T’Lar countered.

“Ah.” He still couldn’t see or hear anyone, but he’d be foolish to doubt her. “Hello?” he called, approaching the front of the house, which was set back from the road about fifty meters. What might have once been a front lawn was a meter deep with wild grass and overgrown with trees and vines. “We’re from Earth. Well, *I* am,” he added, waving a hand to indicate T’Lar. “My friend here is from Vulcan.” They would have known about Vulcans back then of course, even if everyone hadn’t seen one personally. Still no response, at least that he could hear. He asked T’Lar, “Do you hear anything?”

“Yes. There are two people. They’re speaking too low for me to understand.”

McKinney wasn’t sure what to do next. He could stand there and keep shouting, but he felt silly. He could walk up to the door and knock, but in this otherworldly scenario, that seemed a ridiculously mundane thing to do. He spread his arms in a friendly gesture and shouted again. He thought of all his First Contact training, but these were probably humans. “My name is McKinney, I’m first officer of the starship USS Breitling. We stumbled on this planet when we heard your distress call – well, the distress call the Harrington’s Home sent out a hundred years ago, anyway.” Still nothing, and he was feeling rather lame. “We, uh... we can take you back with us if you like.”

Yeah, he thought, we can rescue you as soon as we rescue ourselves.

T’Lar tried, “Please come out. You have no reason to fear us.”

A low double-beep sounded. In his state of near exhaustion, it didn’t register right away. When he saw T’Lar looking expectantly at him he realized it was his communicator. He drew it from his jacket pocket with a shake of his head to clear the cobwebs.

“McKinney,” he answered.

“Commander, it’s Eng here.” He’d left the helmsman in command.

“Go, Eng,” he said curtly, his mind still working on the people in the house.

“Sir, another ship has entered the system.”

9



Somehow, that further piece of information seemed not to fit in McKinney's brain. He stared blankly at the communicator, still wondering exactly what he was supposed to say to get the people in the house to come out. And still wondering if they could get the princess home in time to have her baby. And still wondering if they should destroy that alien robot, or just get the hell out of the system as...

Oh.

"Can you ID the ship, Eng?" If it was Gorn they were screwed. He couldn't fight the Breitling in her condition. If it was a Starfleet ship, *they* were screwed if they --

"Yessir, it's one of ours. It's the Yorktown."

He knew of her. One of the later Constitution class cruisers. One of the few that hadn't been retired to training and replaced with an Excelsior class of the same name. Smaller than the Breitling. He pictured the ten-meter hole in his own ship superimposed on a primary hull three-quarters the size. He pictured the Harrington's Home – if a ship the size of the Colombia was hit where the nacelle pylons joined the hull...

"Hail them, Eng, fast. Tell them to shut down impulse drive. That alien thing homes on it. Tell them now."

"Aye, Sir, standby," Eng said quickly.

Standby stretched. McKinney waited out a full minute of silence, at least. Far too long under these circumstances. He pictured the Colombia's warp nacelles thrown in opposite directions as that Gorn drone blasted into her spine. He pictured her antimatter bottles rupturing. Hell, he'd probably be able to see an explosion that big from right where he was, like a second sun. "Eng?" he prompted just as Eng started talking, startling McKinney.

"Eng here, Sir. Yorktown 's okay. That thing took a run at them when they came into the system, but they got their shields up in time. They shut down impulse on my advice and they're coasting in-system just like we did." McKinney felt himself breathe. It was starting to occur to him that having an intact starship in the system was going to be a plus for everyone. "They wanted to pursue, but it got off their screens before they could recover. They have some damage, but they have full propulsion. They'll be coming alongside us in about ... four hours, twenty, Sir."

McKinney felt his mind shuffling priorities, and it was as if an index card dropped out of the stack every now and then. Another thing he wasn't good enough at to be in command. He knew he had shortcomings, he just wished they wouldn't all be exposed in the course of a few days. He could offload the princess' party to the Yorktown and have them deliver her home while the Breitling stayed here for repairs. He hated to admit failure like that, though. But of course the princess' life was more important than his pride. He didn't feel right leaving these people he just discovered. And he didn't feel right leaving this booby-trap intact.

T'Lar broke his musing: "Daniel, the Yorktown will have to use its impulse engines to brake for orbit. The Gorn drone will attack it."

"The captain should have enough sense... Eng, who's the captain of the Yorktown?"

"Captain Grey, Commander. Um... Robert Grey."

"Advise him to enter orbit far away from us, will you? Tell him to expect that thing to attack again when he fires up his engines for orbit."

"Aye, Sir. He's already thought of that," Eng answered.

"Okay, thank you Mister Eng. McKinney out."

He pocketed the communicator and found himself staring at the Roman brick house in front of him. The third little pig built to last. Did somebody blow down the other houses? Or did they just collapse on their own. No, looking at them one saw only decay, not violence like back at the complex of buildings.

"My head hurts," he muttered.

T'Lar studied him, trying to discern if he was complaining of an actual illness or using a quaint human colloquialism. "Again," she decided to answer, "I am not a doctor. What shall we do, Daniel?"

"Well," he mused, "we have four hours to kill. Let's talk to these nice people."

With that, the front door opened.



Robert Grey was forty seven years old, twenty three pounds overweight, and surlier than usual since his ship got diverted from halfway across the sector to come looking for the missing USS Breitling. Starfleet Command had babbled something about a diplomatic emergency, so he burned subspace at warp seven and followed Dubronin's reported flight plan into this damned nebula. Breitling's impulse wash led them the rest of the way. That and that crazy distress signal, which is obviously what diverted them from their diplomat-delivery mission. He thought of those missions as Limousine Service, not exactly what a multi-billion credit starship was meant for.

All that was bad enough. His current mission had to be delayed for the week or so he'd be off chasing Valentina Dubronin's missing ship. But to break into that clear bubble of space inside the nebula only to be shot at, was just too much. Starfleet was going to get an earfull when they got out of this communications dead zone. Thank God he kept his deflectors up in strange situations, that thing had come out of nowhere.

But then he'd contacted the Breitling and found out what had happened to her, and what had attacked his ship, and what was going on. His surliness got knocked down a peg to merely gruff. Val Dubronin was a friend, and he'd miss her. But the wet-behind-the-ears first officer of hers, McKinney, was a cipher to him. And Grey wasn't encouraged about the guy's command abilities by the fact that he had his helmsman speak for him while he stoged around planetside looking for clues to a hundred year old mystery. Where were this guy's priorities?

"Leslie?" he asked the officer on weapons station.

"Nothing, Sir," she answered, scanning her sensors. "Whatever it was, it's gone into the clouds."

"Keep watching. Breitling said it homes on impulse exhaust, so when we brake for orbit I want phasers and torpedoes ready."

"Aye, Sir."

He recognized the bleep of an incoming call, which right now could only be from the Breitling. He waited for his comm officer, Mesrobian, to tell him before he said anything. A little protocol was a good thing.

"Put them through," Grey said. "Grey here, Breitling, go ahead."

"Hello? Is this the Captain of the Yorktown?"

Grey looked over his shoulder at Mesrobian. The lieutenant shrugged.

"Yes, this is Captain Grey," he answered expectantly.

"Captain, my name is Anthony Van der Roll. I'm the personal physician to Princess Elayna."

The voice had an edge to it that Grey recognized as nervousness, perhaps fear.

"Princess Elayna, sir?"

"Yes, I'm sorry, I assumed you knew. Um. The princess is being transported home aboard this ship. That was the mission of this ship. Well, you can see there's a problem now and the Breitling can't take us. Take her. Home. Captain. It's vital that we get back to Groningen as fast as possible. Our government's future depends on it."

"All right, Doctor, I see. What are you asking?"

"Well, that you take us. Please. We've been delayed too long already."

Grey stewed a little before he answered. This guy was a civilian passenger. There was no way in hell he was using the ship-to-ship with any officer's permission. So this civilian was trying to go over the head of Breitling's commanding officer. And even if the Breitling's commanding officer was an idiot (which Grey only had marginal evidence to support at this time), that just wasn't right.

"Very well, Doctor – Roll?"

"Van der Roll. Three words. Dutch origins."

"Excuse me. Doctor, I will be glad to discuss that option with Breitling's commanding officer when I speak with him next. Until then, I would request that you keep the official channels clear, thank you. Yorktown out." He stabbed the cutoff on the arm of his chair. "Damn civilians," he muttered to himself. "Don't belong on a starship."

Anthony Van der Roll sputtered a few more incoherent words, but he knew the channel was dead. He hung his head and heaved a mighty sigh that came all the way up from his knotted soul. He sat back on his bed and stared at the anonymous art print on the opposite wall.

"Satisfied?" Dockray asked, more gently than was usual for him.

"No," Van der Roll choked, "but thank you for rigging it up for me."

"Easy," Dockray shrugged. "I had to let you find out for yourself that you have only one option: let the crew do their jobs, and wait till they get us out of this."

"I know. I do know that ... intellectually. In my head. But in my gut, it burns. In my chest, it chokes me."

"Do you have a sedative you can give yourself?"

"I've been taking anxiety suppressants."

"No, a sedative. To put you to sleep."

Van der Roll shook his head and lay back. "I can't sleep."

"No, I mean, I want you to take something that will unequivocally put you out, unconscious, period, for at least twelve hours."

The doctor looked at him suspiciously. "You want me out of your way, in other words."

Dockray sighed. "Not out of my way, Anthony. That's much too harsh. I want to ... not have to worry about you so I can do my job."

"Bastard."

"That shows how over the edge you are. I've never heard you say an unkind word to anyone. And saying one to me is ... not advisable."

Van der Roll looked at the armsman. They'd never had a relationship that went beyond polite deference. They were coworkers, and that was that. The doctor briefly wondered if Dockray was giving him a friendly jibe, but the serious look on the man's face instantly ruled that out, and Van der Roll knew that, if he'd been clear of mind, he'd be afraid. "I apologize, Lieutenant."

Dockray nodded cordially. "I see no need to mention this to Elayna. She has enough on her mind."

Van der Roll suddenly sobbed a huge, wracking breath, and a tear broke loose from his eye. "Oh my God, you're right. I'm so damnably selfish." He pointed to his satchel. "There's a green phial in the left outside pocket. Six CCs will put me out for the twelve hours you want." Dockray had the case open before Van der Roll had finished. "If you want, you can give me another when I wake up."

"We'll see, Anthony," Dockray said. "Maybe the rest will let you work it out. Get yourself comfortable."

The doctor lay himself down on his bed. "I love that girl like she was my daughter, you know. I hope she knows that."

"We all love her," the bodyguard smiled as he pressed the hypospray to the doctor's neck. "And she knows it."

Anthony Van der Roll closed his eyes for the first time in two days.



Julius Bedford was the grandson of Marcus Bedford and a surviving crewwoman named Elinore Gugelberger (who, Julius said, was delighted to rid herself of her father's name for something more dignified). Tia Bedford, his wife of thirty years, was the granddaughter of Captain Chen Zhu and his wife Lanei. They were both in their fifties, though they both looked the worse for wear. They wore homemade clothing that was perfectly presentable and brightly colored – why McKinney had imagined them wearing burlap sacks or animal skins he couldn't say. People had been making clothing without machines for millennia.

The inside of the house was brightly lit by numerous glass windows and skylights, and oil lamps filled in the shadows with flickering yellow flame. Some walls were painted a pale rose color, but most were the white of natural plaster. Patches were visible all around, but at least Julius Bedford had the desire to keep the place in repair for he and his wife. The four of them sat at a table built sturdily of local wood, in comfortable chairs of the same origin. The walls were decorated with needlework, though how they made the thread was a question that McKinney was willing to leave till much later.

Tia Bedford set cups of a sweet-smelling tea before them as she took her seat.

"I've never met a Vulcanian," she said shyly. "You're the first alien I've ever seen!"

"That is indeed unusual to hear," T'Lar said, sampling her tea.

"Vulcanian?" McKinney said, "I've always heard it said 'Vulcan'."

"Both were used in the early years of Vulcan/Human relations," T'Lar explained. "Convention settled upon the latter over the years, and the former fell into disuse."

"Probably because it's ... shorter," Julius said, "easier to say. Humans can be ... um ... lazy." He was having to stop and think of words fairly often. He hadn't had a conversation with anyone other than his wife in two decades. He'd swirl his hand in the air and snap his fingers once or twice as the word came to him, and look annoyed with himself.

T'Lar went on, "Neither, of course, is the word native Vulcans use."

"Oh?" Tia said brightly, "What is?"

The word T'Lar uttered was too long and full of glottal stops for any of the humans to master, though McKinney himself came close.

"A close approximation, Daniel," she said, almost wryly. "Perhaps there is hope for your future in politics after all."

McKinney decided there'd been enough small talk. "Julius, Tia, We've pieced together what happened to your grandparents through the log recordings on the Harrington's Home..."

Julius' sudden look of shock stopped him. "God," the survivor descendent whispered. "Daniel, you've been to The Ship?" McKinney nodded, afraid to speak out loud. "It's still up there." Another nod. Julius shook his head, eyes closed, unknowable emotions playing behind them.

McKinney said, "I told you we followed the distress beacon in."

"Yes you did. I guess it just didn't ... sink in ... until you said you'd been ... ON the ship. All these years, I didn't think it would still be up there. It's like... I don't know if I can ... explain. Words are ... escaping me."

McKinney thought he understood. "I don't know how much Earth history you know. But it sounds like a descendant of the pilgrims finding out the Mayflower was still standing in Plymouth Harbor."

Julius had to search his memory, and seemed to be drawing a blank. Tia offered: "I know the story, Daniel, but neither of us are descended from Americans."

"Oh. Me neither, actually." McKinney looked at T'Lar. "Don't count on that diplomatic career just yet."

She raised an inscrutable eyebrow. To the Bedfords she said, "Your ancestor's ship is in synchronous orbit directly above the building complex."

Now Tia looked spooked. "It's been right over our heads all our lives," she pronounced with awe.

McKinney decided to press on. "I have a team at the base camp going over things now, but we need to know what happened after the original survivors landed."

"Tell your people not to, um, touch anything, Daniel," Julius said. "We don't know what they did all those years ago, but they brought down the, ah... the wrath of God doing it."

"Can you tell me anything about what happened?"

Tia got up from the table and walked away from them. McKinney could see it was painful for her to get up, and she favored her right hip when she walked. But why was she leaving? Did he upset her? "Tia?" he said tentatively.

She turned, realizing. "Oh, I'm sorry, Daniel. I'm just going to get something. My manners! it's been so long since I had to relate to anyone other than that old log." She nodded at Julius affectionately.

"I'll give you..." he stopped himself from finishing and turned bright red. Then he winked at McKinney and smiled devilishly. "We don't have much to do here."

Tia called from the next room. "Julius' father kept a diary. He felt it was important if we were ever found. It would be..." she came back into the room with a bound paper book "well, it would be World History, wouldn't it?"

She sat back down, lowering herself carefully. McKinney recalled the face of her grandmother from Harrington Home's tapes. Still a lovely Polynesian-looking face, two generations removed and fifty-odd hard years old. She winced as she settled herself.

"I cracked my leg about fifteen years ago," she explained. "No chance for it to heal right here."

"Local years?" T'Lar asked. "I don't see how you would be able to determine Earth years."

"Easy," Julius said. "The ship's chrono. They brought it down with them, and now we have it in our bedroom. Still going."

"Here's the passage you're interested in, I expect." McKinney reached for it, but Tia held it back. "Oh, you'll never be able to read his handwriting, I'll do it. Some World History, eh? If only I can read it."

"I can read it too!" Julius looked slighted.

McKinney smiled assuringly. "We'll get it transcribed on the way home."

Slowly, Tia's face melted. Tears welled up, and ran down her cheeks. McKinney felt panic rise. What did he do? How to fix it? "I'm... I'm sorry. I.."

She held up a hand, holding in a sob. Julius took her other hand. "This is home," the man said. "We... don't know any other. Just stories about Earth the old folks told us. But we've talked about getting ... rescued ... for our whole lives."

She said, "Don't know if we'd know how to live anywhere else."

McKinney relaxed. they did want to leave, then. "Don't worry about that," he assured them with an honest smile. "You'll have plenty of help."

Tia wiped the tears away and gulped down the last of her herb tea. "Sorry," she muttered. "This is all so strange and wonderful; you finding us." She smoothed out the pages of her father-in-law's journal with reverence, and read:

July 14th 2335 – 34 years 171 days Earth; 16 years 87 days Harrington time.

Father keeps warning them, but since when did they ever listen to him? Every time they clean out a collapsed area of the Control Center they fiddle with things to try to make them work. Father keeps telling them they're going to find the self destruct without knowing it. They tell him they got lights and heat working in the Apartments, all without anyone who can translate alien languages, so be grateful and quit annoying them (he says that's when he decided to come out here and build his own house away from them all).

Chen Wei uncovered a hidden access door to an underground complex. You would think that would make them cautious, but he and his friends have been exploring it as freely as a deserted cave. Captain Chen says he tried to remind "the kids" (that's me and the rest of the First Generation – "the kids" – even though we're all in our twenties and thirties and half of us are parents) about how we got here – by screwing around with an unknown alien device. He says it's probably even still up there somewhere. Nobody takes him seriously because he's an old man. Father too. I mean, nobody takes him seriously either, because he's always been the complainer of the lot. "Oh, Marcus is whining again, what a surprise." To which he points out that he was right about the alien spaceship. I guess it's just not real to us "kids" because we never saw the bloody thing. It all happened before we were born.

Wei and Bobby and Shiro are going to "explore the hell" out of the underground complex. They think it was a military headquarters or something. They found a weapons locker full of slug-thrower rifles and for a while we were hopeful we could use them to hunt the bears better. Nobody could find any ammunition for them though. Bobby told me they'd found a huge control room down there. And what looks like a communications center (compared to what we've seen above ground).

Mrs. Harrington thought there might be a subspace radio down there – the above-ground center only has local comms. That got everybody's hopes up too. So some of the committee is going to go down there again today with their (as Father puts it) "Imperfect knowledge of the alien writing, poking around in the dark with controls that could get us all killed." He told me to stay away from the Main Camp today, like he's going to do. We need to clear another few square meters of brush to plant peas today anyway. None of the Four Families are going near the Camp much any more anyway. Who needs them? We have water and crops for ourselves, and they've been getting more and more obnoxious towards us, even though we give them some of our food. When we do go "into town" (as Mrs. Wanderer says), they razz us and call us outsiders, partly just to be wise, but you can tell they mean it a little. Father says it's remarkable that human beings can create divisive cliques with a starting group of only twenty five. I think he may have missed that he created one himself, but that's my father.

Jeannie Wanderer has volunteered to mind little Ralph and Jenna while we all clear the bush for our new plot. I love the way the Four Families help each other out here. I wouldn't want to live in "town" with those snobs. Oops, I guess I'm guilty of cliquing as much as anyone.

Okay, secretly, I admit it, I want to go explore old secret underground military complexes with everybody. But, as much as everybody thinks Father is just a cranky old blowhard? That's how much I respect him. He's made it seem easy to live here, and I believe him when he says how hard it is compared to what they had planned.

July 15th 2335 – 34 years 172 days Earth; 16 years 87 ½ days Harrington time.

I don't know how to write this. I don't know what they did. It was late afternoon. There was a bang and a rumble. Mother thought she saw a light toward town, but I missed it. We all were afraid something bad happened, but it's an hour's walk, so we kept on working. If they needed us, they'd come out with the tractor and get us.

Fifteen minutes later, I just happened to be looking in that direction. A shaft of light – I guess it was light. I don't know, I've never seen a laser beam or anything like that. A shaft of light came down out of the sky – I guess; it was just there suddenly. I don't think it went UP.

The light came straight down over the town. Bright white. I heard another crack and a rumble. This time, we saw smoke. We started running. Well, we Seconds started running, the older folk can't run because the air's thinner than they grew up with. Jeannie stayed with the babies.

We ran at a jog for fifteen minutes, and then we heard it again. The trees blocked our view in that direction, and the sun was too bright for the flash to show, but I knew it was the same light beam, because it was the same sound. Like the sound of distant thunder. Another fifteen minutes later we heard it again. We'd slowed down to a walk by then, all five of us, panting and aching in the lungs. But the crack and rumble made us run again. Étienne Berté yelled something like "what the hell is it?" but how could anyone answer? After another fifteen, it happened again, and this time there was a really big explosion following the rumble. We could see heavy black smoke through the trees. Marie Berté was crying. She was going to marry Bobby next month, and he was down in the underground complex.

Right after that we broke through the clearing to see the town in ruins. Everything. The control center was burning, and all the buildings were collapsed. It wasn't lost on me that the beam came from the sky every fifteen minutes, and it was five since the last one. I yelled that to everybody, but Marie was running for the burning building. We all scattered to look for survivors.

I found Wei running with his clothes in tatters and burns blistering his back. I asked him what happened. He was pretty out of it, but he said they had indeed found a subspace radio, but they couldn't figure out how to work it. The alien controls were too strange. He'd just come up above ground and was going to go get his father. Captain Chen should know how it works, right? That's when heat and concussion threw him away from the building.

Five times I'd heard the thunder. I looked around to see five ruined buildings, including the apartments where most of the people lived. They weren't smoking like the Control Center. Maybe whoever was shooting at us had hit the ammunition that we couldn't find in there.

I helped Wei. We had to move out of the town area. I shouted to everyone I could see, but there weren't many people moving in the open. Marie was probably under the burning building already. Why didn't I think to stop her? I wanted to run into the apartments and see if I could help anyone, but I was afraid. The light would be coming back any minute. Étienne appeared out of nowhere and took Wei's other arm to help carry him. He asked where Marie was and I told him. He stared at me for a second. Was he accusing me of not stopping her? I'll never know because he ran off after her. I yelled for him to stop, but he disappeared into the smoke.

Oh, I can't remember everything now and it was just yesterday. There are still pictures in my mind of the worst of it, but so much is foggy already. I saw a group of about five people coming out of one of the buildings just as I'd gotten to the edge of the forest. It was time for another strike from the sky. And sure enough, it hit that very building. I saw the five people fly into the air away from the impact, but it blinded me too much to see where they landed. I ran back in, but the heat kept me back. Then I found one of them – Mr. Cummins – but he was dead, burned and missing his legs. Like an idiot, I started looking for them, but I realized they were burned away, not cut off.

It stopped after that last attack. I'll never forget the screaming, and the smell of Wei's burnt flesh. And Mr. Cummins. I stopped looking for people after I found him. I just went into the woods and threw up a lot. The Firsts arrived pretty soon after that, and Captain Chen kept his cool and got everybody organized and accounted for.

Tia flipped a few pages ahead. "The death toll was, well, most of them." She shut the diary, deciding not to read any more. Her voice had the detachment that time and not having been there brought to tragedy. "The few left came out here to live with us, and we never went back. But that was almost fifty years ago. As you can see, everyone else died. We're the last."

"Well." McKinney said. "I think I can say the attack was from that drone we encountered. The same one that destroyed the Harrington's Home."

T'Lar added, "The fifteen minute timing between attacks still puzzles me."

"But it fits in with my theory," McKinney said. "The drone has only enough hydrogen fuel for one shot of its big gun. Whether that's a design feature or it's degraded performance from hundreds of years in orbit, I don't know. But every time it's shot at us, it's immediately disappeared into the nebula."

"I see," T'Lar said, "to scoop up more hydrogen and recharge its gun."

"Exactly."

"And fifteen minutes was the time it took to do so."

"Exactly."

Julius shook his head. "If you two say so. I'm just a farmer. I haven't even seen an electric light since I was five."

"Okay," McKinney sat up. "I think we have enough for now." He pulled his communicator. "McKinney to landing party."

"Freeling here, Sir."

"Freeling, we found some people living about a mile outside the camp."

"I'll be damned."

"They say don't touch anything. Apparently they brought the attack on themselves, possibly by activating a subspace radio in an underground complex."

"Yessir, we're there now," Freeling advised. "Well, we're at the bottom of the stairs, I should say. The whole complex has been caved in. This is as far as we can get."

"Lieutenant, do you think you have enough information for now?"

She must have had to ask around, by the moments of silence. "We have a good start, sir. It'd take a couple of weeks to do justice to an investigation, and you're about to tell me we don't have that kind of time."

McKinney laughed out loud.

Julius grinned. "Hell of a crew you have there, Daniel."

"I do indeed," he said to his new friend. "Okay, Freeling, gather them up and stand by to beam up."

Tia looked panicked. "Oh," she worried. "Does that mean you want us to go right away?"

McKinney said, "No, not right away. We still have days of repairs left, and I wouldn't ask you to tear yourselves away from home so suddenly." She smiled gratefully and touched his hand, making him blush. He spoke into his communicator once more: "Breitling, this is McKinney. Get a fix on myself and Commander T'Lar. Beam us up, and beam up the rest of the landing party as well."

△ △ △

First officer's log. It's been seven hours since we beamed up. To my amazement, I've gotten six hours of good sleep! I think it's because I have a handle – well, I think I have a handle – on the whole situation, finally.

The Yorktown has finally pulled alongside. Captain Grey tells me that the Gorn drone did indeed make a pass at them when they burned for orbit. But, like us, they cut their thrust in time to confuse it. It computed their projected course and fired anyway, but they were lucky enough to get a clean miss. And again, it disappeared into the nebula.

I've invited Grey and his staff over here for a tête-a-tête, to brief him on what we know, and discuss courses of action. I think the princess and her people should be there as well. They certainly don't deserve to be left out of the loop.

Everyone stood, remembering their manners when Princess Elayna entered the briefing room with Lieutenant Dockray at her side..

"Oh good God, she *is* pregnant!" Captain Grey blurted.

Elayna smiled broadly and laughed. "I see Starfleet trains its officers to be observant," she poked.

Grey colored, and harrumphed, embarrassed by his social faux pas. "Please excuse me, Ma'am. It's been a hell of a day. I mean..."

She waved off his embarrassment. "Don't fret about it, Captain Grey. We've had a hell of a few days ourselves. Please call me Princess Elayna."

There was some general milling about as introductions were made around the conference room. Curiously, as Dockray shook hands with Captain Grey, the armsman leaned in and whispered something to the captain. McKinney would have to ask about it later, if it was any of his business. Soon they were all seated around the oval table.

McKinney asked, "Where's the doctor?"

"He's finally getting some sleep," Dockray said. "The man's a nervous wreck over the delay, so I finally talked him into taking something."

"I can sympathize with him," McKinney joked. "All right then. Ill summarize for our guests," McKinney went on. A hologram of the alien drone appeared over the table. "This is what's caused all our troubles. Based on the evidence we've collected planetside and what the locals have told us, here's what we've come up with:

"Two hundred and fifty years ago, a Gorn scouting task force came here. They were looking for an advanced base to use to scout even deeper into this sector. A hidden star system like this was just perfect – they could hide in the nebula from any locals while sending out probing missions. At that time the Gorn were in an imperialistic period, trying to expand their borders and seeking out resources. Yes, this area is *very* far outside their current territory, but back then it was their standard practice to send probes out this far.

"They built a base camp on the surface below us, and stationed this sentry drone in synchronous orbit above the base. I personally don't think it's working at a hundred percent, for which, I guess, we can be grateful. I'm sure it was designed to intercept a broad range of 'enemy' vessels, but by now its sensors have degraded so much that it can only detect the plasma exhaust from our impulse engines. It may be able to detect a warp drive in action, but we haven't been able to test that."

Tchalabi raised his hand. "As to that, Sir, we'll be up and running in another six hours, guaranteed."

McKinney smiled broadly. "Wow, good news, what a shock. Good work, Dennis."

The engineer shrugged and smiled. "Good team."

McKinney nodded and continued, "It's possible that the drone was designed to shoot several shots per charge, but now it shoots its whole load at once. It seems to be a hydrogen-fueled nuclear reaction. You get a ten-meter wide beam of nuclear plasma hitting you at very near the speed of light. But those clever Gorns built it so it can recharge its gun by ducking into the nebula and sucking up more hydrogen."

"Which means," Grey asked, "It has an FTL drive to be able to get there and back."

"Yessir," McKinney acknowledged. "We've clocked it at warp two on its second attack."

"Same here, Sir," Grey's tactical officer, Bakry, said.

"Well then," Grey continued, "All we have to do is outrun it."

"If that's its top speed, yes, Sir. But hear me out."

Grey folded his arms and looked disgusted. "I get the feeling you're not going to make me happy, McKinney."

McKinney shook his head. Superior officers were such a pain in the ass sometimes. "Well, Sir, I wasn't happy when I got all the pieces together.

"The Gorn apparently didn't find anything to their liking out here, so they packed up and went home. But they left the base intact for potential future use, and they left this sentry drone on station. To their credit, they powered it down. Then a hundred and three years ago, the colony ship Harrington's Home came here. Now, they were on their way to another star system, but they wanted to investigate this nebula-bubble on the way. Purely for scientific curiosity."

"Gets a lot of people in trouble," Grey huffed.

"Yes, Sir. Well, they woke this thing up accidentally. You've seen the wreck." Grey grimaced. McKinney continued, "They had no choice but to settle here. Twenty five survivors out of a group of two hundred colonists, most of whom were killed in their sleep, by a booby trap set a hundred and fifty years earlier by a very nasty bunch of people. So they lived here, totally unable to contact Earth, *ever*. They had children, they struggled to survive. This planet's biosphere is high in heavy metals and thin in oxygen, so the people from Earth had a hard time. Remains we've scanned show high incidence of cancer, and deaths in their fifties or earlier." That stirred a mumble from those assembled. Nobody died much under a hundred these days. "The second and third generations adapted to their environment, being born into it. But they didn't get much of a chance. Thirty-four years after landing, they found an underground control room, under the Gorn main building. It had a subspace radio.

"From what we've been able to piece together from surviving computer records down there, from an interview with the *last two* people alive on the planet – " and again, that drew a gasp " – they activated the subspace radio and attempted to call Earth. Or anybody. But even though they figured out how to operate it, they didn't know how to read Gorn very well. The sentry drone intercepted the message. Only the message didn't have the proper Gorn military code attached."

"Oh Jesus," the princess whispered.

McKinney nodded at her. "Yes. It assumed a hostile power had taken the base. It came back and blasted the base camp – which had become the colonists central town – to ruins. Repeatedly. It looked like a preprogrammed pattern to hit all the buildings. With two generations of children, they had grown to a population of a hundred and thirty. Four families, a total of eighteen people, lived outside the main camp, but ran in to help. After the attack ... " he couldn't help it, his voice began to swell with anger " ... after the attack the, uh, the total population of Harrington's Home was thirty."

Elayna clutched her hand to her mouth to hold in the cry she was about to utter. Even Dockray looked sallow, but furious.

"Only two people live there now," McKinney went on. "A lovely couple in their fifties named Julius and Tia Bedford. They have no children – they decided against condemning another generation to solitary confinement, as Julius put it. They've been alone for about eighteen years, since everyone else died."

"Do they want to leave?" Grey asked.

McKinney nodded. "And how."

Grey mulled over the new information for a while. "Princess Elayna," he addressed her, "Do you want us to take you in the Yorktown and get you home right away? That was, after all, the mission in the first place."

McKinney felt worried, but he wasn't sure what he wanted her answer to be. He'd be relieved if she went, yet thoroughly disappointed. But he knew he'd be complimented if she stayed.

"Thank you, Captain," the princess said firmly, "but there's plenty of time. The Breitting committed to taking me home, and I'm perfectly willing to allow Commander McKinney to see that assignment out." McKinney beamed a huge, honest smile at the young lady. She finished sadly, "and ... I liked Captain Dubronin very much. I'd hate to ... disappoint her by not seeing her last mission completed."

McKinney almost felt like crying in gratitude at the girl's compassion. What a great leader she was going to make.

"Well," Grey said, "She was my friend too. Regardless, McKinney, I have a horrible feeling you want to wrap everything up in one fell swoop. Rescue the survivors, get the princess out of here, *and* kill the Big Bad Wolf all at the same time."

McKinney saw T'Lar raise an eyebrow.

"Curious you should use that analogy, Sir, but, yes, I do."

"And if I order you to skip that last part?"

"I'll be gravely disappointed, Sir."

"But you'll follow my orders?"

"I will, Sir. But whatever shape she may be in, I will bring this ship right back here afterward and blow that wicked thing out of the sky."

Tchalabi rolled his eyes, hung his head, and muttered a Syrian curse.

Grey eyed the engineer briefly.

"Captain," McKinney said, anger still pulsing in his heart. "I'm not sure why I'm taking this personally. Maybe if you'd gone planetside with us and seen what happened down there, talked to those two wonderful people, you'd be feeling the same. I don't know. But it infuriates me that those poor colonists spent eight hard, hopeful years looking for a home and found nothing but death, disease and hardship. All because of a carelessly abandoned piece of military hardware. Now, if I could take it out on the Gorns personally, I'd do it. Come to think of it, maybe I *will* do that someday. But right now, one thing I *can* do is make sure that thing never hurts anyone again."

Grey said, "Lord save me from a man with a mission. You have a plan?"

"Betcherass. Sir."

"You *know* he's right, Elayna," Melody chided as McKinney escorted his three passengers back to their quarters on deck six.

The princess argued, "Melody, how can two great big starships have a problem with a little thing like that ... what's it? ... drone?"

"Look around you, Princess," Dockray said. "They've already had quite a bit of a problem with it."

"I just hate to be displaced again." She said. It was the first sign of petulance McKinney had seen from the serene young lady since he met her. "Besides, I have faith in Commander McKinney."

"Well," McKinney said, "Thank you for that. But it's simple regulations. I can *not* take my ship into combat with civilians aboard, given any alternative."

She sighed. "I hate to impose on those people. They've been alone all those years, and to drop a royal party of four on them like this..."

McKinney shook his head, "Tia and Julius are happy to have *any* guests at all, trust me! You'll be a real thrill to them. Oh." They'd come up against a sealed-off section. He'd been so busy it had slipped his mind that part of his ship was missing. Damage control parties had welded steel plates across the corridors to keep the pressure off weaker interior doors, pending shipyard repairs. They'd have to walk around the hub of the saucer to get from the briefing room to the guest quarters. Not for the first time it occurred to him that the drone's blast could just as easily have gone through his own quarters, or the princess'.

"I see what you mean, Lieutenant," Elayna sighed, indicating the patched damage. "Well then, We should collect Anthony on the way, I suppose. He may even appreciate some time off the ship, even if the air is too thin. He hates being closed in."

"He should still be knocked out for a few hours, Princess," Dockray told her. "Commander, couldn't we leave him be? He'll sleep through whatever happens, if what he told me about the medication is true."

McKinney shook his head. "And if he gets killed in his sleep, what will your government say to mine? No, I'll help you carry him to the transporter room if it comes to that."

Dockray nodded assent.

Eventually, they came to their section, as McKinney's crew buzzed around the group, nodding to the guests and their Commander, anxious to do their parts to get out of the mess they were in. The ladies continued on to Elayna's cabin while Dockray knocked on Van der Roll's.

"Anthony? Are you up?" No answer.

"How long was the drug supposed to last?" McKinney asked.

"Another four or five hours." Dockray pulled a small electronic gadget to override the door, then realized the ship's commanding officer was standing next to him. McKinney recognized the jimmy for what it was and gave the bodyguard a wry frown at the same time Dockray gave him an embarrassed shrug. Dockray pocketed the device and held a hand out, inviting McKinney to open the door.

"Computer," he said into a nearby comm panel, "McKinney here. Open the door to cabin six-dee-twenty-nine."

With a beep, the door slid back. Dockray gave a theatrical head-nod of acknowledgement, indicating McKinney should precede him.

Doctor Van der Roll was right where Dockray had left him, on the bed, on his back, sleeping soundly. "I don't know if you can even wake someone up from this drug. Anthony?" He sat on the edge of the bed. "Oh crap." Dockray laid a hand on the supine man's face. "Oh, *crap!* He tricked me!"

"Wha..." was all McKinney could think to say. "What is it?"

"The bastard! The coward! He *used* me!"

Understanding dawned on McKinney. He stared at Van der Roll. He glared at Dockray. "He's *not*, is he?"

"Stone cold, Commander."

"Oh, it's just one thing on top of another this week, isn't it!" McKinney grouched, diving for the comm panel. "McKinney to sick bay! Medical emergency in six dee twenty-nine."

An anonymous voice acknowledged "On our way," and bleeped off.

"Oh, it's way too late for that," Dockray said. "He's been dead for almost eight hours."

"The shot you gave him?"

"The shot he *tricked* me into giving him." He paced, while McKinney stared at the corpse.

The man was paler than anyone he'd ever seen. His lips and nails were blue. Dead, all right. Another person dead. This just had to ... stop! Enough was enough! God, this story was brutal – mass slaughter of innocents in hibernation, decades of struggle and suffering ending in more slaughter. Death from sickness, death from old age at only fifty or sixty. Years of loneliness for the last people. Now, even suicide.

I'm gonna kill that goddamn evil thing, McKinney swore to himself, *then I'm gonna go to the Federation Council and get me some scaly Gorn hides to hang on my wall.*

"I thought I knew people well enough," Dockray ranted at himself as he paced, "but they always surprise you. I thought, yes, his nerves were shot, but he knew we'd get out of this soon. But he couldn't wait. It was too much for him. I never thought he'd go this far. Damn. I was afraid he'd do something stupid like that Marcus guy did in the tapes – something stupid that would get us all killed. *That* I was watching out for. *That* I thought I could prevent by letting him know I knew what he was thinking. It probably just made him feel more cornered. Ohhhh, hell, what will I tell Elayna?"

McKinney's eyes snapped to the armsman's, his voice firm and commanding: "You'll tell her we couldn't wake Anthony up, and I changed my mind and decided to let him sleep. That's what you'll tell her."

Dockray stopped pacing and locked McKinney's eyes. It occurred to McKinney that he hadn't seen Dockray so much as a little bit ruffled before this, and now he seemed more upset by his own failure to *prevent* the doctor's act, than by the doctor's death itself. It also occurred to him that, five days ago, he never would have had the nerve to talk this firmly to an armed professional bodyguard, much less stare him down like this. Dockray still scared him a little, but something in McKinney had changed. Something about all this had hardened him.

"You're right, of course," the Lieutenant said. "For now. But I'll have to tell her some time."

McKinney didn't see another way. He'd love to hide the truth from that sweet, innocent girl, but how? He could claim Van der Roll was killed in the battle to come, but only if that battle was severe enough to cause fatalities. And he was determined not to let that happen. Besides, did he himself really want to take the political fallout of having a guest killed aboard ship? The truth was probably the best course. Elayna was tough enough to deal with it.

"Fine," McKinney answered. "But not now. I don't need to worry about her any more than I already am."

The medical team arrived outside the door at a full run. McKinney looked up the hall to make sure Melody or Elayna hadn't noticed. He and Dockray gave them room, and McKinney explained the situation as they examined Anthony Van der Roll's body. It only took a moment. The medtech agreed with the two men's amateur diagnosis: stone cold dead. McKinney told them to put the body on ice for now, and ordered them to keep it quiet for the princess' sake.

He and Dockray then went about helping the ladies collect their essentials for their brief stay on the surface and escorting them to the transporter room. All the while McKinney kept shaking his head, trying *not* to think the words, *what else can go wrong?*

10



From the command chair on the auxiliary control room of the USS Breitling, Commander Daniel McKinney keyed the intership comm channel to the bridge of the USS Yorktown, alongside. “McKinney to Yorktown. Captain Grey, are you set?”

“Waiting for you, McKinney. I’m the one with the *working* starship.”

McKinney rolled his eyes. “Standby.” He killed the channel and keyed intraship. “McKinney to Engineering. Make me happy.”

“Tchalabi here, sir. Warp drive available. But the best you’ll get is warp five.”

“That doesn’t make me as happy as I’d like, but it should do. Thanks, Dennis.”

He looked at his crew around the bridge. The A-shift people were all in place. The people who’d gotten them safely into orbit those long, weary three days ago. They looked expectantly at him. “Okay, people, this shouldn’t take but a minute. This is not a manned ship we’re fighting, it’s a robot with only one shot and no brain. Eng?”

“Ready, Sir,” the helmsman nodded smartly.

“Ms. Greengrass?”

“Tactical ready, Skipper,” she grinned.

That drew a grin back from him. *Skipper, eh? Why not? “Weapons?”*

Eng reported, “phaser and torpedo crews ready. Weapons hot.”

“Looks like we have a working starship too, huh?” Everyone gave out their own short shout of happy agreement. “Ms. Medoff, please get me Captain Grey again.”

The air chirped and Grey’s gruff voice said, “Well, McKinney? I can feel my toenails growing.”

“We’re working now too, Sir,” he said pointedly. “Go in ten ... nine .. eight ...”

“Impulse engines hot,” Eng reported. “Warp engines on standby.”

“Sensors at max,” Greengrass added.

“...two ... one ... Break orbit, Mr. Eng, full impulse. Get us some maneuvering room.”

The Breitling soared away from the planet Harrington’s Home at half the speed of light. A microsecond before her, the sleek Yorktown had done the same. The white-flecked, blue and green world no longer filled the viewscreen, and the wrecked starship that had ended its days in orbit there receded to invisibility. Blazing plasma, invisible in airless space, belched from both vessels’ impulse engines and screamed their presence to the surrounding ether. Somewhere out beyond the rose-colored curtain of compressed gas that defined the limits of this particular arena, sensors should be sniffing subspace for its signature. McKinney didn’t think it would take long ...

Greengrass sang out, “Here it comes. Bearing six-seven mark three-two, range thirteen billion kilometers, speed warp two.”

“Go to warp two, Mister Eng. Yorktown, continue on course and speed.”

“Acknowledged,” Grey said, not hiding the sarcasm he felt his junior deserved. “engaging fishing lure mode.”

The man had a sense of humor after all.

They were heading toward the drone at a severe angle of deflection. They’d cross paths in about three minutes, but too fast for visual cameras to see. Their subspace sensors would have to do the targeting, and those sensors were their auxiliary ones.

“Targeting solution set up, Sir,” Greengrass announced. “It hasn’t altered course toward us.”

“Good, so it can’t detect a warp signature. Eng, key the computer to pickle a full torpedo spread, pattern alpha.”

Eng tapped keys and acknowledged.

The viewscreen was in tactical mode, presenting a graphic of the star system looking “down” from galactic “up”. Against a black background, three lines traced the courses of the three vehicles operating within the boundaries of the nebula’s pocket. A blue line tracing the Yorktown heading outbound away from the sun and the planet at one-half cee, heading for the clear space of the outer system, arcing in its fight with the star’s gravity well; a red trace showing the alien device making a straight-line subspace run for them at the speed of light itself, vectoring on their projected course; and the straight blue line of the Breitling, positioned perfectly to shoot the damn thing. McKinney mused that, even exceeding the speed of

light, their traces crawled at barely perceptible progress. A solar system was a vast area of emptiness. Even at the speed of light it would take hours to cross. Dotted lines projected forward from the Breitling and the alien, indicating when they'd cross paths, with a time readout blinking a countdown.

With a warning beep, a swarm of icons fled outward from the Breitling's symbol on the screen. "Torpedoes away," Eng reported.

McKinney felt a thrill ripple through him. This was the resolution of three days worth of pain and fear, and a hundred years of death and suffering. In a minute he'd be free. Funny, he thought, just a week ago the thought of escorting the princess home had made him feel trapped and panicked. He lay awake at night worrying, wondering how he could get out of it – no, that train of thought made him think of poor Doctor Van der Roll. He'd never been that desperate to avoid reality.

But now, escorting the princess home was an anticipated delight compared to the situation he *actually* found himself in. *Just goes to show you that you shouldn't worry. You're always better off than you think, and there are people out there with real problems. A lot of them are buried back there on that planet. A couple of them are still alive back there on that planet!* And one was in a bed on deck six, dead of overreaction to worries that, in the end, were really so trivial.

These new symbols showed easily perceptible progress on the screen. Torpedoes were high-warp weapons. The spread fanned out to cover a certain area along the alien's path and try to assure a hit, tracing six fingers of light on the display. Within seconds they met the alien's course and bloomed into a series of glowing circles around it. The odds of a direct hit on anything moving at hyperlight speeds was nearly zero, which is why photon torpedoes carried such enormous destructive power. The matter/antimatter annihilation explosions of a spread of six torpedoes would obliterate everything within several cubic kilometers, even something screaming through subspace at multiples of light speed. Unfortunately it also blotted out the Breitling's degraded auxiliary sensors for the duration of the explosions.

"Drop out of warp," McKinney ordered. He didn't want to run into the nebula wall. "Give us visual on a split screen, please."

When the explosions faded, McKinney expected to see nothing on the tactical display except the two Starfleet ships' tracks. The visual window showed eerie white fading fireballs of dying atoms. There wouldn't be debris from a hit; the object would be consumed down to its atoms.

He heard Captain Grey's voice shout suddenly: "Evasive! Fire phasers!"

What? No! He had to have killed the thing! "Yorktown? What's going on?" But there was the Gorn's icon on the screen heading right at the Yorktown. It had dropped out of warp right on top of her.

"Give me visual on the Yorktown," he ordered.

The viewscreen filled with the image of the Constitution-class ship and its sleek, swept-back nacelles. Phaser bolts lashed out from the saucer's topside at the off-screen enemy. She was facing away from it so she couldn't bring her torpedoes to bear.

It came. That stark blue-white beam blazed out of the dark and bulldozed into the graceful starship. Her deflector shields flared a brilliant blue-white, outlining the ship with an almost opaque aura. McKinney feared for the worst, but just when he thought he was about to see another explosion, another ship die, another four hundred people obliterated, the beam stopped. Yorktown's shields glowed hot for a few moments.

Medoff scanned with his cameras and got a visual on the drone, putting its image in a third window. It was turning to leave.

Captain Grey took his hand away from his eyes as the glare from the viewscreen died away. Even attenuated by video filters it was intense. "Bakry, what the hell happened?"

"It must have some incredible shields, Sir! It dodged through that torpedo barrage and kept coming. Our phasers didn't scratch it"

On the screen, it was moving away from them. It hadn't gone to warp yet.

"Status!" Grey barked.

"Shields degraded but intact at ... sixty percent," his first officer reported, calm as reading a grocery list. "Light feedback damage to environmental systems. All other systems nominal."

"McKinney," Grey called, "Your plan sucked." Without waiting for a reply, he ordered, "Helm, come about – give me an intercept course. Phasers and torpedoes, target that bastard and fire when in range. Ahead full impulse."

The Yorktown leapt to the chase against its now-unarmed foe. But the moment his ship moved, Grey saw the drone arc around toward him.

“What the hell? It has no ammo, if McKinney was right.”

“But it still detects our impulse exhaust,” Bakry said.

“But it can’t shoot at us. Oh nuts!” With a sudden realization, Grey ordered, “Evasive, helm! Keep away from it. Phasers --”

Too late. At a closing speed a significant fraction of the speed of light, not even the Yorktown’s computer could have dodged. But they did move aside enough to save their lives. The drone’s deflector shields impacted the Yorktown’s shields as it tried to ram, and the two electromagnetic bubbles blazed along each other’s flanks like blue fireworks, compressed, rebounded, interacted.

When the ancient drone passed, the Yorktown drifted on, retaining its original path, but now without power. Her port warp nacelle skewed like a broken limb, its support pylon cracked and twisted at the base. Blazing red warp plasma spat out of the break for the few moments it took the engineer to shut down the reactor. The ship spun slowly, riding its own momentum.

The bridge was swathed in red emergency lights, the red alert claxon sounding stridently. Smoke bubbled from a few control panels, and people picked themselves up from the floor. As the white lights came back up, Grey surveyed his bridge. “Status,” he said in total disgust.

“McKinney to Yorktown!” he shouted, fear roiling in his belly. “Yorktown, are you all right, Yorktown?”

“No we’re not all right, you dunsel!” Grey fumed over the intership. “I’m going to fry you, McKinney, look what your lame-assed idea has done to my ship!”

Okay, it had a few flaws, McKinney thought, but didn’t say aloud. “Do you have casualties?” He held his breath. *No more deaths. Please.*

“No fatalities. Plenty of injuries, damn you! I’m on emergency batteries. My impulse drive is down and my warp drive is ..*bent!* You lost me a nacelle! Damn, *look* at what you did to my ship. I’m not getting out of this system without *yard time*. Now we’re *both* screwed, McKinney!”

He was sure his idea was sound, but he hadn’t anticipated the drone dodging the torpedoes. Had it detected them coming, even at warp speeds? If so, what about them had it seen – their warp fields? Their physical presence? The antimatter in their warheads? Antimatter in a ship’s storage bottles was more densely shielded than the minute amounts in a torpedo, that would explain detecting the weapons but not the ships. Or maybe it just saw the great big hellacious explosions in front of it and dodged. It could have dropped out of warp and sidestepped, then popped back into warp before sensors could notice. That would mean its computer was smarter than he thought, or less degraded than he thought. Or its shields were more powerful than they thought.

“Skipper?” Greengrass said, “look at this.”

He watched as Greengrass played back the events on her monitor. A shark’s smile formed on his face.

“We’re not both screwed, Sir,” he said to Grey. “I still have a working starship.” He’d hoped that would be taken as an ironic jest, but even if Grey blew his stack over it, McKinney didn’t care. If he got out of this without getting anyone else killed, they could hang him in a cage at the harbor mouth till he rotted away for all he cared. He knew what he had to do now. The idea was a good one, but now he only had his own ship to use as bait. “And we have fifteen minutes to get ready,” he finished.

There was an uncomfortable few moments of dead air before Grey’s obviously controlled voice muttered, “All right, smartass. Show me.”

The sky was afire. Night had come to Harrington’s Home, and in the thin, cool air, Princess Elayna Demerest of Groningen and her lifelong friend Melody stood in Julius and Tia Bedford’s front yard and looked up. Never had she seen such a sight! Groningen’s night sky, like many habitable worlds’, was deep black and studded with thousands of stars. They had a decent naked-eye view of one nearby nebula, which covered only a quarter of a degree of their sky, and one very bright star which was their nearest neighbor.

But the sky about Harrington’s Home was blazing rose, patterned with swirls and clumps in the nebula’s gases, and with the occasional brilliant, distant star poking bravely through thin parts of the cloud. The binary star system with which this planet’s star shared this cleared pocket showed as two blazing pinpricks just above the eastern trees, not bright enough to cast any might on the planet. But it wasn’t dark outside. The whole world was colored by the pale red glow of the hot nebular gasses. It wasn’t quite bright enough for one to read, but Elayna could see well enough to move around and find her way.

Melody put an arm around her young princess and hugged her close in the chill air. “Hard to breath,” she said. “My lungs hurt.”

“Yes. I suppose if you breath a bit slower and deeper?”

Melody shook her head. “No, I get light headed. More than usual.”

They laughed together. “You beat me to it,” Elayna said.

She sighed, which didn’t seem quite as satisfying in thinner air. “It’s awfully quiet here, isn’t it?”

They listened. Some animal made a hooting grunt far away, and a bird flew overhead. Or something *like* a bird. Its wings made a light fluttering sound. The only other sound was the sigh of the wind through the leaves. No aircraft, no cars, no music. None of the constant background hum of civilization that one heard continually, so much so that it formed the subtle score to one’s own thoughts, always in your head. Here the silence overpowered the mind. Elayna could hear Lieutenant Dockray’s voice in conversation with the Bedfords, though she couldn’t make out the words. Back home, she wouldn’t have even been able to hear them at all over the thrumm of a passing aircar, or the whine of the building’s air conditioners.

What lovely people the Bedfords were. Not just to take in total strangers for protection, but in general. Considering the life they’ve lead and the tragedy they’d seen in their lives. And to live here all alone for decades, with only each other for company, and still be ... well, *sane* ... was an accomplishment she wasn’t sure she could match.

“I miss Roger,” she blurted.

Melody hugged her harder as they both watched the sky. “You’ll see him soon enough. Commander McKinney won’t let us down.”

“You know,” the princess said, “at this moment, as peaceful as all this is ... if Roger was here with me I’d say, let’s just stay here and forget all that royal posturing, and live for ourselves and our children.”

Melody toshed her. “Didn’t you just tell me you love all that fuss?”

Elayna laughed. “Yes, I guess I did. And didn’t I also say I have mood swings?”

“Oh, yes, that’s right,” Melody smiled knowingly.

The princess got somber. “You also told me to think about what may happen if we don’t get back. Now here I am, maybe stranded on an alien planet, while our ride home is about to go into battle – I wonder if we’ll be able to see it? I didn’t really take the possibility seriously until now. I’d never thought about life after ... disgrace.” She spat the last word derisively. “If the baby comes before we get home, I may as well not go home at all.”

“Oh, that’s ridiculous!” Melody said sternly. “I honestly don’t think anyone is going to hold you to that tradition.”

“It’s a law, dear, not a tradition. In either case, you just know the Chorks and the antroyalists will use it to get their ways. Oh, they just *had* to launch that ship on Pelora last week, didn’t they.”

Dockray had come out of the house to join his charges. The Bedfords had assured him that were no dangerous night animals on the planet, or at least on the area they occupied, or he wouldn’t have let them go outside alone. But he’d been fascinated by the diary Bedford’s father had kept, and was soaking up the story of the hardy survivors and their descendants.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Elayna asked him as he approached.

“Actually, I find it a little unnerving. Skies should be black at night.”

“You? unnerved?” Melody joked. “I’d expect that from Anthony, but not our brave protector.” Dockray made an odd face, perceptible even in the pale nebula light. “It’s a shame you couldn’t wake him; he’d have loved to get off the ship for a little while. He isn’t handling this trip very well.”

There was that face again. “Leftenant,” Elayna said, “are you and Anthony having some difficulty? You make a face whenever you hear his name tonight.”

“I do? Damn.”

“I know you two aren’t as close as I’d have liked, but you have to get along around me. I just won’t have any bickering among my people.”

Dockray hung his head. “Oh damn. There’s nothing for it but to press ahead.”

“Pardon?”

Melody, having lived more of life than her princess, blanched in the dim light. “What happened?”

“Damn,” Dockray said again. “Highness ... Um, Elayna -- I need to tell you something...”

She froze and stared at him. “Leftenant Dockray?” she said cautiously. “Why ... why – *exactly* – did Anthony stay behind?”



It took a little longer than fifteen minutes to make preparations, but it didn't really matter. Once the drone had recharged its gun it simply lurked somewhere in the nebula until it sniffed prey, so they could go at any time. The Yorktown had stabilized its spin, having gotten thrusters back on line soon enough. But its impulse drive power would be down for hours. So Captain Grey just let the ship drift for now – it would be years before the planet's gravity would pull them back in, and the drone wouldn't notice them at all.

McKinney found himself flexing his hands, clutching and releasing the arms of his command chair. Nerves were a tough thing to master, and even though he told himself he was more confident than ever, his subconscious betrayed him and gave his fingers a mind of their own.

"You're a hundred percent sure of what you saw, Susan?" he asked his tactical officer.

"Absolutely, Sir. You saw it too."

This will work, his conscious mind told itself. Zaccaria, the navigator, turned and gave him a look that said *are you sure about this?* almost as if he was telepathic. McKinney forced a confident smile, but Zaccaria only managed an even-more-worried expression and turned back to his console.

Deep breath.

"All right, Mister Eng. Torpedoes and phasers ready. "

"Ready, Sir."

"One quarter impulse. Engage."

The Breitling's impulse engines flared brilliant red, and thrust ahead, accelerating to a fraction of the speed of light.

"Greengrass?"

"Nothing yet, Sir."

The range needed to be close. The damn thing had to attack before...

"Got it," the tac officer sang out. "Contact approaching at warp two, bearing one-six-seven, mark zero. Four minutes to intercept."

"Targeting computer," McKinney ordered, "stand by. Don't paint the target until we're ready, in case it can sense the beam."

"Tracking passive," she noted. "Standing by."

The alien's path homed on the fading trail of dying atoms pouring from Breitling's impulse exhaust, correcting its off-angle deflection course in a gentle curve to cut its target off. It came up from behind the starship, not as a matter of tactics, but just because that's the way they'd ended up facing in all the confusion. But it didn't matter, since McKinney had to wait for it to shoot before he could do what he had to.

Faster than a manned vessel could if the crew was to survive the deceleration, the drone popped out of subspace directly over the Breitling's saucer, going from warp two to matching sublight velocities almost instantaneously. McKinney barely had time to think *neat trick* before that hideously sharp beam lashed out at his ship once again.

It slammed into the Breitling's saucer right at the forward tip, blasting a chunk clean through, blowing decks and bulkheads and clouds of atmosphere out the bottom. But it was the impulse engines that it smelled, and for the short duration of its beam's life, the drone rotated, and sliced the beam along the saucer toward the nuclear plasma streaming from its exhausts. The force that had blown five decks worth of debris through at the first impact pushed hard, and the Breitling's nose pitched down, offering up the saucer's topside even faster to the hacking force, gouging out great melting pieces of deck, framing, doors, bulkheads, plants, labs, paintings, machinery, carpet, beds... but no people, McKinney thanked heaven for that. No people.

"Cut impulse engines, Mister Eng," he ordered.

Eng tapped a key and shook his head. "Control circuit cut, sir."

McKinney sat back and sighed, "Oh well, I figured that would probably happen," and watched the screen as blue-white hell ate through tritanium plating until, inevitably, it actually hit the impulse engines' fusion reactors.

The thermonuclear fireball enveloped the alien, and a green sphere of glowing energy surrounded it as its shields absorbed the nuclear energy and dissipated it back out into space. When the light was gone, there was no debris from the cremated USS Breitling, only a slowly fading blob of dying atoms. And the Gorn drone, its duty done, turned to leave again.

The explosion cast its unforgiving light onto the planet, and onto a tableau of three people standing in the night.

"Oh my *God*," Melody said, looking heavenward. As the princess cried in her arms the ground around them had become bright as daylight. The sky had turned opaque blue again, the fusion fireball mimicking the sun's light, blocking out the nebula as if it were noon. An angry light glowed up there like a temperary sun, then faded away.

Dockray stood apart from the two women. When he'd told her about Anthony Elayna had collapsed, crying uncontrollably at the loss of her friend, into Melody's arms, and he'd stepped away. He managed not to be looking directly at the explosion, but it burned in the corner of his retina. He gasped, but found there wasn't enough air to gasp and coughed. He breathed deep, recovered.

"I hope that was the bad guy," he whispered.

"Let's hope that was worth it," McKinney muttered. "Susan, track it."

"Got it. It's heading back for the nebula wall. Bearing three-five-one, mark two-one-one. It's entering warp... now."

"Helm, pursue and overtake, at warp four. Torpedoes ready."

Stunted and stubby, and missing the graceful saucer-shaped primary hull section that had once adorned its prow – the saucer McKinney had evacuated, ejected, and used as remote-controlled bait – the remainder of the USS Breitling, with its repaired warp drive in place, flashed into subspace and charged ahead after its fox.

"Overtaking target in one minute, Skipper," Greengrass pronounced with enthusiasm.

"And were you right?" he asked.

"Yessir," she beamed. "It dropped its shields as soon as its own target was destroyed.

A wolfish grin creased McKinney's smooth face. "Got a bead on it, Mister Eng?"

"Oh, yes, Sir!"

"Range?"

"Closing to ten thousand kilometers."

"Then at five thousand, kill it, please."

The gentle chirp of the weapons-away alarm sounded almost immediately, ranges like that falling away in seconds at these speeds. Such a close launch of such fast missiles would be impossible to evade, by any organic or synthetic mind. The photon torpedoes raced the distance between the two vehicles in less time than it took for the sound of the launch signal to fade.

Four torpedoes struck in succession. Not a spread along a projected course, but four clean hits in a dead-astern tail chase that couldn't miss.

The screen whited out, bathing the control room in harsh white light and stark black shadows. The usually reserved Lieutenant Eng pounded his fist on his thigh and shouted, "Right up its ass!" Greengrass kept her eyes on her own consoles, and went to active scanning beams immediately. She wasn't going to lose it again if it got away.

"Shields at full, and all stop, please," McKinney ordered, to avoid slamming into any debris.

"I don't know how, Sir, she said, but..."

He swiveled to look at her. "You're kidding."

Greengrass hit some keys and gestured to Medoff, who picked up on the cue and aimed an external camera. "It reads as dead, Sir. But it's still there. Spinning away at point two-five cee."

The viewscreen showed the drone spinning about all its axes in wild gyrations. Two of its five arms were gone, and it appeared to be blackened over its whole surface. Blue sparks spit out of the broken ends of its arms at intervals, creating a brief spiral trail behind it. The gyrations were not the result of control inputs from a computer gone mad; it was residual momentum from being hit by four antimatter explosions that sent it spinning off at a quarter the speed of light.

McKinney stood to approach the screen for a closer look. "Tough little cookie," he said with awe. "I guess it got its shields up just as the torpedoes hit."

Zaccaria asked plaintively, "Phasers, Sir? Shouldn't we finish it?"

McKinney sat down again, thinking hard, his reason suddenly fighting his instinct. Greengrass said it was dead. If that's the case, then ...

"No. Get a tractor beam on it and stop that spin."

"Sir?" Zaccaria said in shock.

"Hang on, Ensign," McKinney assured. "Scan the hell out of this thing. Make *sure* it's dead."

Medoff joined in the worry. "But, Commander..."

"Wait. Think a minute. Without any physical evidence of this thing's existence, the Gorn government might be able to worm their way out of any blame."

"We have the whole complex on the planet," Medoff offered.

"Yes," McKinney admitted. "And I'm not saying we haven't got one hell of a case of negligence to level at them. But think how much more damning it will be to have this monstrosity to wave in their faces."

Eng turned to look at him. "But how can we be sure it's dead?"

"Well," he sighed fatalistically, "I can think of *one* way."

It would have been crazy to bring the device aboard the Breitling's hangar, in case there was any life left in it, or in case it decided to explode suddenly. And it was probably too big to fit through doors designed for boxy shuttlecraft anyway, even missing two of its arms. McKinney could have asked for volunteers, or ordered someone to do this. But he was still taking the whole thing too personally to let anyone else put the coup de gras on this thing. When he asked the linguist, Lieutenant Bedwineck, what to look for, she volunteered to come along and read the language for him. When T'Lar found out what he was doing, she insisted on coming to keep him from exposing himself to lethal radiations. She'd argued her position as chief of bio sciences, and he'd argued that if anything, a simple medtech should suffice. But he was just as happy she was there.

With visions of people dead a hundred years swimming through his mind, and images from old vidcorders behind his eyes, Daniel McKinney tapped the retrothrusters on his backpack and came to a halt five meters away from the charred and twisted hulk of the Gorn sentry drone. T'Lar removed a radiation detector from her spacesuit harness and took a reading. He pulled in close to her and read the panel over her shoulder. The beastie's mouth was hot, but the hull was clean. His suit's shielding could handle any residual he might be getting from the gun barrel. She held the scanner on him and he tapped his thrusters, coming to a rest against the round, shuttle-sized hull.

It was silly, he told himself, but he was tingling. This was the resolution of his first command, his first crisis. What could he have done differently? Nothing, of course, because he was thrust into it by circumstance. Captain Dubronin had made the decision to follow the mayday, and she herself had had no choice in that, either. He looked his enemy over. His torpedoes had bubbled and flaked the surface finish. Whether it was paint or some kind of plating, he couldn't tell. He peered into the broken stub of one arm with a hand light, and saw only unintelligible alien cabling and sheared conduit. There was a frost, probably of residual liquid hydrogen that rimmed the broken conduit. It had stopped sparking from its wounds.

Bedwineck had been hovering ten meters back recording images of the object. McKinney had an uncomfortable association with the footage he saw of Harrington Home's crew doing the same. He motioned her in. "The hatch is right here," he said. He remembered the opening instructions from the ancient footage, and slipped his spacegloved hand into the catch. The hatch, remarkably, was not fused shut, but opened – with some effort – on damaged hinges. McKinney had to "stand" on the hull and heft it upward.

There had been circuits burning inside, but a panel near the edge of the opening showed a series of lights. "Dead, huh?" McKinney said knowingly. "Miss Bedwineck?"

The tech glided over and stick her head in fearlessly, trusting her commanding officer to not get her killed. She shone a light on the panel. The lettering was faded and burnt, but readable – to anyone who could read Gorn. "Here, Sir," she pointed. "'End Operation', literally. 'Off' to us." She reached for it.

He touched her arm. "Thank you, Lieutenant."

She understood and pushed herself off, letting herself drift back a few meters. McKinney reached for the circuit breaker panel. "Both the red ones at once?" He asked, and Bedwineck said "Yes."

With two fingers, he jabbed the pair of glowing buttons. The whole panel went dark.

T'Lar scooted in and took a general radiation reading. McKinney thought it was probably so she could see his face. She had advised against this little spacewalk, and then insisted on coming with him. Maybe to some Vulcans, friendship was logical. She said, "Are you happy now, Daniel?"

"Ya know," he said with finality, "I think I am."



A mobile drydock was a massive space vehicle indeed, and one was on its way to them with a new port nacelle assembly for the crippled Yorktown. How well the giant, folded, spidery framework would navigate the nebula no one, including its captain, knew. But they'd cross that bridge when they came to it.

The bent and limping Yorktown and the headless Breitling parked side by side once again, next to the derelict Harrington's Home, in synchronous orbit above the dead encampment. It was a nice clear day down there and the planet's surface shone the deep green of jungle, spotted with the bright blue of its big fresh water lakes. It made a grand sight outside the Yorktown's lounge windows. A fourth wounded vehicle, the Gorn probe, hung behind the Breitling's hull. McKinney planned on towing it back to Earth himself and setting it down in the forecourt of Federation Headquarters in Paris. He was sure some official somewhere would take it away from him sometime before he got anywhere near Earth, but it was a nice plan.

Julius and Tia Bedford stood in the Yorktown's officers' lounge staring out the window at their home, and at their heritage – the wreck of their grandparents' dreams.

"All our lives we'd heard about The Ship from the Firsts," Tia said with awe. "It's ... Oh, how can there be a word for it? Shocking, I suppose. 'Awe-inspiring'? What they must have gone through!"

McKinney told her, "We have their record tapes and logs. If you ever feel up to looking them over, I mean if it wouldn't upset you."

"Upset me?" She looked at him, astonished at his offer. "Oh no, I'd be fascinated! Oh, it would be a wonderful help to me!"

Julius hugged her across her shoulders. "My Tia says she wants to write a history of the, um, generations of Harrington's Home."

T'Lar said, "That would be a worthy effort. I would look forward to reading their story." She looked at McKinney. "After, of course, I brush up on ancient Earth fairy tales." He laughed at his friend. She looked mildly offended. "I merely wish to close a gap in my English vocabulary," she explained. "I find your obscure references ... disturbing."

McKinney smiled. "But I like disturbing you."

"I know," she said flatly. "And I enjoy thwarting you."

Princess Elayna was seated at the lounge's oak dinner table. She had asked everyone to go about their business as if she wasn't a royal envoy and just let her sit and rest. Lieutenant Dockray had told her about Doctor Van der Roll. He'd told McKinney that Elayna had cried for a couple of hours, until she'd cried herself dry, then still couldn't talk for hours more. Her voice was quite hoarse when she finally felt that she was presentable enough to socialize. After all, she'd said, the Breitling had suffered more loss among its crew than she had from hers. And now, like a true professional diplomat, she was as composed as could be. But McKinney could see the edge of a sulk hovering around her pretty face. McKinney sat beside her for a moment, leaving the Bedfords to marvel at the sights.

"I don't suppose I'll ever understand," she whispered huskily.

"I do," McKinney answered matter-of-factly. "Anthony and I aren't that different."

She looked surprised. "Well, I know you were always a little nervous around *me*, but..."

"Princess, I was stark staring *terrified!*" She looked amazed, and almost cracked a smile at his admission. He went on, "I would have rather wrestled a live Gorn than face the responsibility that Captain Dubronin was putting on me."

"But ... why? It's just, well, socializing!"

He nodded. "You see, that comes easy to you. I have to work hard at it, think of the right thing to say. Since it's so hard, it scares me. Anthony had too many things coming at him all at once – his responsibility to you, his affection for you – and he was afraid he was going to fail you in both respects – and what horrible things might happen to you. Plus his fear of space travel. Phobias are very difficult to overcome. Combine all this with the fear that we wouldn't get you home in time, and he felt responsible for the potential ruination of the government."

“Oh but that’s silly! None of it is up to him.” She suddenly looked sad again. “Was up to him.” Then, ver quietly and hoarsely: “All he had to do was take care of me.”

“Well. They don’t call it irrational fear for nothing. I think, at least, I finally figured that out.”

McKinney had suggested that Captain Grey might at least like to meet the people his ship was damaged for, and Grey had grudgingly offered to host the Breitling’s officers and their guests aboard the Yorktown for a formal dinner (since the Breitling’s guest facilities had been vaporized with her saucer section). Grey wasn’t in the most sociable of moods, considering he and his ship would be sitting here in this nebula pocket for at least a week while their nacelle was replaced, while McKinney continued on to Groningen with his passengers. But he put on his diplomatic face for the princess, and his compassionate one for the Bedfords. For McKinney, he occasionally spared an accusing glare.

The Yorktown did put out a good spread, McKinney thought. Grey had enlisted some yeomen to wait a formal dinner in deference to Elayna’s royal status. Tia and Julius were overwhelmed by the amount and quality of food being served. They’d been able to eat certain of the planet’s animals, but catching them had been a rare trick, and none of them had adapted to being bred as livestock. Meat was a sporadic part of their diet, and now a real turkey had been uncovered on the table before them. Julius leaned in and inhaled its aroma greedily. McKinney couldn’t tell if his tears were a result of the steam rising off it or not.

Doctor Alejandro had spent several thorough hours giving the Bedfords their first-ever physicals. McKinney’s first worry was relieved when they proved completely clear of cancer. Their generation had grown up with the planet’s particular ratio of elements and their bodies had adapted just fine. Being removed from that environment should pose no problems for them in terms of food and air ingestion. They reported being light-headed some of the time, and Alejandro had told them that the higher oxygen content in human-standard air was the cause. Given time, they’d get accustomed to it. “Meanwhile,” he’d joked, “breath less.” McKinney reviewed Alejandro’s optimistic report in his head as he watch the couple tuck in to the hearty meal.

“Mister and Missus Bedford,” Captain Grey addressed. “Granted it will be a week before we can leave, but if you like, you’re welcome to travel with us to the nearest starbase. From there, we can get you back to Earth in short order.” Something in his tone told McKinney he really hadn’t wanted to make that offer, but politeness required it.

Julius had to wash down a mouthful of beets before he could answer, but Tia spoke for them. “Oh, but I couldn’t do that to Commander McKinney, Captain!”

Oh God, McKinney thought, the man’s going to really despise me.

Julius finished, “We wanted to see the princess’ planet first. If that’s all right.”

“Of course,” Elayna smiled, though not with her full wattage. “We’d be happy to have you.”

Grey glared. “McKinney, my part in this little debacle of yours has pretty much been, show up, get shot, get my ship wrecked, do nothing useful, and then end up feeding your passengers. I’m not very happy.”

“Yes, Sir,” McKinney said, neutrally.

“We’re both going to have to sit out inquiries for damaging our ships.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Especially galling, since my damage was entirely your fault.”

“Sir?”

Elayna looked up sharply from her meal. “Oh now wait just one minute, Captain,” she said in her sternest Official voice. Grey flashed her a surprised, angry look at the interruption, which he quickly changed to dead neutral in the glare of the Royal Envoy from Groningen. “Commander McKinney was no more responsible for this situation than Captain Dubronin or yourself!”

Grey was only taken aback for a moment. “With respect, Ma’am...”

She raised a hand armed with a spoon to stop him, and he demonstrated the wisdom that Starfleet requires of its starship commanders. “I beg your pardon, Captain Grey,” she went on, in a voice that would stop a roomful of quarreling diplomats cold.

This girl is eighteen? McKinney marveled once again.

Princess Elayna continued, “Please review the situation, Sir. Captain Dubronin was following orders, which brought her here. Again it was orders – standing orders – which forced her to track down the SOS signal. Then with his captain dead, and command dropped in his lap suddenly, Commander McKinney did his best to carry out both his original orders, and the dictates of his conscience.” Grey raised a finger to make a point, but she bulldozed him. “Excuse me, I’m not finished. You, Captain were also following orders to come to our aid, correct?”

“Yes, but –“

She shook her head vehemently. “No one here is any more responsible for our troubles than anyone else. If you need to point fingers, aim one at the Gorn government for leaving that hideous device lying around where anyone could trip over it, and direct your anger into joining Commander McKinney in making his case against them.”

Grey huffed and folded his arms. He cast a baleful look at McKinney.

“And by the way, Commander McKinney,” she continued, and paused to take an apparently painful breath.

“Princess?” McKinney raised an eyebrow.

She clutched her stomach, looked at him sideways and nodded. “It’s all the excitement, I suppose.”

“Oh, you’re *not*! Excuse me,” McKinney blurted and ran to the comm panel on the wall, shaking his head and muttering *one thing after another*. “This is Commander McKinney. I need a channel to the Breitling immediately.” Yorktown’s comm officer acknowledged and patched him through. “McKinney to Tchalabi.” There was a nerve tingling pause while the air remained silent.

“Tchalabi here, Sir.”

“How’s our top speed looking?”

“Repairs are going well, Sir. We could manage warp seven in a pinch. Wait, come to think of it, without the mass of the saucer, we might crack warp eight.”

“We have a pinch. Standby, we’re shipping out immediately.”

Melody and Dockray each held one of Elayna’s hands. Melody’s she held tightly, but Dockray’s she gripped with whatever pain she was feeling and he gripped back with equal force. The armsman said, “There’s no way we’ll make it, McKinney! It’s still almost two days trip!” He sounded more angry than afraid, cursing the fates.

The Princess let out a fatalistic chuckle. “Well it *is* my first baby. I could be in labor for that long.”

“A shot to delay it? I’ll call the doctor.” Grey suggested

“No!” Elayna shouted passionately.

Dockray angrily explained the pertinent rules of succession to Grey.

McKinney continued speaking into the comm, feeling those old familiar butterflies returning. “Transporter room, can you beam us over directly from here?”

“It may only be , forgive me, gas,” Elayna joked.

T’Lar knelt down between Melody and Elayna. “I may have a solution, Princess, if you are willing. There will be no drugs or artificial means involved to be detected by your doctors, or to go counter to your laws.”



With no sharp prow to ply the subtleties of subspace, its warp dynamics shot to hell by the absence of its primary hull section, the Breitling shuddered and banged through the usually undetectable transitions between warp factors. True to his word, Dennis Tchalabi coaxed his patched reactor to push the decapitated starship, just barely, through the door of warp factor eight. Once settled into a flank speed cruise, the ship continued to vibrate uncomfortably, and the engineer kept watch on his baby from his station in Main Engineering through the night. Starships were not designed for this treatment. Since the Constitution class ships, primary hulls had been detachable, but only for emergencies, with the intent that the saucer then became a lifeboat for the crew of a crippled ship. It wasn’t generally thought that the reverse was true, and the carefully designed warp field was not optimized to work without its complimentary ship profile intact. It had been done before – McKinney wasn’t breaking new ground here – but no one had ever suggested it was a good idea. McKinney only hoped that he wasn’t causing the spaceframe irreparable damage by pushing it this hard.

All the while, Princess Elayna lay on a bed in the makeshift sick bay that Doctor Alejandro had set up in one of the cargo holds, and T’Lar sat on a stool at the head of that bed with her slim fingers lightly brushing the young girl’s temples. Neither woman stirred, nor opened their eyes, for the duration of the trip.

And when the stubby remainder of the USS Breitling dropped out of warp and slid into Groningen’s orbit, and Lieutenant T’Lar at last released the bearer of the Heir to the Throne from her trance, Elayna still had fourteen blissful hours of labor before little Prince Roger the Fourth was born, on his homeworld.



In orbit above the capital, McKinney and his friend T'Lar sat sharing their dinner in a small break room on deck nineteen, still waiting to hear if Elayna's baby was born yet. Four small, round tables occupied a tiny alcove at the end of a corridor, with one oblong porthole looking down on Groningen's cloudy hemisphere. The Vulcan simply ate the collection of greens on her plate without fuss or ceremony, while McKinney picked through his chef's salad for the bits he liked, leaving the rest for last.

"Thank you for saving our hash, Lara."

She looked at his meal. "You are having a chef's salad, not hash."

For once, he wasn't sure if she was kidding him. "It's an old colloquialism. Thanks for saving us."

"I see. It seemed the best recourse. Though it is not usually acceptable to reveal our ways to non-Vulcans."

"You folks are a puzzlement to we mere humans. We know you have mental disciplines that we can't match, but you're always surprising us with new ones when it counts."

She shook her head mildly as she moved on to her soup. "It is not that you 'can't' have our mental disciplines at all, Daniel. Those are achievable by anyone with the dedication to learn. Granted, humans have no telepathic abilities, so the mind-touching techniques will be beyond your reach. But anyone at all can learn the self-disciplines that we practice."

He chuckled to himself. "We poor muddled beings who only use ten percent of our brain? I can't imagine."

"And that is part of the problem. Imagination and an open mind, the willingness to learn, and, perhaps, sufficient confidence in one's self, are required. You are correct that few humans have these qualities."

He was trying to decide whether or not to be offended by that.

T'Lar continued, "Again, I can, in just a few hours, teach you meditation techniques that will solve any sleep problem you may have. Or ways to disregard your *raging* human emotions and get on with the job at hand."

Now he was sure she was playing with his head. "Well, thank you," he laughed, "but I don't think I'll be needing that any more."

Truly, after the last few days, he didn't think anything would ever bother him again.

The small comm screen on the bulkhead chirped, and the duty comm officer's voice announced, "Commander McKinney, there's a call from the surface for you, Sir."

"Mm," he said with a mouthful of chicken bits. "Patch it through here, please."

He got up to get closer to the little 20 centimeter screen on the wall. After a moment, Melody's face appeared, bright and smiling.

"Hello!" McKinney said, pleased to see her. "What's happening?"

"It's a boy!" she beamed. "See for yourself."

Melody stepped aside and there was the Princess of Groningen, looking exhausted but otherwise as presentable as for a royal reception, except that she was resting in bed. A rather luxurious bed at that. In her arms was a squirming mass of arms and legs, thankfully not nursing. McKinney could handle seeing royalty in a bathrobe or dog-tired, but he had to draw the line somewhere. He wished he could see this picture on the main bridge viewscreen! There was a man next to the bed who must have been Elayna's husband – Roger, was it? Elayna held the baby up to the camera like a prize and flashed her best smile at McKinney.

"We made it, Commander! Lara? Are you there?" she asked.

T'Lar approached and McKinney made room for her. "Here, Princess. I am pleased that everything worked out well."

"Thanks to you. Thank you both! Oh, thank your whole crew, Commander." She was acting more like an eighteen-year-old girl who just had a baby than a princess, and McKinney found it delightfully refreshing.

Prince Roger addressed the camera. He didn't look very much older than Elayna, maybe twenty or so with a rakish black beard that unfortunately made McKinney think of William Tell. "Hello, Commander. I can't thank you enough. I want to extend my government's condolences for your losses, and our apologies for your trouble on our behalf."

"Thank you, Your Highness," McKinney replied smoothly. "But please, there's no need to apologize. Someone would have stumbled over that situation eventually. It was only our mission to help you that

made it possible to find out the fate of those poor people, and remove the danger of it happening again.”
Wow, McKinney thought, *that came out awfully easily!*

“Thank you, Commander, that’s kind of you,” the prince said. He was a much more serious and formal person than his wife. But McKinney got an impression of likeability. Roger continued, “I’d like to invite you and your officers down for a formal reception tomorrow evening, so my father can thank you in person.”

The ... *king*? To his own surprise, McKinney didn’t get a rush of fear at the thought. It might even be fun to rub elbows with royalty.

“We’d be happy to come, Highness. Um ... excuse me, but the ship’s clock isn’t on your local time....”

Elayna chimed in, glancing at a clock at her bedside. “In ... oh ... sixteen hours and twenty minutes, Commander?”

“Yes Ma’am,” he smiled. “I hope you’ll excuse our appearance, our dress uniforms were on the part of the ship that blew up.”

Elayna laughed, and her husband tried to look disapproving at her lightness. “That will be fine, Commander. We’ll see you then,”

“Thank you, Highness.”

“Well, we should sign off now, I think,” the princess said. “I’m frightfully tired behind all this makeup and giddiness, and the baby needs his sleep.”

“See you soon, then,” McKinney said amiably, and signed off.

That night, Daniel McKinney slept like a baby too.