

**WARP CORE PRESS PRESENTS**

The Adventures of the USS Aurora  
Vulcanus NCC-1888

**"The Enemy Among Us"**

Volume 1 Issue 2

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## WELCOME ONE AND ALL!

This is the second issue of the new interactive fiction, otherwise known as "Mission Logs." It has been some time since the members of the USS Aurora Vulcanus have had an independent, dedicated publication to showcase their creatively guided fiction. It is my hope as Mission Coordinator that I have built an adequate sandbox in which every member can play and have fun.

For this outing I had hoped more people would have played. Since they did not I took on the monumental task of moving the story along. What you will find in the pages that follow should entertain. If I missed your character and you would have portrayed them differently, then I offer my apologies. I did the best I could to remain true to the story line and portray all characters in a positive light. In short next time write for your own characters, or at least give me some suggestions.

I must apologize for the delay it has taken for this issue to appear. Many problems cropped up including the need for eye surgery. I now have my own computer, a new shiny netbook and a means to put the issues together without having to use the old dinosaur, may it rest in peace.

May 2011 bring joy and good health to everyone and may it bring contributions. It is more fun with everyone playing. It keeps me from being forced to make all the little decisions in plot twist. Some of the best challenges come from the input of others.

I would like to remind you of some of the guidelines: All of the fiction within this showcase must remain PG13, meaning it must be suitable for children to read so no "X" rated stuff. If you write it be prepared to see it edited out.

We are aiming for four issues each year. This should enable everyone enough time to create their little pieces of the world. Should you need assistance, ideas, guidance, or just plain want to ask questions, please feel free to contact me. If you are new to this sort game, or are a new writer I welcome you. I understand what it is like to be a new writer and feel overwhelmed and lost. Should any one need it, I am willing to hold your hand through the process until you have your own wings of confidence.

### **Art Work:**

I would love to include some art to dress up the publication. It can be simplistic doodles to more elaborate art. All I ask is that you keep it to 8.5" x 11" as that is the max size of the scanner I have if I am needed to scan it in for you. All artwork needs to be in JPEG format as that is the easiest to manipulate.

### **Submission Guidelines:**

At this point the publication is in electronic format so we are not constrained by length. However, I would encourage everyone to write at least one page. My goal is to get everyone to participate. If you look at this from the Ferengi point of view, the more who play the greater the rewards.

Should we have electronic transmission issues I would encourage you to keep a copy of the item. I know not everyone has Word and should this be the reality in your word I'd suggest you cut and paste it into the body of your email. It may mean sending it in smaller amounts but it works.

One small item that may make the world easier for all of us it to put at the top of the piece what it is you are responding to. An example of this might be 1800 Hours Day 1. This will speed up the time of organizing the work and making compilation easier.

### **Where To Send Submissions:**

Please email all submissions, questions, ideas and comments to: Robin Andrew Woodell at [vampirewizard@writing.com](mailto:vampirewizard@writing.com)

Should you need to mail things like artwork for me to scan use the following address: Robin Andrew Woodell, 207 Avon Street, Beckley WV 25801.

**All submissions for Issue #3 need to reach me by 20 March 2011 in order to appear in the April 2011 issue.**

## THE MISSION LOGS

### 11:30 HOURS DAY 1

When the special briefing ended everyone filed out of the room leaving Christoph and the Command Staff behind. The turbo lift, pregnant with silence, continued to its destination. Each officer lost in their own private thoughts and the need for disaster plans seemed to be the dominant thought. Starfleet had a reputation for being able to move on a moments notice in order to render aid and assistance. The computer stored dozens of scenarios and appropriate plans. All one really had to do was to locate one that closely resembled the current situation and then tweak it to serve the specific need.

One by one the officers exited the lift leaving Kang to travel alone to engineering. He had two possible emergency fronts to deal with: the USS Galveston and the planet Sarojin. Securing a ship was easy, harnessing a rogue planet would be a lot harder. If the AV could achieve an orbit around this planet, could the ship's engines handle the demands of a planet on the move, following a trajectory that put it on an unknown course? Then again, the Admiral might abandon the idea of orbiting the planet in favor of just paralleling the planet's movements, forcing the engines to struggle along.

As if that problem alone would not be enough to deal with, Kang had to add the logistics of beaming down men and

equipment. Away teams and others who would establish a base camp. They carried everything necessary for emergency sheltering and survival on a hostile planet. He quickly decided that the Marines were more than capable to erect a base camp, leaving him free to produce the engineering miracles of power, lights, and indoor plumbing.

The transporters worried him the most. Sarojin was a desert world and that meant an environment full of sand. Grit could breakdown the finest of equipment. He would have to beam the away teams down and then quite possibly beam up refugees. Additional personnel would put a strain on the ship and utilize more energy for propulsion.

Kang walked into his office and pulled a cup of thick, boiling coffee from the replicator. He took a sip and sat down at his desk. "Computer?"

"Working."

"Search Starfleet disaster plans that specify engineering and its response to planetary evacuation due to destabilizing orbits."

Within seconds he had no less than ten scenarios. One by one he scanned them, eliminating all but one. It was not an exact match. It covered 95% of what he needed and required minimal adjustments. In less than thirty minutes it was complete.

Satisfied with his work he sent it up to the Admiral and began a second search for a plan that could be adapted for the Galveston who would be in equal distress. He would need to send over a team to make sufficient repairs to hold the ship together until the tug arrived.

LT Paris LeGrande walked into the office. “We’re getting a lot of requests for Hanger Deck space.”

Kang kept working. “Medical Department needs to set up a make shift hospital. We’re on a search and rescue mission. Get someone to inventory our spare parts and emergency supplies, including the contents of the portable shelters. We’ll need them when we reach our destination.”

“Right, we’ll get right on it.”

The engineer looked up and met the blue eyes. “I want all transporters ready to go at a moments notice. We should reach the target zone in 31 hours and we have a lot of work to do.”

# # # #

Ensign Von Ricktovn huffed out of the turbo lift, lost in her thoughts. She’d been surprised by the order to attend the briefing and now she faced an assignment that made her feel like a ship out of water. The admiral asked for a report on how the explosion of Rani could affect Sarojin. Who’s even heard of that planet? An exploding moon, who cares? Any computer could give the admiral projected answers. Why did she have to involve her?

Hilda walked into her quarters and decided to lie down on her bunk. Her head throbbed. She closed her eyes and listened to the echoes in her mind.

Sarojin, a desert planet, lots of heat and sand, moving through space on a new course. Sand meant grit and filth clinging to everything. Desert meant heat, enough to wilt any hairdo. Would she actually be required to beam down?

The Marines were going down and that spelt disaster. She knew how bossy those pseudo soldiers could be. The men were the worst, but any woman who chose that kind of life was a real threat. Hilda had to face facts. If she beamed down she would have to exercise great caution or she might end up molested.

Would Arri beam down to cook up their meals? If he did it might not be so bad an idea to tag along. Maybe she could get him off to the side – alone. This time if he didn’t cooperate with her she could maroon him and it would serve him right for rejecting her affections.

# # # #

Leone O’Neill looked up from the monitor in her office, eyes scanning triage rapidly, and narrowing slightly. What was Ensign Taaj doing here? She wasn’t due on duty for several hours yet. Pausing the program she was running O’Neill pushed herself up from her chair and headed out.

“Ensign?” Taaj did not respond for a long moment, her attention on one of the triage monitors. Turning, she gazed at O’Neill, head tilting a little to one side.

“What are you doing here? You’re off duty.” The main doors to Sickbay opened to admit the CMO. O’Neill glanced his way, noting the ever present LT Petros in attendance. Maybe that was it, the CMO needed a check up and wanted his pet Physician.

“Dr. O’Neill, please call the senior staff together in triage, I want everyone here in 15 minutes.” The Commander continued into his office without further comment. Returning to her office, O’Neill put out the call, and waited.

Christoph emerged from his office 15 minutes later, and faced the collected senior doctors, nurses and technicians. He frowned at Chadwick as she pushed a chair over to him, but lowered himself onto the seat nonetheless, and outlined their mission to Sarojin.

“Sickbay won’t be large enough to accommodate the casualties we are going to receive.” He concluded to a tense silence.

“Cargo Bay 3,” said a voice from the rear of the gathered medical staff. Heads turned, and the crowd parted as Christoph craned his neck to see who had spoken. Someone pointed to a figure lying on one of the beds.

“What about Cargo Bay 3, Ensign Taaj?”

The Surgeon continued to stare at the ceiling, hands resting behind her head. “It’s only a quarter full. The contents can be redistributed between Bays 4 and 5.”

O’Neill considered the comment and idea, pushing through a knot of Technicians. “Could a mezzanine level be fitted?” She looked back toward Christoph. “If it can, it would double the Bay’s capacity and prove a reasonably adequate hospital unit.”

Behind her, a smile tugged at the corners of Taaj’s mouth as the Surgeon sat up, straddling the bed. “The construction of the Miranda Class Cargo Bay allows for retro-fit of a double mezzanine, Dr. O’Neill.”

Christoph looked from one woman to the other. “All right, Dr. O’Neill, I want you to oversee the conversion of Cargo Bay 3, liaise with Quartermaster Division, get that Bay cleared. Ensign Taaj, I want you to coordinate production of the supplies we’ll need.”

“Aye, Sir!”

He accepted their confirmation. “Everyone else, the only thing I can liken the situation we are heading for is a War Zone. Prepare your departments and shifts accordingly.” He smiled then, looking around at the faces of his staff. “You are amongst the finest that Starfleet Medical has produced, I have every faith in your ability to handle this.”

Recognising the dismissal the teams split up, there was a lot to get done before they reached Sarojin. O’Neill left Sickbay to check out the Cargo Bay. Approaching the door to the Bay, a Cargo Controller held up a hand.

“Can’t go in there just yet - We’re running a clinical level decontamination.” He indicated the portable monitor attached to the corridor wall. “Another 10 minutes and it’s all yours, Doctor.”

Leaning forward, O’Neill studied the read out. “The Bay has been cleared already?”

The Controller stuffed his hands into the pockets of his jumpsuit. “About an hour ago. Listen, if we get a command to clear a Bay, run a clinical decon and get it ready for a mezzanine rig - We know something big is going on, and we don’t hang about!”

O’Neill nodded with a mollifying smile. “I can see that.”

“I’ve got a team fine tuning the cargo transporters, just in case you need them too.” His tone suggested that he hoped whatever the situation was, that the extra capacity of his transporters would not be required. O’Neill thanked him and turned her attention to the monitor.

Captain Rickard looked at the Ensign standing before him. Medical Division he noted from the insignia on her well fitting uniform. “I’ll need a command order to alter the layout of the hanger decks.”

She half turned from him. “Of course Captain, if you aren’t capable of setting up a double blast wall here....” she trailed off with a sigh, green eyes sliding up to meet his.

Something clicked inside his head, and he was calling orders to his crew before he knew what was going on. Hands clasped his and a warm kiss was planted on his cheek. The Ensign left the deck with a bounce in her step, casting a sparkling glance over her shoulder as she went.

Next stop Quartermaster’s office. Taaj slowed a little, squaring her shoulders she marched forward.

One One Zero and Zero One One looked up from their twin monitors as the door to their office opened. Their eyes registered the medical insignia and, given the report they had received for potential demands on their systems, they nodded in unison.

“Bynar” Taaj muttered to herself and stepped up to the counter, laying a disk on the surface and pushing it forward. “Two part requirement. First section to be delivered to Dr. O’Neill in Cargo Bay 3.” One One Zero lifted the disk and studied it before slotting it into their console.

“Second part to be transferred to the hanger deck, a temporary storage area is being constructed. Ensign Blackthorn will take delivery.” Without waiting for a response Taaj turned and left the office, once outside in the corridor she shook herself like a dog emerging from water, and continued on her way.

Returning to Sickbay she sought out Chadwick, and punching in a few commands at a monitor, they re-checked the estimated numbers of casualties and



evacuees expected, and adjusted their calculations accordingly.

Cross referencing each others work, the women stood for a moment, deep in their own thoughts. “Right then Rachel, this is going to be a tough shout.”

Chadwick looked at the Surgeon, eyes widening at the use of her given name. “We won’t be able to save everyone.” Tears pricked the Nurse’s eyes at the Doctor’s bleak appraisal. Noting her distress Taaj sighed. “No need to worry, Death and I are old friends, he owes me a few favours. Now - let’s get these replicators up and running.”

# # # #

As Arri walked from the turbo lift the admiral’s words kept repeating over and over in his mind. She’d given him a huge task. He needed a disaster plan that included feeding all the away teams, the sick and injured, visitors and any refugees they took on. The menus boggled his mind as he walked into the mess hall.

The lunch rush was already at hand and well under control. He walked on into his office. His most pressing task would be the dinner party the admiral wanted to give in no less than six hours. He needed a menu to dazzle the visiting scientists and physicians. It had been a long time since he’d had any opportunity to cater an event. He wanted to make a good impression, to polish the image of the Ol’ AV and wanted to make himself look as good as possible.

The comm button on his desk blinked. He sat down and pushed the button. The view screen illuminated and the recorded message played.

Ensign Taaj’s face filled the screen and she gave him a strange lopsided smile. “I know it’s short notice, but I’ve modified Commander Christoph’s diet. I’d like you to implement it as soon as possible.” Her face faded and in its place a detailed menu appeared.

Glancing over the revision, Arri reached an immediate conclusion – Christoph would not be happy. In fact, the Vulcan might just hurl the bowl at him. It made little difference at the moment and he had no time to alter the lunch he’d set up. No, he would pretend he had not received the memo, maybe after the dinner party.

Since the Seleya would increase the Vulcan population, he made a few selections suitable for picky eaters. For the rest he would select a buffet of delights guaranteed to dazzle. He culled through his recipes and in no time had a feast fit for a king. After sending the recipes to the various prep stations, he walked out into the main kitchen.

Arri collected four trays and began to assemble the lunches. He needed two for the Ready Room and two for the boys. On theirs he made certain to include all their favorites, guaranteed to please the palate and increase the boy’s waistlines, after all they both needed a bit of fattening up.

With each tray complete he added a cover and stacked them. Spotting

Lieutenant Commander Julian Adams checking the contents of a vegetable bin, he walked over. "I have some deliveries to make. When I return I want to meet with the senior staff. We've got some very tall boots to fill."

# # # #

Lieutenant Sparks walked into Communications and tried to smile as people looked up at him. Normally, at this time of day, he would be on the bridge. Sensing trouble in the air, one by one they gave him their undivided attention.

"Our work has been laid before us. The AV has set out on a search and rescue mission to Sarojin. All communications with the planet and its moon are out. The USS Galveston on station has sustained damage. It has also gone silent. Our task will be monumental in its scope."

The air grew very close as everyone paused to contemplate the ramification of his words.

"This is a desert world. I think you all have some idea of the conditions we will be up against. Our away teams will need comm links that are protected against all possible environments since the planet has been thrown onto a new trajectory. Communication with Starfleet Command will be in high demand. Our first priority will be the Galveston. She needs a way to communicate with the outside world. Right now she is a dead ship drifting until the tug can pull her home." He paused looking down at the deck plates before walking towards an empty work station.

Sensing the meeting was over, everyone returned to their own work and silence filled the room. Sparks pulled up a disaster plan and began modifications to implement it on two levels. He had the equipment and if he modified it everyone would be able to talk to the ship, the planet, and ultimately Starfleet Command.

A young Andorian, Ensign Marzm walked up and using a soft voice asked, "Could we not use communication buoys as relay stations to boost communications with Starfleet Command?"

Sparks looked up into the pale blue face and smiled. "My thoughts exactly. We drop one to pick up the communications coming from the Galveston and another one where we encounter the planet. As Sarojin moves further away we could bounce comm chatter until it reaches the next repeater station. Good work, Ensign."

She bowed her head and walked off.

# # # #

Ely - Cli Drake finished up the mission briefing. As a security officer and reservist in the Marines, the Andorian felt he would be used as one of the red shirts for the away team. He also had medical training a plus for any team. He had to laugh. How many times had he seen the action and wondered if the curse of the red shirts would strike? That was only for the young kids. He knew he was tougher than that. As Drake got his pack together, he replayed the situation. The details called for a

little bit of everything, weapons light, but something to do the job. He would have standard issue, but he always took a few back ups. He needed to check with the OIC to see what his people would be carrying. Med kit for combat was already to go. It seemed paradoxical to some, he could damage and heal in the same mission. Like life, a mission was a double-edged blade, cutting in either direction. Hopefully it would be more of rescue but how many times have there been surprises?

# # # #

Admiral Lee and Captain Harpy left the briefing room, heading for the Captain's Ready Room. By now the data from Starfleet should be arriving. Lee sat down behind her overly large desk. It had been designed so two officers could work in comfort during times of war. Harpy sat down and activated the computer link. A monitor rose up out of the mirrored surface of the desk. Within minutes she was perusing the data streaming in from Earth.

Neither officer looked up as Arri walked in with two covered trays and a carafe of coffee. "Lunch is served, Admiral. Do try to enjoy your meal." He walked out before either of them could respond.

"I do have one concern," Harpy began as she moved to inspect the trays. "If we do find our colony and we are able to evacuate them, what do we do about the planetary population? We cannot take them all onboard, the AV couldn't sustain that many people." She pulled the covers off both trays, allowing the admiral to select which one she wanted.

"I am way ahead of you. I already requested a clarification of our orders regarding the civilian population. It will be up to the Admiralty, of course, but you are right. Those two populations are not going to want to leave their world. I mean have you looked at their religious beliefs?"

Harpy put her tray down and resumed her seat. "Sorry, I haven't gotten that far yet." She dug into the spinach salad.

"Either way, we have 29 hours before we reach Sarojin." Lee put a heaping fork full of seafood delight into her mouth and savored the flavor. She knew one thing for certain, Arri understood the comfort of food. She could only wonder at what delights he planned for tonight.

Both officers ate in silence, gazing at their monitors. Captain Harpy found her voice first. "I see what you mean. Any effort on our part to help either group could be misinterpreted."

The admiral looked up. "Yes, how do you help someone without fulfilling their prophecies?"

The buzz of the comm link interrupted their thoughts. She punched the button, "What can I do for you?"

"Admiral, I have an urgent call from the Admiralty," answered Ensign Karak.

"Go ahead, Ensign, put it through."

The data print out on the admiral's monitor changed to the smiling face of Admiral Bennington. "It's good to see you again, Admiral Lee. We've been

discussing your concerns and believe we have an answer for you.”

“Well, that can’t be good,” whispered Harpy as she picked up her salad and moved to the sofa, so she could continue eating.

“Go ahead, I’m listening.” Lee straightened in her seat as she watched a series of emotions flit across Bennington’s weathered face. He had never been able to truly hide his own feelings and something made him very uncomfortable.

“To sum it up, Lee, you are to evacuate our colonies on Sarojin. Render aid to the civilians only if it can be done without endangering our own people.”

“If the planet is that unstable, how can we sit by and watch all those people die?” Her stomach churned at the thought of genocide.

“If your recon teams deem evacuation of the planet is adamant we will re-visit the issue. You are not to try any evacuation on your own. The Aurora’s safety must remain of paramount importance. Is that understood?”

“Completely, Sir, however, if my teams indicate we must evacuate how long will it take for the fleet to arrive?”

“That of course will depend on the location of the needed vessels. We could be looking at a window of 24 to 36 hours.”

Lee took a deep breath and watched a frown build on the old man’s face. “That could mean a lot of deaths, Admiral.”

“As I said, we are still going over the data you just received. The Admiralty is willing to entertain any thoughts and ideas once your recon teams make their evaluations. Until then I bid you a safe voyage.” He terminated the call on his end and the view screen filled once more with planetary data.

“Now what do we do?” asked Harpy as she got up and put her empty plate on the tray.

The admiral took a deep breath and shook her head, pushing the half eaten lunch to the side. She was no longer hungry. “We wait and see. Perhaps further study will shed some light on the problems at hand. Meanwhile, we have to get this ship ready. Our guests should be arriving soon. I would like you to be on hand to greet them. Get things sorted out and I will greet them all tonight.” She gave Harpy a smile.

“I knew you were going to do that.”

# # # #

Reaching his final destination, Arri paused to push the door chime, trying not to drop the stacked trays. He waited and finally a muffled voice answered. “Come.”

When the door slid open he walked in to find the boys knee deep in work. The desk looked like a war zone littered with paper and computer disks. Christoph

looked exhausted, his face haunted by deep shadows.

“Sorry, I’m late. I got so involved with menus I nearly forgot these.” He held out the trays uncertain where to put them as an avalanche of paper slid over the edge of the desk.

Stefan bent down to retrieve the mess, annoyed either with himself or with someone on the bridge.

“And before you ask, these trays contain all of your favorites. I got the message from the surgeon about a new diet, but with the dinner party tonight I didn’t have time to implement it. Besides, I don’t want to wear it.”

A strange expression crossed the gaunt face as he looked up. “What are you talking about?”

“Nothing, don’t worry about it. I did take the liberty of mixing some protein powder into the chocolate pudding. I figured you could both use the extra nutrition and it will help to boost your weight.”

Christoph slapped his hand on the desk as he shook his head. “Why is everybody obsessed with my weight? You would think this much effort would be aimed at someone bordering on obesity!”

Arri laughed. “Not likely to ever be a problem for either of you.”

Stefan shot Chris a dark look as he cleared off a place on the desk. He took the trays and opened the first one.

“Steak, excellent!” He covered it and sat it down on the only other clear place in the room, the chair.

When Stefan attempted to open the second tray Chris waved his hand. “Don’t bother, I’m not hungry.”

“Come on, we can all hear your stomach growling. They probably hear it out in the corridor.”

“You exaggerate, besides Kyle will be coming soon and you know what that will mean.”

Arri took a step closer to the desk. “Maybe not, at least taste my food before you reject it.” He tried to sound encouraging. There were times he felt sorry for Stefan, who was forced to endure Christoph’s darker moods.

The Vulcan looked up but did not meet their gaze. He reached out and opened the tray. Selecting a single piece of cantaloupe he popped it into his mouth and closed the tray.

“Right, well I’d love to stay and chat but I have a party to cater and lots of cooking to do. Will you both be attending?”

Stefan looked over at Christoph for a response. “I have not been given permission.”

“That being the case, I will send you a sampling of the food. Something you can nibble on.”

Stefan beamed as he walked Arri out into the corridor. “Thanks for

understanding. He's in a dark place at the moment. The Admiral is confining him to his quarters, a forced rest."

"Well, that explains a great deal. Look if he can't handle what's on that tray let me know. I can send him broth and tea."

"Thanks and I'll call you if he needs anything." Stefan walked back into Christoph's room.

# # # #

### 14:00 HOURS DAY 1

Admiral Lee sat in the center seat on the bridge and watched as the speck on the view screen grew larger. Long range scanners monitored the shuttle's approach. The Seleya was a long range Vulcan shuttle in bound from the USS Darwin. They would have to take the shuttle onboard as they were now too far for a return trip to the Darwin.

"We're receiving a hail from the Seleya," announced LT Sparks.

"On speakers if you please."

"USS Aurora Vulcanus, this is the Shuttle Seleya. We are on our final approach vector. ETA is five minutes."

"Shuttle Seleya, this is Admiral Lee. Continue on your approach. Hanger Deck Two is standing by to receive you." She signaled for the comm link to be broken. Pushing a button on the arm of her chair, the admiral activated a ship wide channel. "Attention all crew. The Shuttle Seleya will be arriving in Hanger Bay Two in five minutes. Please make

all final preparations to welcome our guests. Bridge out."

There it was done. She rose and started to walk toward her ready room. "Helm, once the Seleya is onboard batten down and resume our previous course. Warp factor five if you please."

"Aye, Admiral," came the response as the door to the ready room closed.

# # # #

As the Shuttle Seleya moored the intercom announcements made it impossible for Hilda to continue with her nap. She sat up and moved to the built-in workstation. She activated the monitor and waited. True to the Admiral's word all the data on Sarojin had been provided. She combed through it and shook her head.

Sarojin was a hot, dry planet that was going to be murder on her hairdo and milky white complexion. Perhaps she could do all her surveys from the comfort of the ship and avoid all that sand and sun.

Reading through the scientific reports the implications of such an incident became all too obvious. Rani was of a sufficient mass and it should not have exploded on its own. Something caused

that destruction and whatever it was it had to have been very powerful. Hilda also felt fairly certain that bits of the exploding moon would have impacted on Sarojin's surface. That thought triggered a number of possible scenarios. She opened a file and began to list potential obstacles that the planet would have to deal with – none of them pleasant and nothing geared for stable life.

Having finished her assessment of the data she had a fair number of possible scenarios they might find and their long term implications. Pleased with her work, Hilda forwarded a copy to the Admiral and one to the Executive Officer. She felt certain it would appease the Admiral until such time as she had more data. After all, what was really expected of her while they were en-route?

Gazing up at her chronometer, she realized it was time for her appointment with Ishka, the beautician. A new hairdo was required for tonight, especially with new eligible bachelors joining the crew.

# # # #

The Vulcan Shuttle Seleya arrived with additional medical personnel and cargo containers. Doc Adams, S'Vek, and I went down to Cargo Bay 1 and received six containers marked "Perishable Foods" and five containers marked "Food Rations" and returned to the mess hall where we took inventory of what we had received and stored the supplies into the ship's freezers.

I sent Crewman Yenni, the janitor, to clean the Observation Lounge to within a hair of his life. Another small crew stood by ready to decorate and assemble the necessary tables and chairs. All available cooks were busy preparing both Human and Vulcan delicacies. I must say, all that cooking is beginning to tax the environmental units in the galley.

Needing a small army of servers, I pressed every crewman in my department into the schedule, making sure the buffet would remain full and the guests comfortable. We'll all have time to sleep tomorrow, but tonight we must rise to the occasion as our reputation hangs in the balance.

Arri checked each station and was pleased to find all the recipes were being followed to the letter. Even the prep staff took pride in their slicing and dicing. With any luck everything would be ready to go by 17:30 allowing him time to change and oversee the final placement.

Tonight the crew not attending would have to dine on simple fare, but tomorrow they would feed on tid bits from the party. In the back of Arri's mind lingered a worry that the Admiral would not be pleased with his feeble attempt to put together a disaster plan. He prayed she would not realize how lame it was until tomorrow. By then he could beef it up and resubmit his work. He'd just been too wrapped up in the dinner party to worry about some stuffy old plan. Besides, why did he need a plan? Either way you looked at it his department was going to be feeding a lot of extra mouths.

# # # #

Christoph leaned heavily against the sink as he vomited. Stefan held the golden hair back out of the splash zone as everything in his stomach rushed out in one big explosion. He felt as if the room were too hot and a cold sweat broke out all over his body.

The cabin door chimed, but no one moved to answer it. Whoever it was would have to wait. Christoph gagged again and then sagged to his elbows. Stefan grabbed his waist to keep him from hitting the deck. Pulling one arm over his shoulder, he got Chris on his feet and with his one good leg they made it back to the bed.

Stefan lowed Chris down. He gasped for air as the room spun. With a flailing arm he managed to find the triangle and pulled himself up in bed, while Stefan helped to place the cast onto the mound of pillows.

When Christoph looked up he noticed the Counselor standing next to the room divider. She'd let herself in unannounced using the emergency override.

Stefan straightened up, "When did you come in?"

"When no one answered I assumed there was some difficulty."

"Wonderful timing," Chris mumbled as he leaned back against the bulkhead. He wiped sweat from his brow with the back of his hand.

Walking back into the bathroom, Stefan returned with a wet compress and he placed it over the Vulcan's brow. "Here, this will help."

"No need to ask who I heard retching. I can see by your pale complexion it was you, Commander. Bulimia is not becoming in men."

"Why would anyone willingly endure this type of distress?" Christoph stared at her as she approached the bed.

"Some might if they wanted special treatment, or perhaps this is a special secret of yours. One you use to keep Stefan at your side as your servant...."

"You are way off base, Counselor." He swallowed hard against another wave of nausea.

Stefan poured a glass of water and held it out to his friend. "Take a sip, it will help."

Christoph took the glass and had it almost to his lips when the Counselor walked up and snatched it out of his hand. She sniffed the contents.

"What goes on in your mind? Do you think Stefan is poisoning me?"

"I would never hurt him. You must know that." Stefan backed away from the Counselor.

"Well, I had to check," she handed the glass to Christoph, but he refused to take it. She sat it back down on the bedside table.



“What do you really want?” He looked up and studied the face towering over him.

“Answers to some basic questions. I did some homework. You are mixed with Vulcan and Romulan DNA. You should be able to achieve a Vulcan Healing Trance. Why haven’t you?”

“Obviously you did not read far enough. The trance does not work on viruses and bacteria.”

“Why didn’t you use it to heal your leg or your heart?”

“Some things, Counselor, still require a physician’s intervention.” He met her gaze.

“With your genetic engineering, you must be almost immortal. I don’t understand why you would wish to endure petty suffering. Unless you do it to trap your symbionts.”

Christoph laughed. “Very good. Do I look like an immortal? No, don’t answer that. We are all aware of the suffering immortals are forced to endure. Ultimately they are destroyed by the hands of those they sought to protect.”

“Commander, are you telling me you are immortal? Some sort of Divine Construct?”

“No, you are the one calling me that. I bleed like any humanoid.” He pulled himself up into a more comfortable position and swallowed hard as another wave of nausea hit him. He caught

Stefan’s movement and with a shake of his head the human stood where he was.

“I’m here to help you both and you refuse to let me in. Why are your shields still in place?”

“Why do you want to enter our minds?”

“I have to discover the truth about you and your relationship. I know you are hiding something or your record would not be sealed on so many levels.”

“Everyone has secrets. I am certain you would not welcome my entering into your mind.”

She shifted her position and took a deep breath. “Must I remind you that the Admiral has ordered my examination.”

Christoph nodded. “Yes, but only after you insisted. What are you really after?”

“I want to understand what you do with the blood you drink?”

“Why? You drink coffee and I don’t inquire what you do with it.”

Exasperated she tapped her foot on the deck. “I must understand in order to document it and protect the crew.”

“You realize of course you sound very judgmental and a tad bit voyeuristic.”

“If we do not understand your basic needs how can we ever hope to help you?”

Christoph sighed and shook his head. “Trust me, Counselor, you could never

comprehend what I receive in return. But if you insist on a glimpse into my personal hell, then so be it.” He stared at her and slowly let his shield drop as the next wave of nausea arrived.

He allowed her to experience the pain and constant struggle to breathe and pump blood. He did not allow her to control the direction she probed. The current distress was enough to prove his point.

Kylan gasped and jumped back, almost falling. Stefan moved to her side and grabbed her arm, guiding her to a chair.

Christoph struggled to reach the edge of the bed and leaned over in time to lose his battle. Stefan kept a basin by the bed for such emergencies. He had excellent aim. Sagging back on the bed, his head felt as if it were about to split in half. The room swam as he closed his eyes as he stretch out.. He struggled to breathe and the wheezing grew louder.

He listened to Stefan walking into the bathroom. He heard water running and then he felt the cool cloth draped over his brow. “Let’s get you more comfortable.” Stefan slipped another pillow under Christoph’s head so he was now at a 45 degree angle. “Rest, it will soon pass.” Stefan walked over to where the counselor sat. “I’m sorry, but I must insist you leave. He cannot answer any more questions.”

Kylan wore jasmine and Christoph could smell the scent moving away from his part of the room. He heard the comm link open. “Commander Kylan to Sickbay.”

“Dr. O’Neill here.”

“I need to speak with Ensign Taaj immediately.”

“This is Taaj. What can I do for you?”

“You have a patient who is in a lot of agony, Doctor. I suggest you come at once and check on Commander Christoph.”

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“For starters, Doctor, he’s vomiting, very weak and in general distress. I cannot believe the amount of pain he is in. You must do something for him.”

“Is Lieutenant Petros there?”

“I’m here.”

“Tell me what is going on.”

“Christoph is having the usual reaction to the medications Ensign Blackthorn administered.”

“Have you tried cool compresses, dimming the lights and giving him some triox?”

“Already done.”

“Did you take any scans?”

“I was about to when the Counselor insisted on pushing things.”

“Take a new set of readings. Now, please.”

Stefan walked back to the bed and Chris managed to open his eyes part way. He saw his companion take the scanner from the bedside table. He ran it over Chris and then walked back to the desk. "There is nothing out of the ordinary, Doctor, I've seen these readings before. His pulse is thready and he is wheezing."

"Thank you, Lieutenant, I'll send Kyle around with something to help his breathing. Taaj out."

"What? She isn't coming?"

"It isn't necessary. The medications tear up his stomach. It usually passes in thirty minutes."

Christoph heard her walk back into the sleeping area. "I felt his agony. That man is in a great deal of pain."

Stefan sighed. "It's to be expected when growing new bone and vomiting violently." He walked back to the bed and knelt down. "How are you doing?"

"I've felt better." He coughed and it sent pain through his chest and head.

"Kyle is on his way, just hold on." He placed a hand on Christoph's shoulder.

The Counselor approached the bed. "Maybe I can help."

Stefan leapt to his feet and blocked her path. "You created this mess by pushing him. How could you possibly help?"

Kylan physically pushed past him and knelt down at the bedside. "Will you let

me in again? I could guide you to a place where you could control or lessen the pain."

Christoph looked up, his eyes boring into hers. "I've already done that or you would not have been able to tolerate the glimpse I gave you. Please just go away and let me die in peace." He swallowed hard and brought a hand to his mouth.

Kyle let himself in and rushed up to the bed. "How long has he been like this?"

"About ten minutes, he's already purged his stomach," answered Stefan as he leaned down to collect the soiled basin.

The ensign ran his scanner over Chris and studied its readings. "Feel up to the usual treatment or would you rather just try the inhaler?"

"I'm too tired for anything." His voice was little more than a rasp.

"Right." Kyle walked to the treatment cart, opened the medication drawer and selected the inhaler. He returned to the bedside and knelt down. "When I put this in your mouth, I want you to take a deep breath."

Christoph followed the direction and two puffs later he could feel his chest opening up again. His head pounded with every beat of his heart but at least he could breathe easier.

"All right, I want you to sleep for a while. I'll come and check on you later." He placed a hand on Christoph's shoulder and then pulled a blanket over him.

“Thank you,” came a whisper as his eyes closed.

“Come on, Counselor, you’re with me. Let the Commander sleep. Stefan will watch over him.”

He heard the door close and Stefan knelt down. “Can I get you anything?”

“A glass of water.”

Stefan helped him to rise up on his elbow and drink. He pulled an errant strand of blonde hair from Christoph’s face. “You had me worried for a while.”

Feeling better, Chris managed a smile. “I had to give her something or she would have kept prying.” He smiled and grabbed Stefan’s hand. “I didn’t let her in too far, just enough to convince her to leave me alone.”

“Yeah, but will it satisfy her?”

“For a while and next time I will control it better. You have to admit her timing was excellent.”

Stefan gave him a half smile. “She has a valid point, Chris, maybe you should use the trance.”

“No, do you not understand what you are asking of me?”

“But if it would heal your leg and strengthen your heart...”

“What about the cost? Have you considered that? If I use the trance the beast would be set free. Could you live

with that on your conscience? No, the price is too high.”

Stefan searched his face and brought his hand up to cup Christoph’s cheek. “Is there no advantage to having those extra genes?”

Chris turned his head in shame. “The anomaly you speak of makes me nearly immortal. It makes me stronger than a mere Vulcan and if I have enough blood I can heal very fast. However, the cost is very steep.”

“You still have the private supply. Maybe it would be enough for you to try...”

“No!” Christoph turned his head and looked up into Stefan’s eyes. “You don’t know what you ask.”

Emotions flashed across the human face as he tried to get some control. “Never mind, try to relax. Take a nap, no one will bother you while I am here. I won’t allow it.”

# # # #

The Seleya was safely docked in the shuttle hanger and it’s crew installed in quarters. O’Neill and Taaj looked at the message on the screen, faces devoid of expression.

Ensign Jefferies peered between the women at the screen and huffed. “With the amount of work we have to get done before we reach Sarojin, you’d think the top brass would forego the ‘meet and greet’ parties.”

“Ensign - don’t you have something constructive to be getting on with?” O’Neill fixed him with a hard look, and backing away, hands raised in mock surrender, Jefferies laughed and went on his way.

“Talking of work to be done - did you order the Cargo Bay cleared this morning?” O’Neill turned to Taaj, arms folded across her chest. The Ensign looked up at her, an eyebrow rising slowly.

“The Commander briefed us at 12:15, Doctor O’Neill. Did someone order the Bay cleared before that time?”

“Ten out of ten Ensign,” O’Neill said dryly. Taaj’s brows drew together slightly and O’Neill shook her head with a laugh.

“Butter wouldn’t melt in your mouth would it!” She stated with another laugh. “I know it was you, even if I can’t prove it. This time, you get away with it. Now - go get ready for the reception.” Taaj watched O’Neill’s graceful movement as she strode out of Sickbay with a shrug of an eyebrow.

# # # #

The door chime broke Stefan’s concentration. He’d been at the computer almost an hour and he felt stiff. “Come.”

When the door opened Admiral Lee walked in. Stefan jumped to his feet, standing at attention. “At ease, Lieutenant. I came to check on the Commander.”

“He’s asleep, Sir.”

“No, I am not,” came a deep raspy voice from the dark sleeping area.

Stefan led the way, turning the lights up to one-half. Christoph pulled him self into a sitting position, leaning against the bulkhead. His shirt was off and the blond hair hung freely about his broad shoulders.

The admiral walked to the foot of the bed. “Commander Kylan filed a report earlier. She’s very concerned over your well being. You really shook her up. Has the surgeon been successful in managing your pain?”

Christoph smiled. “I can bear the pain, Admiral. However, the Counselor fails to understand the situation.”

“Explain.”

“I can endure and even control the pain on many levels, but the chemicals the medical staff insist on injecting me with creates an agony that is quite difficult.”

She nodded her head. “Yes, she reported the vomiting, I assume that is the real reason behind your failure to thrive.”

“It is difficult to keep enough food in place for it to be of benefit.”

The Admiral studied his face and felt a sudden sense that he had told her the truth. So that was the real secret he hid earlier. He was protecting his dignity. “Understood, I really came to inquire if you feel up to making an appearance at the dinner party. Some of our guests are

anxious to meet you. I will understand should you choose not to eat.”

Christoph looked over at Stefan and then met her gaze once more. “If Stefan helps me, I could get cleaned up and arrive only a few minutes late.”

“Well, Lieutenant, could you work a miracle and get him dressed? I must insist on the two of you wearing the uniform of the day. We’ve given you leniency in wearing your old duty uniform. However the time has come to join the AV, at least on the formal level.”

He looked up and met the admiral’s gaze. “I have the required uniform, but I must ask permission to cut the fabric. The cast will not fit inside the pants.”

It was her turn to smile. “Yes, of course and your hair style will be of your own choosing. T’Hara has been looking for you since she came onboard.”

He swallowed hard. “She has always been difficult.”

“Well, gentlemen, I must take my leave. I too need to get cleaned. I look forward to seeing you both on the Observation Deck.” She turned and walked out.

# # # #

## **18:00 HOURS DAY 1**

Arri walked into the observation lounge to make his final arrangements. His crews had set up the buffets, one each

for hot, cold and deserts. He checked the temperatures and was not happy with one section of the cold buffet. The lounge had a small room off to one side designed for preparations needed by special parties. He walked in found a bucket and filled it with ice. He refilled the needed section and took the cups of shrimp cocktail off the tray and buried them partially in the ice. That looked much better and kept the food safer. Satisfied with the buffets he stowed the bucket and began inspection of the hors d’oeuvres and watched as fluted glasses were filled with non-alcoholic champagne.

With a critical eye he inspected the tables and chairs, clustered in groups along the sides of the room leaving the center open for those who chose to stand and chat. Of course, he made certain the area before the viewing windows remained free for those who chose to stand and watch as the stars passed. Each table had white linen and a centerpiece carved from fruits and vegetables. They were edible and come tomorrow would be served up to the enlisted crew.

Somehow in less than six hours they had pulled everything together. His small army of servers and stewards assembled, dressed in highly polished boots and fresh uniforms. Over their left arms hung clean white towels. They seemed genuinely pleased to be serving and come tomorrow they would reap their rewards.

The glass doors slid open and the Admiral walked in. She was all smiles as

she approached. “Arri, you have outdone yourself, tonight.”

“We aim to please, Admiral Lee. Can I get you anything?”

“I’d better wait until the guests arrive, it is their party.” She walked over and examined the buffets before returning to his side. “Where will you be during the party?”

“My station is by the door to the prep room. I will be directing the traffic.”

“I want you to be prepared because I intend on introducing you to our guests at some point tonight.”

Great, just what he always wanted. Arri hated being in the lime light and preferred his food to speak for him.

The doors opened and the first guests arrived. On cue the food and drinks moved out to mingle with the crowd. A steward stood ready to remove the dirty dishes or fetch whatever was needed. The whole operation looked like a well orchestrated dance.

# # # #

Stefan handed the uniform pants to Christoph. He’d cut the fabric from one leg making room for the bulky cast. At least it was a black cast so one could not readily see it or the missing fabric, only the bare toes. The shirt fit to perfection and its color off set the platinum blonde hair. He handed over the jacket.

Christoph pulled and tugged and fumbled with the fasteners. Then he

added the belt and the whole thing flopped over. No amount of tugging would make the belt stand at attention. “I am not going.” Exasperated he sat down on the edge of his desk. “This is useless.”

“Stop pulling on it. Give me the belt. Once it fits the jacket will be sucked into place. It just needs a new hole.” Stefan held out a hand trying not to get frustrated with his friend.

“The jacket will still be too large.”

“No, it won’t be. Your crutches are going to make the thing ride up anyway. Everyone will assume that is the true problem. Very few will realize that you’ve lost ten more pounds.”

“It was only eight.” Christoph sighed and watched as Stefan poked a hole in the black leather with a pair of bandage scissors. His stomach chose that instant to let out a loud complaint.

Stefan looked up into his face. He wanted to laugh but decided against it. Chris was in a dark place again. Instead he walked around the desk, dug through the contents of the bottom drawer and found two red packets. He handed them to Chris and walked back around to finish the belt.

Chris looked at the packets. “Graham crackers?”

“Yes, they will absorb the extra digestive juices in your stomach so it won’t be gnawing on your backbone for all the world to hear.” He held up the belt, inspecting his work. “There that

should do the trick.” He fed the belt through the belt carrier on the back of Christoph’s jacket. “Now how does it fit?”

Chris put a cracker in his mouth and stood up, leaning against the desk again. He fastened the belt. It fit perfect and pulled the jacket in. He tugged the whole mess down into place and put another cracker into his mouth.

“Will, you stop pulling on the jacket. You look just fine. Now what about your hair? Ponytail, braid, semi pulled back?” He held up the hair brush and studied Chris.

Sitting down again on the edge of his desk Chris ate the last cracker. With his mouth half full he pulled the brush from Stefan’s hand and ran it through his hair. When he was satisfied he threw it on the desk.

“Okay, you’re going to hide behind the blonde veil, that works.” Stefan smiled as he picked up the clothes brush and ran it over the Christoph’s jacket. “You know as much fussing as you’ve done in the last fifteen minutes one would swear you were trying to impress a woman.”

Chris looked up and met his gaze. “I am not. See if you can find the silver clasp. I might want to pull some of my hair back later on.”

Stefan walked back into the bedroom and dug around in the night stand. He found the item and took it to Chris. “I know you heard the Admiral say T’Hara was already looking for you. Maybe in

your sub-conscience you want to meet her again...”

“That is not logical. Besides, the Admiral already promised she would try to run interference, so I highly doubt I will be running into her.”

“Still, you are trying very hard to impress someone. Care for a touch of cologne?”

“Stop it. Stefan, you’re impossible and if you don’t get dressed I will be more than fashionably late.”

They both laughed as Stefan walked back into the sleeping area. His jacket and belt were already laid out on the bed. He shrugged into it, fastened it up and was working on the belt when he walked over to Chris.

The Vulcan’s face fell. “I am jealous. Your jacket fits too well. You look dashing. All the women will be flocking to your side tonight.”

Stefan smiled feeling his cheeks redden. “Next time, don’t get sick.”

# # # #

Commander Kylan walked into the party and circulated around the room trying not to look like someone on a mission. When she spotted the Admiral she smiled and walked over. “Looks like a nice turn out.”

The Admiral took a deep breath as she turned to survey the crowd. “Don’t worry, I personally invited him to attend.”



Kylan looked down at her hands. “I should have thought of it earlier, but he disturbed me.”

“Yes, he did seem to have rattled your cage. When I found Christoph he was sleeping and looked none too worse for the wear.”

“I contacted T’Hara and she should be here in a few minutes.”

The Admiral turned to look into the counselor’s eyes. “Are you certain this is a good idea? I did promise to keep her away from him.”

She flashed a half smile. “He won’t let me in so I must observe how he reacts. Maybe the surprise confrontation will take him off guard enough so I can get inside.”

“And maybe it won’t. You may just have to accept the idea that he may never let you inside his private thoughts.” Admiral Lee shook her head. “I’m not sure it’s even necessary. He is clearly a very stable individual and now that we know why he’s losing weight there is no need to press further.”

Kylan scrunched her brow. “He still hasn’t answered the questions about the blood. How does he get it? What does he do with it? How does it affect him...”

“That is completely irrelevant. He has a private supply and medical offered it to him on several occasions. It has been documented that he drinks it; case closed. Now I really must mingle and meet the new guests.” She walked off leaving Kylan behind.

# # # #

Christoph made slow progress as they walked up the corridor. The journey to the lounge felt like a forced march of four kilometers. Stefan walked slowly at his side chatting about inane subjects trying to take his mind off the trip. It didn’t work and he could feel the sweat dripping down his back as the pain screamed in his skull. This was a very bad idea.

The glass doors parted and they lumbered in. The room felt cool. The myriad of aromas made his stomach turn. He fought down the urge to be ill. They paused to take in the crowd as Chris wiped his brow on the back of his hand.

Officers mingled in small groups while others hovered about the food like hungry vultures. They moved out into the sea of humanity. No matter the direction Christoph tried to go in he was bumped, jostled or blocked from making any real progress. “This is going to be impossible. Can you see the Admiral?”

“No, but I see the Counselor sitting in the corner watching everyone. Come on, I’ll take point.” Stefan moved in front of the Vulcan and lead the way. “Excuse me, coming through.”

People started to step aside when the finally noticed Christoph was on crutches. With a great deal of effort they reached the Admiral near the farthest viewing window. Christoph lurched to a halt. “Fashionably late as promised, Admiral.” He bowed his head and

repositioned himself so he could stand in one place.

She smiled. "I'm glad you made it. I was beginning to worry you had changed your mind. Allow me to present Commander Christoph, my Chief Medical Officer and this is Lieutenant Petros his protégée. This is Captain Scott Donahue, T'Rhea and Soror." The couple stood to the admiral's left.

"Captain Donahue, I read your recent paper on techniques of combat surgery from within the war zone battlefield. It was fascinating."

The captain blushed and a huge smile broke out on his face. "You honor me, Doctor, I had no idea it was in print yet."

T'Rhea looked at Soror. With a nod of approval she stepped forward. "We missed you earlier when we checked into Sickbay." Her voice was soft and warm.

"I apologize for being unavailable to see to your needs. I do hope my staff saw to them."

"Yes, your Ensign Taaj was most helpful. My husband forgot to pack one of his medications."

Christoph smiled even though he knew it was wasted on the Vulcan, but he was after all playing the role of a human tonight. "We aim to please. Feel free to drop by at anytime. Sickbay is always open..."

"Should you be standing?" asked the Captain as he studied Christoph.

It was his turn to feel uncomfortable. Chris looked down at the deck, very self-conscious of his own situation. "I am attempting to learn balance, however, I frequently loose and settle for leaning against something."

"Oh," the captain shifted his position. "Would this help?"

Christoph looked up and noticed the man had moved making a section of the low bulkhead with the railing available. He managed to move in front of the window and turned, leaning against it. "Thank you, that was most kind. Tell me, Captain, how was your journey?"

"Very long but I managed to catch up on some reading. I don't see how anyone can sleep in a cramped up shuttle."

Everyone laughed, except for the Vulcans. The admiral gave a half bow. "If you will excuse me." She turned and walked off heading towards the counselor.

Stefan moved closer to Chris. "I will get us something to drink." He walked off.

As the conversation lulled, someone's stomach decided to make a rather loud declaration. The Vulcan couple seemed the most uncomfortable. Soror placed a hand on his wife's arm. "Perhaps we should find something to eat, excuse us." They turned and walked off. The man had a slight limp and was obviously in pain. It explained the pinched look in his gaunt face. Christoph made a mental note to check into Soror's medical records perhaps they could help him further.

# # # #

Hilda pulled on a fresh uniform jacket and tugged at her skirt. She checked her hair and makeup for the tenth time before deciding to add a generous spray of her favorite perfume. Her signature fragrance 'Midnight Delight' was guaranteed to attract every eligible bachelor within ten kilometers. She was ready.

With a sway that was anything but regulation, she walked down the corridor to the turbo lift. To her amazement it was utterly empty. Well, she felt certain it meant that everyone was waiting for her anticipated arrival.

When the glass doors to the lounge slid open, she strutted in like a queen heading for her throne. She just knew all eyes would be on her lovely visage. Quite the opposite occurred. No one even noticed she had entered. No matter she continued on towards the middle of the room.

Several people moved out of her way. Some gave her a dirty look and put their hands up over their mouth and nose. Others clustered in groups chose to move closer together, no doubt so they could whisper about her remarkable beauty.

Hilda marched right up to the bar and selected a stool. She perched on it like a throne. The Catt looked up and asked, "What will it be?" He voice was curt, clearly annoyed with her presence.

"A mai tai."

The drink appeared before her, placed on the bar with more force than was required. The insolent woman needed to be put on report for treating her like a victim of the plague. Hilda returned the dirty stare.

Turning around on the stool, she surveyed the crowd. Several tall candidates caught her eye. A scrumptious blonde on crutches made her heart race. He looked familiar, but she just couldn't place who he was. Walking beside him was a gorgeous man, deeply tanned with curly jet black hair that hung down to graze his broad shoulders; a Greek god if she'd ever seen one. They headed straight for the Admiral.

She sighed and sipped on her drink. She would have to wait for the Admiral to leave before she could move into action and announce her presence. The man standing next to Admiral Lee turned and she caught a view of his delicious face. A captain, tall and broad in the shoulders with lightly peppered hair that added to the ruggedness of his strong face. She felt her heart lurch. She'd found her target and planned out her attack.

A server passed by and she snagged a cracker piled high with cheese, meat and topped with an olive. She popped the entire thing into her mouth and chewed. Arri had just come out of the side door and was about to pass her. She hiked up the corner of her skirt to display more leg clothed in black stockings and waved as he passed. Of course she batted her thick black eyelashes at him. He ignored her completely.

It riled her. She had been spurned again. She sighed trying not to get too upset. There was more than one way to catch a fish, fry him up, and serve him on a platter. She would make Arri jealous when he saw the captain on her arm. It would turn everyone's head.

When Admiral Lee walked off, Hilda took her cue and moved towards them. The Vulcans were still near her target. She hated their cold calculating minds. At least computers were warmer, efficient, and could be turned off. Who would want to spend their lives with a living computer? She altered her course to walk behind the couple. The captain turned his head and she caught a glimpse of his deep blue eyes. She could get lost in those eyes. He looked her way and she smiled, batting her eyelashes. She followed that with a quick wink, but he turned his back to her as the blonde on crutches moved to lean against the bulkhead. Who was that man who captured the captain's attention?

Moving closer she listened to the conversation. Now she knew who it was – Commander Christoph. She'd seen him at the briefing. The man had snubbed her a couple of weeks earlier coming out of the mess hall.

She strained to listen to the captain's voice. He had a slight accent that increased her desire to try out his arms. If she planned it right he would have to come to her rescue.

Hilda slipped through the crowd and went to the buffet. She loaded a plate, grabbed up a fluted glass and walked back to her target. She managed to find

something to trip on and she bumped into him, falling forward, dropping her plate and glass. The captain never looked her way, as he stepped aside. A steward walked up to clean up the mess.

Spurned again she plodded towards the bar and sat heavily on the stool. The Catt looked up. "Another mai tai?"

"Yes" No one looked her way, much less paused to speak to her. She settled on watching Christoph and the captain as they talked. She couldn't help but wonder what spending the night in his arms would be like.

They would start off with moonlight stroll through the arboretum. They would sit on the bench under the cherry blossom tree and kiss. When things heated up they would go back to his guest room....

"Ensign Von Ricktovn," called the Admiral.

Hilda jumped to her feet and walked over to the Commanding Officer. "Yes, Admiral?"

"Ensign, your cologne is quite putrid. Will you please leave. You are turning people's stomachs. I suggest you shower and change before returning."

She stood there mouth gaping uncertain what to say.

# # # #

Stefan found The Catt manning her usual station behind the bar. It too had been decorated with fruit flowers. She

smiled as he approached. "I haven't seen you or your friend in days."

He sat down on a stool and took a peanut from the dish. He shelled it popped it into his mouth. "Christoph's been very ill."

"Okay, so what about you? What's your excuse? No, let me guess." She looked up at the ceiling and then caught his eye. "You were kept a prisoner, forced to be his nursemaid. Am I close?" She smiled broadly, her violet eyes dancing beneath her curly black hair.

It was uncanny how she always knew things. Stefan laughed. "Actually, I have been."

"It's not fair for him to hog all your time. Is he feeling better?"

"Sort of, I guess, at least he is up and about." He didn't want to bore her with the ugly details.

"How about your usual? You look like you need cheering up."

Stefan looked back over his shoulder. The crowd was growing and he'd be needed. "No, not tonight. I need a pomegranate spritzer and a small gin fizz."

When she met his eyes he tried to smile. "Are you sure you wouldn't like something stronger? I'm serving up rare and exotic drinks in honor of our guests."

He grabbed another peanut. "No, better not." He shelled the peanut and ate it while she mixed their drinks.

The Catt was so beautiful she could take any man's breath away. She sat the drinks on the bar and smiled at him. "Don't wait so long between visits, Stefan." She reached out and brushed her hand across the top of his.

His heart skipped a beat. "I won't, thanks." He stood up, collected the drinks and walked back to where he had left Chris. The crowd around him had shrunk leaving only Captain Donahue bending his friend's ear.

# # # #

Captain Donahue chatted on but Christoph barely listened. The room was spinning again and it took all of his concentration to remain upright. He grabbed at the railing for support and squinted.

"Are you all right?"

The voice sounded like it came from a tunnel. Bright light stabbed his eyes. He felt a strong hand grip a hold of his upper arm.

"Crewman, bring him a chair, now!" Someone stepped closer. "I've got you. You won't fall."

Chris could hear people moving as the world grew darker. Everything spun. He had no idea which was the floor and which the ceiling.

“I’m going to lower you into a chair.”  
The voice sounded distorted and foreign as he felt his body bending downward. Something solid flew up to meet his backside. He could feel hands pulling the flap of his jacket open. The zipper on his shirt was opened and his neck exposed.

“Can I get him anything?” asked a woman in the distance.

“A glass of water and cool compress.”  
Someone grabbed his wrist and then moved to feel the base of his neck.  
“Come on take a deep breath for me. You’re gonna be just fine. Listen to my voice. That’s it, come on, stay with me now.”

Something cool was draped over his neck as his head hung down, hair covering his face.

“Can you take a sip of water?” A glass touched his lips and he opened his mouth. He managed to drink a little and let some run down his chin.

“What happened?” Stefan asked walking up. “I just went to get him a drink.”

“Any chance that it’s more sugar than alcohol?”

“Pomegranate juice and soda water?”

“Excellent, I’ve got this, but he needs to eat.”

Chris heard Stefan walk off and felt the concern through the link. His head started to clear and he looked up, still not able to focus his eyes.

“We have some juice for you. I want you to try and drink it.” He held the glass to Christoph’s lips.

He drank the cool concoction and let its sweetness soothe his parched throat. The pain in his head had let up. His vision clearing. He reached up and took the glass with a shaky hand.

“Very good, Commander, I want you to take it nice and slow.”

“What happened?” Christoph rubbed his brow and looked into the glass window. He could see in the reflection that most everyone was busy with their own conversation.

“Feeling any better?” Donahue knelt next to the chair staring into Christoph’s face.

Chris sipped the juice again. “Yeah, how did you…”

“Come on drink up I sent the Lieutenant to get you something to eat.” He stood up and tugged his jacket back into place. He took a step to stand behind Chris.

In the glass reflection, he watched as the Counselor made a bee line for his location.

“Is something wrong? Should I get his Physician?” She tried to crane a look at Christoph but the Captain blocked her path.

“No need to worry anyone, he’s fine, just a bit hungry. We all are. I’m sure there must be someone wishing to talk with you.” He dismissed her and she

huffed away. He walked around to stand in front of Christoph.

“I owe you my thanks,” he said pulling his hair back, grabbing the cloth before it fell. “I don’t honestly know what happened.”

“Well, I do, you were listening to me rattle on and then you started to faint. I managed to get you to a seat in time.”

Chris met the man’s blue eyes and held his gaze. “Thank you, I might have fallen again.”

“Yes, well you wouldn’t want to be wearing two casts. I’m sure you had enough of that the first time around.”

“How could you know about that?”

Captain Donahue smiled and looked down at his feet. “All right, I confess, I know a little bit of your history.” He looked back into Christoph’s face. “A close friend of mine died in that battle. His little brother, Johnny, was the medic who pulled you to safety. I had always assumed that was just a war story told to make me feel better about my loss.”

He shook his head. “No, the story is true. The medic dragged me to safety and then did what he could. I needed a surgeon and none was available. He put me into casts and after a while I learned to walk with what was left.”

“Still a warrior always goes down fighting, however, I believe you have more issues than just your legs.”

Chris finished his juice and sat the glass on the floor at his feet. “How did you guess?”

Donahue looked down at the deck. “It’s what I do. I have a talent for reading subtle changes in appearance. For example, I can tell you are in a great deal of pain, but you’re not the type to ever speak of it. I’d wager you’ve lost a great deal of weight, despite the desperate attempt at a proper fitting uniform. You have deep shadows under your eyes and your cheeks are sunken. A fine tremor has begun in your hands, which you try to hide. Your coloring is not what it should be, suggesting you have issues with your heart and quite possibly your lungs...”

“How did you know that?” Chris cut him off not wanting to listen to a further airing of his problems. He looked up and met the blue gaze.

“I tried to take your pulse, but you’re not exactly human. Even at the base of your neck it’s hard to find. Your heart rate is too fast for a human and not strong enough for a Vulcan. When you get close enough you can hear the labored breathing and the wheeze you try to hide by speaking softly and breathing shallow.”

Before Chris could find his voice to reply Stefan rushed up with a plate and small bowl. “I brought some of your favorites and chocolate pudding.” He smiled and handed his friend the food.

Donahue smiled, “You did good, Lieutenant, just what the doctor ordered.”

Christoph dug in as the two watched. After a few forkfuls he looked up. “Go on, both of you, and get something to eat.”

Donahue shook his head, “Sorry, you can’t get rid of me that easily. I’ll stay so your friend can go and eat.”

He looked over at Stefan and smiled. “Thank you, go enjoy yourself. I will be fine sitting here.”

Stefan nodded and took off like a shot out of a cannon. Both men laughed.

“He’s very protective of you. I admire that kind of loyalty.” Donahue stared off in the direction Stefan went.

“We have a long history together. Your talent is extraordinary for a mere human.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment, but I do have to ask one question. How close to death are you?”

Chris felt the color drain from his face and he choked on the pasta. He coughed and it sounded moist and terrible. “What?”

“You didn’t think I could see it? Come on, I’ve stared death in the face. I know all it’s signs. You can trust me to keep your secret safe.”

“I’m not dying...”

“Don’t lie to me. You don’t do it very well.”

Christoph sat the half eaten plate on the floor as he looked up. Could he really trust this stranger? Well, he had helped him in an awkward moment. He’d have to try. “All right, you nailed many things in your observation, but death is not one of them. I’m not like the people on this ship and I won’t suffer the death you speak of, it’s impossible for me.”

“No man is immortal, Doctor, least of all you.”

He shook his head and gave a half smile. “You’re wrong, Captain, what you don’t know is that I was not born in the manner most life-forms are. My origins began in a laboratory where they engineered my DNA. They took what was best from Human, Vulcan and Romulan genomes. In creating me they received a big surprise, one they did not bargain on. This is not the first time I have been gravely ill, but I will recover given sufficient time.”

Donahue sighed and shook his head, smiling. “So the stories are true. I thought Johnny was telling a big tale, trying to impress me.” He held out his hand. “It is an honor to meet you, Commander Christoph.”

“Perhaps you should call me, Chris.” He shook the offered hand.

“Still you do need to rest. It can’t have been an easy trip from your quarters to reach the lounge. Whose is your Physician?”

“Ensign Taaj took me under her wing when I got hurt. Dr. O’Neill and I had words when I first arrived.”



“Cardiologists are all alike. They think they are the gods of the universe and they frequently miss the bigger picture.” He paused stared into Christoph’s eyes as he scrunched up his brow. “Hold on, how are you handling the medications? It can’t be easy if your genetics are so mixed.”

“That’s the real problem. My stomach is at constant war.” There he had admitted it and somehow with this man it didn’t feel like he was complaining or acting like a weak child.

Stefan rushed up. “I spotted T’Hara, she’s looking for you.”

Chris grabbed his crutches and stood up. “Time to move into the crowd.”

# # # #

Heading for the Observation Lounge, Taaj idled through the corridors, unwilling to join the reception and the need for increased vigilance and self-control that it would bring. Rounding a bend in the corridor she came across two of the Seleya’s complement.

The pair were consulting the computer for directions as Taaj passed, eyes fixed on the floor. She went on a few paces and sighing inwardly stopped and turned back.

“As-Salamu ‘Alaykum.” She greeted the taller, male figure. Asad El Haider stared for a moment, and recovering his wits returned the greeting, hand rising to his heart.

“Dr. Aurek.” Taaj nodded to the female, who smiled in response, and looked to

El Haider with a slightly bemused expression.

“Come with me, I’ll take you to the Observation Lounge.” Taaj turned and headed away before either could respond. A quick glance at each other and they hurried to catch up.

“And you are?” El Haider asked as they walked through the Ship’s corridors.

“Taaj.” The Surgeon replied without looking up. The visitors exchanged another look across her head. The doors to the reception area opened before them, and Taaj withdrew deeper into herself.

Her companions looked around for their fellow visitors. A tall, pale figure approached. Taaj watched Christoph’s painful progress critically. Even with the crutches he was having difficulty. He lurched to a stop.

“Captain El Haider, Dr. Aurek. This is Commander Christoph, Chief Medical Officer.” Taaj stood by impassively, staring at the star field passing the observation window as Christoph made small talk with the new arrivals. He called another officer over and introduced them.

A steward appeared with a chair which he placed at the CMO’s side. Looking once at Taaj, he lowered his frame with an air of resignation. “Alright, Mother,” he said sarcastically. Taaj ignored him, and wandered away to watch the stars.

Her contemplation was disturbed by a quiet gasp behind her, and refocusing

Taaj studied the reflection of a tall woman who stood, staring at her.

“You are not Human.” The woman accused as the Surgeon turned to face her.

“Now why would you say that?” Taaj asked, head tilting slightly in a questioning manner, a lopsided smile beginning. “And why would you be trying to get inside the heads of my crew? Having a spot of trouble?” A flicker of surprise crossed T’Hara’s face.

“You’re quite right of course,” Taaj stepped closer. “I’m not Human.”

“You’re a full telepath.” T’Hara found her voice, eyes boring into the Surgeon’s.

“Really want to go head to head?” Taaj asked with a feral grin. “You’re not the first, and you won’t be the last.”

T’Hara looked away quickly a slight blush colouring her cheeks. Her eyes fastened on something at the far side of the room.

“Ah, that’s what you were after,” Taaj murmured, watching Christoph holding court through the Vulcan woman’s eyes. “But you’re mistaken, he’s not...” Taaj paused, “available, he’s already taken.” T’Hara looked at her sharply as the Surgeon eased by, heading for the CMO.

Christoph looked up to see her bearing down on him, and readied himself for the lecture. “Commander, I’m sorry to interrupt,” she began and his eyes narrowed, as in his head he heard her

voice. //”T’Hara is on the other side of the room and she’s gunning for you.”// “Ladies, Gentlemen.” She gave a short bow to the group gathered about the CMO. “The Commander has a routine check up scheduled.” She glanced at the cast on his leg, and their eyes followed. //”Get a wiggle on Commander, she’s on the move.”// Her voice sounded again in his head.

Accepting her assistance to stand, Christoph made his farewells and with the Surgeon at his side, slowly left the Lounge. Once in the turbolift he swore. Taaj ignored him, eyes fixed on a point beyond the walls of the lift car. Stefan stood next to him in silence.

The lift doors opened and together, either side of the CMO they walked slowly to his quarters. Taaj left them, seeking space and quiet in which to re-centre herself. She headed as usual for the Arboretum.

# # # #

Captain Asad El Haider and Captain Scott Donahue made interesting company, Drake thought to himself. They were kindred spirits in so many ways. After the dinner, they found a corner to swap stories and to share insight of what might lay ahead. He wondered if this scene had been played out for centuries. The warriors, no matter what their uniforms or weapons, united in a cause. Change the time; they could have been the knights of old. He could picture either other officers’ roots and place them in the historical context. Drake felt sure they had a good team dealing with the mission.

# # # #

It feels good to be back in space instead of desk duty Taylor commented to the stars traveling, streaking in the observation window. Some of the guests asked for a brief tour after the dinner and this was her favorite part of her Old Broad. She saw Kylan give her that look of calm and knowing. How long had it been since that first visit to this point as a new XO. Second thought, she didn't want to add up the time. What was the saying, it was not the years but the mileage? Starbase duty doubled your mileage, not to mention your abuse. Had that time been a waste, the future would determine that. For now, it made more of a difference here and that was all Lee ever wanted.

As they returned their guests to their quarters, Lee knew Kylan had deliberately stayed behind. It was always their habit to discuss things before the action developed. "If we were not in mission mode, I would offer a night cap," as they headed back to Officer Country. "And you are showing patience my friend."

"I learned, you will share when it is time. Besides, it makes for a better tale." Raijana could read her commanding officer's body language. A mixture of emotions, normal for the situation, but above all, peace. "Then you are okay with this path. Some one else would be upset at the turn of developments."

"Never been most and some days one must give up something in order to move

beyond. Or so a wise counselor once told me."

Kylan giggled at the memory. "Didn't know you listened to that fortune cookie. I will take you up on Chinese when this is over."

# # # #

With everyone doing their job to complete satisfaction, Arri tugged on his jacket, the only unpleasant thing about the evening was having to wear Starfleet "Monster Maroons" as everyone jokingly called them. It was time to move out and mingle.

One by one he managed to get introduced to the scientists and physicians. What he really enjoyed was learning about the fields of the two planetary specialists, T'Rhea and Soror. Even LT S'Vek found them fascinating. By the end of the evening he had a better idea of who the visitors were and what they might enjoy eating.

# # # #

Walking through the plants, hands trailing over leaves and flowers, she allowed her mind to surface slowly, shedding the unwanted thoughts of others and purging the attached emotions. Lowering herself to the ground by a stand of Abutilon, she rested, deep in thought.

"And there she is, like a Jinn called up by magic," said a deep voice. "What?" El Haider lowered himself to the ground a short distance away. "No sign of apprehension? Alone, with a strange

man.” Taaj queried with a raised eyebrow.

“Was T’Hara correct, are you a full telepath?” He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, chin resting on his clasped hands. Taaj allowed him to study her a full minute. “Hey!” She smiled at his exclamation as she vanished.

“Jinn are not always biddable Captain.” She said re-appearing on a nearby bench. “Come,” she patted the seat beside her. “There will be time enough to study the new specimen after Sarojin.”

“Am I that obvious?” El Haider asked plaintively, and grinned at the lack of expected response. “You’re the Ship’s Surgeon?” Taaj nodded, stretching her legs out before her and crossing them at the ankle.

“Yes, I’m the one who’ll have to try and patch together whatever I’m sent.” Despite her relaxed posture she seemed distant to the Captain. “To save as many lives as I can.” Her tone was almost puzzled, and she frowned a little.

“That’s our job.” He agreed, intrigued. “You seem a little unsure - have you had any combat or disaster experience?” Her green eyes looked deep into his.

“Too much.” She said quietly and he became aware of memories coursing through his mind that were not his.

Breathing heavily he absorbed the images, his professional self identifying causes of injury and treatments in a detached fashion, his personal self

horrified at the suffering she had witnessed.

“I really should be preparing,” she smiled at the Captain. “Wouldn’t do for me to lose control of myself.” Jumping to her feet she grinned down at El Haider, an image at odds with the memories he had just received.

“No.” She put out a hand to prevent him standing. “Stay here awhile, there’s a great collection of roses over that way.” She pointed. “You know how much you love roses, Captain.” Moving back a step or two, she smiled again.

“We’ll need to discuss medical tactics tomorrow, come and see me in Sickbay. I’ll be there from 06:00 hours.”

El Haider watched her go and stood, walking slowly in the direction she had indicated. Cupping an overblown flower in his hands he stooped to breathe in the heady aroma, all worries falling away.

# # # #

Christoph leaned back against the bulkhead, happy to be off his feet, one leg propped up on a mound of pillows. The dinner party took what little energy he had. Thankfully they had managed to avoid T’Hara, but would it continue? Sooner or later they would be in Sickbay together and he need a plan of action.

Stefan walked up carrying two glasses. “What are you planning now?” He sat down on the foot of the bed and handed one glass to Chris. “I know that look and it can’t be good.”

He sighed and took a drink of his juice. "I need to find a way to avoid T'Hara and spend more time in Sickbay."

"You managed to avoid her tonight, maybe the Admiral will keep her word." He took a gulp of his milk and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand.

"I had help tonight on two fronts. I was thinking about going to Sickbay around four in the morning. It should be quiet and no one would notice. If I'm there before shift change I could then manage to stay beyond the allowed four hours and no one would be any the wiser."

"No, you're wrong, dead wrong. They are logging the time you arrive and you will only get into more trouble with the Admiral."

He shook his head and sat the glass on the night stand, no longer interested in its contents. "I don't really care. I hate being cooped up and treated like a toddler. I'm older than 98% of this crew..." The door chime interrupted his tirade. "Who could that be at this hour?"

Stefan motioned for Chris to be still and walked around the partition to answer the door. The Counselor and Ensign Blackthorn walked in. "I came to check on the Commander."

"Why?"

"He was in pain this afternoon. I watched the Captain helping him at the gathering. I thought he might need further medical attention."

Stefan sat his drink on the desk. "He's resting now."

Chris listened to the conversation and watched the Counselor through the link. He felt her probing the human's mind, trying to gain access to Stefan's private thoughts. Christoph slid a shield up to prevent her from reaching more pertinent areas. Besides, it really was none of her business what they did behind closed doors. He chuckled at the thoughts she expressed in her feeble probing. So that was the real reason behind her constant push. She wanted to satisfy her own curiosity.

"Could the Ensign at least make his examination? If all is well we will leave."

He sent instructions to Stefan, who allowed the ensign to pass but blocked Kylan from moving towards the sleeping area.

Kyle approached the bed, scanner in hand, wearing an apologetic expression. "Sorry to intrude, but she insisted."

"You'll find nothing has changed since your last visit an hour ago."

"Are you at least feeling better?" He bent down and ran the scanner.

"Yes, the nausea passed twenty minutes ago."

"Look, if you want I could get rid of her. I could tell her you are worse and that you needed my care."

"But would she believe it?"

The medic smiled. "You'd have to play along."

Chris smiled and began to slid down onto the bed. Kyle got him position and covered with a blanket. “Try to look sick. Keep your eyes closed at least halfway and breathe through your mouth.”

The ensign walked back to the counselor’s side as Chris willed his body to play along. He slowed his heart rate and breathed deep enough to produce that horrible sounding wheeze.

“The Commander is in need of my undivided attention.”

“Is he worse? How bad?”

“He’s running a fever and his breathing is labored.”

Stefan shifted his weight. “It’s the Admiral’s fault. She requested his presence and it overtired him. By the time we got back he complained of feeling awful and went straight to bed. I was about to call Sickbay when you arrived.”

Chris watched as Kylan’s expression changed to one of suspicion. He could feel Stefan trying to keep a straight face. “Fatigue will not cause a fever, Lieutenant.”

The Ensign moved closer to the Counselor. “The Commander is still recovering from a bout of pneumonia. It is not uncommon for patients to run fevers at night.” He turned to look over at the bed. “See for yourself.”

Kylan walked to the bed and bent down. She felt Christoph’s brow. He tried to

stir and ended up coughing, a deep rattling moist cough. “Rest, don’t move. Ensign Blackthorn will see to your needs.” She patted his shoulder then made a hasty retreat. “Ensign, you will remain with your patient. I will inform the Surgeon.”

“There’s no need, ma’am, I can handle this.”

She stared him in the eye. “Very well, I’ll leave you to it.” With that said she walked out into the corridor.

Stefan and Kyle walked back into the sleeping area and laughed. “You really do look sick,” Stefan commented as he sat back down on the bed.

Chris pushed himself up into a sitting position. He coughed again and pointed at Kyle. “It was his idea.”

# # # #

Hilda stormed to her quarters. She’d been thrown out of the party. They were all jealous! Her perfume was sweet and reminded her of the Greek Goddess Aphrodite. How dare the Admiral call it gagging! There was no law preventing a woman from enhancing her beauty. Maybe if the Admiral took a lesson from her she would be happier and not feel the pressure to compete and put her crew in unnecessary danger.

Feeling certain that Admiral Lee volunteered for this mission, Hilda paced her room like a tigress protecting her offspring. She fumed with each step. How dare they make her leave the party before she had a proper meal. She

hastened her pace. There was one thing she knew for certain, she would have her revenge. She would find a way to put both of those women on report.

She replayed the scene in her head and drooled over the new captain. He was a real dream-boat. Even his voice dripped with sex appeal. He was just what she needed to make Arri jealous.

As Hilda prepared for bed her thoughts drifted over his rugged physique. She could almost smell the musky scent of his chest and feel the muscles ripple as they pulled her closer. The insistent buzz of the comm link broke her happy daydream. She pulled on a fuzzy pink robe and walked over to the work station.

The face of Captain Harpy filled the screen. "Ensign, your report is unacceptable. You will correct the points marked. The Admiral wants your report first thing in the morning. Is that understood?" She smiled.

"No, I don't understand."

"What's not to understand, Ensign? Your work was found lacking, therefore, you will make the necessary corrections. And one other thing, make sure you never, ever wear that particular cologne to an official function again. Is that understood?"

Hilda was dumbfounded. She vaguely remembered nodding before the XO closed the channel. How dare she say the report was incomplete! It allowed for almost every possible event, what more did they expect?

In the place of Harpy's face her report scrolled across the screen. Someone had highlighted sections in yellow.

Comments were placed in red and the whole pages were crossed out using the overstrike key. Virtually nothing of the original document was found to be acceptable. With her anger growing, she stored it all on a plastic disk and turned the terminal off. She had absolutely no idea what the Admiral wanted and she no longer cared. Whatever was needed could wait until morning.

Hilda freshened herself up in the bathroom, wrapped her bouffant hairdo up in soft paper and went to bed. She snuggled up with her pillow content to dream about the new captain, the love of her life.

# # # #

## **02:30 Hours Day 2**

Ensign Reva sat at the science station. He'd spent the shift checking long range scanners and found nothing out of the ordinary. Leaning back he stretched. He was board and he looked over at Lieutenant Bishop as she sat at Communications.

She was beautiful, tall, with thick blonde hair and thin as a reed. He felt his heart quicken. Problem was, she never noticed him. Comm traffic had been heavy all day and now in the wee hours of the morning it was still going strong.

When he glanced back into the viewer he noticed a small blinking signal. It was just on the edge of detection, something metal. He fed it into the computer but as

yet it was still unidentifiable. He watched it and called up the star charts for that sector. Nothing made any sense. “Commander, long range sensors have picked up something metal, barely within the sensors range.”

“Is it a ship?” CMDR Phillips looked up from the center seat.

“Computer cannot identify it, Sir, we’re still too far out.”

“What’s its origin?”

“That’s what doesn’t make sense. There is nothing in that sector, no planets, no major shipping lanes, nothing.”

“All right, record data, we’ll see where it takes us. Helm, continue on present course.”

# # # #

Arri rolled over and turned off the alarm. It had been a short night. He pushed up into a sitting position as the lights came up. Damn, breakfast already. He’d stayed up late supervising the clean up from the admiral’s party. It had been a success and he was enjoying a happy place until reality sat in.

Overhead he heard a lot of com chatter, too much for so early in the morning. He jumped up and dressed. If something were going on the admiral would be wanting some fresh coffee.

# # # #

Commander Phillips stood up and stretched. The command chair was not

designed for anyone over six foot six inches tall. Jonathan Phillips stood six foot ten inches and had the build of an athlete. He’d played every sport in school and it continued when he reached Starfleet Academy. What he really hated was sitting still. He preferred a life in motion.

The overnight shift was usually slow and tonight had been painfully quiet. It always left him with too much time to think. Jonathan preferred to amuse himself by composing music in his head. For some reason it always kept him calm and alert, ready for anything that came along.

“Sir, the signal’s gotten stronger.”

Phillips walked over to the Science Station. “Let’s see what you found.”

Ensign Reva activated the small view screen above his station. The blip blinked red as he pointed. “According to the computer it’s an outdated mechanical distress signal.”

“One of ours?”

“Possibly, but what doesn’t make sense is that this sector of space is empty. Sensors can’t locate anything transmitting the signal.” He met the cold dark eyes of the Officer of the Watch.

“Ensign, something has to be transmitting. Signals don’t just crop up on their own. Probe the surrounding areas. Maybe it’s a natural phenomenon causing some kind of weird ricochet.”



The dark head nodded and returned to work while Phillips went back to his seat. It was probably an echo or a computer glitch. No way would he bother senior officers until he had more details. “Ensign, run diagnostics, maybe it’s a glitch in our system.”

“Aye, Sir.”

What were the odds that it was anything important? If it was an outdated signal it was most likely from an abandoned space buoy, or worse yet, space junk.

# # # #

Arri started the large pots of coffee and began preparing what he like to call “Breakfast on the Run” – simple fare that can be stuffed into pocket bread and munched on at any duty station. Over the years he had found it was most popular when events became hairy.

One by one, his junior staff arrived to begin their morning routines. They always walked in muttering amongst themselves.

“They say the bridge picked up an old fashioned signal on long range sensors.” LT S’Vek walked over to the freezer to check its temperature.

“Na, it will turn out to be space junk – it’s always space junk.” LTJG Mortimer shook his head as he grabbed up the portable UV light to check the cleanliness of the freezer’s door.

All this talk made Arri wonder if the signal turned out to be real, would they

stop? How many more people would he need to feed?

# # # #

“Commander, we’re picking something up off the starboard side.”

“On main view screen,” Phillips ordered.

The stars filled the screen and a rippling of space drew everyone’s attention.

“What do you make of that, Ensign Reva?”

“A spacial anomaly, Sir, computer cannot identify it.”

After another ripple a form began to coalesce. It was a ship! She looked dead. No running lights or any other lights, and she hung at an odd angle, drifting in space. Her twin nacelles were twisted and warped. The dome was missing from what looked like her main bridge. As the AV approached words come into view on her main saucer – USS Dante NCC-1700A.

“Ensign, run that ID through the computers. I want detailed scans on that ship. Was she cloaked?”

Reva ran through the tests and looked up. “Sir, that ship is dead in space. It appeared as if it was caught in some kind of flux and phased into existence.” He ran his hands over the keys. “I have the ship’s information. It is indeed the USS Dante. She was a prototype Constitution Class Starship with a full compliment of 210 Humans. The vessel was lost with all hands when the planet

Xhosa collapsed creating a black hole. She was caught in the event horizon and was sucked in. No one has seen or heard from her in over fifty years.”

“Wow! What about any signs of life?”

“Uncertain, I’ve got some faint energy signatures on two decks, but they don’t make sense. It’s not mechanical, more like a chemical combustion signature.”

Phillips scratched his neck, a nervous tick he had when things just didn’t add up. “Fire on two decks?”

“No, Sir, I wouldn’t call it a fire because it is too controlled and in multiple locations...”

“But no signs of life?”

Ensign Reva looked back into his hooded viewer. “Sir, none of these readings make any sense. How can anything be alive?”

“Then you’ve found something?”

“Possibly, but it is very faint.”

# # # #

## 03:45 HOURS DAY 2

Christoph opened his eyes and checked the chronometer 03:45 hours. He still felt exhausted, but if he were going to have any freedom he needed to reach Sickbay before change of shift. He sat up and waited for the room to stop spinning.

Stefan moved, propping himself up on an elbow. “What’s wrong?”

“Time to get up.”

“You’re joking? We just went to bed, lie back down.” Stefan pulled the pillow into a more comfortable position.

Swinging his legs over the side of the bed, he grabbed up the crutches. “Come on, Stefan, rise and shine.”

The human wiggled out from under his blanket. “I’ll rise but no way am I gonna shine.”

When Chris emerged from the bathroom he found Stefan had laid out fresh clothing. The maroon nightmare still hung where he taken it off. He hated that uniform, but what real choice did he have.

Ten minutes later the two officers emerged to find the corridor illuminated for daylight hours. People rushed from their quarters, fastening their jackets on the way. A small crowd waited for the turbo lift.

“What’s going on?” Stefan asked.

The lift doors opened and the mob moved in, making room for Chris and his crutches. “Long range scanners picked up a distress signal. They found minimal life signs and it’s gotten everyone up early,” commented an ensign as he stepped from the lift at his appointed stop.

# # # #

Admiral Lee joined Captain Harpy on the bridge. A yeoman appeared with steaming coffee. Commander Phillips remained on the watch.

“Open hailing frequencies, Lieutenant.”  
The admiral sipped her coffee as she waited.

“No response, Admiral.”

“Sensors, an update if you please,” ordered Harpy as she leaned slightly forward in her chair.

“I have confirmed energy reading on two decks and faint life signs. Life support is at a bare minimum.”

The admiral took a deep breath as she studied the view screen. “She certainly looks dead.”

“It’s been over fifty years. How could anyone still be alive?” Harpy picked up her coffee and sipped.

“Perhaps the black hole acted as a time warp. Either way, it warrants further investigation. Helm, bring us about. We will stop and render aid.”

# # # #

Stefan was amazed that the lift was so full. It seemed weird that everyone would be running around like chickens with their heads cut off at 04:00 hours. Who in their right mind got up at this hour? Well, maybe the marines did. He yawned and waited for the lift to empty.

Every corridor was the same scene. If he didn’t know better, Stefan would almost

swear they were at war. They walked into Sickbay to find it already in full swing. Staff were busy packing emergency bags and prepping stations for incoming.

Ensign Blackthorn walked over smiling. “Didn’t expect to see you in so early, Commander.”

Christoph balanced himself on his crutches and looked about. “What’s going on?”

“Word from the bridge is that we found a ship. Something called the Dante, lost about fifty years ago. She winked in out of nowhere.”

The Dante – the name repeated over and over in his mind. Where had he heard it? Stefan stared at the deck and then he remembered the story his mom told him, years ago.

A hand grabbed his biceps. “Are you all right?” He could feel Chris staring at him.

“Yeah, why?”

“You were miles away and you’re very pale.”

“Just trying to remember something. I’ve heard that name before – Dante...”

“Everyone has, it’s from your Human literature...”

“No, it’s something else,” Stefan interrupted. His heart started to race. “I remember now, my mom told me her father served on a ship that was called

Dante. He was lost years ago, they believed the whole crew died. She was five when he disappeared.”

“And you think this Dante is the same vessel?” asked Chris still studying his face.

“Well it could be! Just think of the possibilities!” He could feel his heart race and the room spin.

Kyle moved closer and grabbed Stefan before he could hit the deck.

“All right, you are officially worrying me. Let’s get him into my office.”

The ensign pulled one arm around his neck and walked Stefan into the CMO’s office. Kyle pushed him down into a seat, grabbed a scanner and ran it.

“Stefan, take a deep breath,” ordered Christoph as he looked on.

“What?” He looked up and saw the hypo spray heading to his shoulder. “What are you...”

“Breathe.” Christoph placed a hand on the human’s neck and felt the pulse as it steadied. “Relax and let the medication work.”

Stefan leaned against the wall as he looked up. “I’m fine.”

“Could you find him some juice?”

Kyle nodded and took off.

“I’m fine.” He tried to push up and then sat down hard again.

“What is going on? You almost fainted on me.” Chris took the seat next to Stefan and grabbed his left wrist, the pulse growing stronger now.

The ensign returned with a large glass of orange juice. He held it out. “Drink up.”

Stefan obeyed and gulped half a glass. “According to my mother, her father, Stefanos Andreas, was stationed on a vessel called the Dante.”

Christoph looked up at Kyle. “You said that ship was called Dante?”

“Yeah, we could pull up her crew list.” He moved behind the desk and activated the monitor. “Computer, display crew list of the USS Dante.”

A complete list of all 210 names scrolled across the screen too fast for them to read. Kyle looked up. “Do you know what he did?”

Stefan scrunched up his forehead as he studied the deck plating. “Something in medical, I believe, at least that is what she remembered.”

“Computer, revise list to show only medical staff.”

The list narrowed to fifteen names and all three looked on.

“That’s it!” Stefan pointed, his heart pounding in his chest, threatening to come through his skin.

“Calm yourself,” Chris said as pushed Stefan back into his chair.

“What if he is alive? What do I say to him? What will we do?”

“Away Team report to Transporter Room. Beam out will occur in five minutes,” announced Sparks overhead.

A flurry of messages crackled from the speakers as everyone checked in. Chris looked out his office door and watched Ensign Meyers grab up an emergency bag and head out the main door.

Kyle found his voice first. “Did either of you eat breakfast?”

Stefan looked down at the deck and finished his juice. Normally he was the voice of reason, remembering such events and suggesting them.

“All right, first order of business, two trays.” Kyle got up and walked out of the office.

Chris placed his hand on Stefan’s neck. “Your pulse is racing again. Take a few more deep breaths. Your distress is bleeding through the bond.”

Stefan met his gaze. “Could anyone be alive? I mean, it’s been years, how could anyone survive?”

“Stranger things have happened. The away team should have an answer for you soon. Try not to get too excited, you’re not up to it.”

He tried to smile. “I’ll try not to, but my imagination is already working overtime.”

When Kyle returned he carried two trays. “I want you both to eat. It’s not the new diet but it will give you both much needed energy. From the looks of you both, I’d gather you didn’t get much sleep.”

Stefan yawned. “Practically none.” He pulled the cover off and attacked the eggs.

Christoph moved to sit behind his desk and picked up the juice, pushing the tray aside.

“Come on, Commander, you have to do better than that.”

“No, it is too close to my next round of medication.”

Kyle nodded. “True, but isn’t it better to have something to actually throw up?”

The Vulcan sighed. “Perhaps.” He pulled the tray over and opened it. Sausage and eggs were the one thing he couldn’t refuse.

“The Away Team has beamed out,” announced the overhead speaker.

“Kyle, is there any way to monitor ship-to-ship chatter from down here?”

The ensign beamed. “Oh, yeah, we do it all the time. Only way we can be ready before we’re actually needed.” He leaned over the desk and punched in a code, before activating the comm link. “You can listen, but you can’t talk. To do that you need a direct link.”

Christoph looked up and met his gaze.  
“Very good, Ensign, thank you.”

# # # #

#### **04:15 HOURS DAY 2:**

Drake never stopped marveling how beaming into a new place felt. One moment you were in familiar surroundings, next somewhere strange. It was eerie and very little light. He watched as others scanned for life signs. He had his antennae and he could almost pick up something. The team lead motioned for them to go right. Shadows played on the walls of the ship, making shapes move and flicker. He could almost make some thing out, but it moved very quickly. A kid, no his eyes were playing tricks. Most ships rarely carried children. A ploy perhaps to put one off their guard, a good one Drake noted, very few would shoot until it was too late. Again he thought of a kid playing hide and seek, watching the team explore the corridor. He was about to say something, when the comm beeped. Other teams were reporting children being sighted and to use caution.

# # # #

“Children. Did I hear you right?” Lee repeated when Harpy reported in what they had found. “Are sure they are the crew?” Oh boy, she started to play the scenarios, time travel, mystery disease, alternate universe, experiment gone terribly wrong. It hurt just thinking about it. It was good they had a crew

whose experiences and talents were up to the challenge. She read the data the names were matching up with the crew. “We will start getting the options ready for dealing with the age issues. But if you found the fountain of youth, I will beam the bottles over. More medical personal are preparing to come over. Keep checking in, we will be ready to transport you back if we get silence.”

# # # #

Christoph couldn't sit still any longer. He picked at the bowl of fruit, listening to the comm chatter. “The medic is out of his league.” He got up and with his crutches, made his way to a storage locker.

“What are you gonna do?” asked Stefan, following at his heels.

“I'm going over there...”

“No, you aren't. Admiral Lee will never allow it.”

“She can't stop me if she doesn't know.” Rummaging in the closet he pulled out a walking boot.

“Can I give you a hand?” asked Kyle as he walked up, hand extended. Chris gave him the boot and leaned against the wall. “Put these in my office.” He handed the crutches to Stefan. Kyle knelt down and fitted the boot over the cast He fastened the Velcro closures making sure it was a secure fit. “Of course you realize we will all be in trouble.”

“Not if we save lives. We'll need some equipment.”

Kyle stood up and moved to a cabinet. He pulled out two large medical bags. “We’re always ready.” He smiled as Stefan returned wearing an exasperated expression.

“Well, if I can’t stop you I may as well go along.” He grabbed up a standard first aid kit and they headed out of sickbay unchallenged.

Chris hobbled along to the transporter room and when they entered they found an ensign on duty. “Beam us over, please.” He walked to the pad and Stefan helped him up.

“I’ll need clearance, Sir.”

“We are the back up medical team. I presume you have been listening in. We are needed on that ship.”

The ensign never budged an inch and still wore a confused expression.

“Mister, are you willing to let those people die because you chose to stand there looking like a knob? You do know that their deaths will be on your conscience.”

With a deep sigh, he shook his head and activated the controls.

The ship was dark. Christoph’s natural adaptation allowed for excellent night vision. He tapped into the beast and felt his eyes adjust. “Follow me.”

Stefan stumbled along in the dark as they worked their way down a cluttered passageway. At first it seemed like random junk piled up and neglected.

Chris started to notice that everything had been placed purposefully to form an obstacle guaranteed to slow anyone down, allowing the occupants some warning of an invasion. It made no sense, why would they need a means of defense?

His sensitive hearing picked up the sounds of scurrying – feet not in boots, but bare slapping the deck. At one point he even thought he heard giggling – high pitched like a child. It all made no sense. The crew were adults. Ships from this time period never carried children. Could the crew have bonded over the years forming family units? It made a strange sort of sense. Families meant offspring and that meant kids who giggled.

Upon reaching a junction, Chris chose to move right, following the sound of running. They all heard the high pitch whine of a phaser being fired. He hastened their pace, despite the growing pain in his leg as he pushed his own limits.

In a murky pool of weak yellow light stood a security officer observing what looked to be a teenager. He lie on the deck obviously stunned. Kyle pushed past Christoph and knelt down. He pulled out a scanner.

“I only stunned him. He just kept running. They’re like wild animals.” The guard watched as Kyle worked, never lowering his phaser.

Christoph walked into the light and the officer snapped to attention. “How is he?”

Kyle pressed a hypo spray to the youth's shoulder. Violet eyes looked up. "Take it easy. You've been stunned." He helped the boy to sit up.

"Who are you?" he squinted up into the light.

Chris held his hands out, open where they could be seen. "You are safe. My name is Christoph and these are my friends Stefan and Kyle."

The boy moved into a crouch, as if ready to bolt. "What do you want?"

"We're from Starfleet and we've come to rescue you..."

"Starfleet?" he sat back down, shaking his head. "Really? It's not some cruel joke to torture and kills us?"

Christ took another step closer. He wanted to kneel down, to get on his eye level, but his leg prevented that. "I am Commander Christoph, Chief Medical Officer of the USS Aurora Vulcanus. We found your ship and stand ready to rescue you. What is your name, son?"

"Lucien." He looked about the corridor. "This is my ship, well, what's left of her."

"Do you have any sick or wounded?"

Lucien got to his feet, Kyle holding onto his arm as he swayed. "We heard strangers. We must protect the sick and young..." his voice trailed off as if he were remembering something.

"Have others come?" asked Christoph as he studied the teen, who looked about 17 years if age.

"Others, not all of them kind."

"We mean you no harm. Can you take us to those who need help?"

He walked to a Jefferies tube and pointed up. "On the next deck are living quarters."

Christoph walked over and looked up, he wasn't sure he could make the climb. "Lucien, is there another way up?"

"No, we have to carry the little ones." About that moment he looked down, "Oh your leg..."

"Can you lead the way?"

Lucien nodded and took off like a monkey climbing with the security officer following on his heels.

"Kyle, you're next."

"No way, you can't climb with you're bad leg."

"Go on, Stefan will take my bag and I will follow you both." He held the bag out and Stefan slung it over his head and adjusted the bag to ride on his back.

The boys climbed and reached the top before Chris started up. He took a deep breath. This was going to take all his strength. He would have to haul himself up using only his hands.



When he reached the top he almost collapsed. The boys knelt down and pulled him over the edge. He was winded but unharmed. He tried to push up and failed. Stefan and Kyle pulled him to his feet.

Lucien waited, looking nervously down the corridor. "Come on. They're down here." He darted off into the dark.

From the shadows up ahead someone jumped out with a metal baseball bat. They hit the security officer dead in the face, sending him instantly to the deck. A peal of laughter – children laughing echoed down the passageway. Lights flickered and danced in a bizarre pattern on the walls.

"It's an ambush," yelled Chris as he grabbed Stefan and pulled him back. Up ahead was a huge dark shape.

"Who's there?" called Kyle as he stood fast, shifting weight, ready to make his next move.

"Andreas the Mighty. Want to taste my little friend?"

"We come in peace to help you," yelled Chris making sure he did not move. He could sense children all around them.

"Liar! Liar, liar, pants on fire!" A wild maniacal laugh filled the passageway. The shrieking sound could only be that of a female.

"We are from Starfleet Command. We've come to rescue you." Chris kept his tone even and non-threatening.

"Don't listen! It's a trick! Protect!" The voice in the shadows triggered some plan and everyone scurried away, leaving the away team alone in the passageway.

# # # #

Admiral Lee sat behind her desk in the ready room. She stared at the screen. Captain Harpy had managed to get five names and they matched. These were the people stationed on that ship, but what turned them from adults into kids?

"Captain Harpy to Admiral Lee."

She hit the comm button. "I'm here, what did you find?"

"Only two decks are livable. We'll need environmental suits to check out the rest of the ship. Still having trouble rounding them up. Some of these kids are very dangerous. Four of my security detail have been wounded."

"Can your medic treat them?"

"He's doing what he can, but we'll need more help. We've got some wounded kids as well."

"Your names matched up. It would appear these are the same crew members. I'll send over another team with more medical and heavy in security. Do you think we can salvage anything?"

"Unknown, I've seen no computers, or technology of any kind in use. It's all become rather primitive down here."

She took a deep breath. “Understood, Captain, I’ll send another team to investigate the bridge and see about gathering up the computer and log data. Do what you can to round them up. Make sure you check in every fifteen minutes. If you go silent, I will beam the whole lot of you up.”

“Got it, Admiral. Captain Harpy out.”

Kids, what the hell were they going to do with them?

# # # #

Arri carried a tray of food and a carafe of coffee to the Admiral’s Ready Room. Something was afoot and he wanted the command staff to be well fortified. He buzzed at the door.

“Come.”

The door opened and the admiral looked up and smiled. “Excellent timing. We’ve stopped to render aid. You’re not going to believe this, Arri, but the crew are children. I’m not sure the exact number we will be taking on board. We’ll need to feed them. I’ve reports that they are half starved. Can you have something warm waiting their arrival?”

“Did you say children?” How could they find a ship filled with children this far out into space?

“I’m as confused as you are, Arri, but I have every faith that you can come up with something sure to please them.”

He regained his composure. “Of course, Admiral, I’d be honored.” Arri put the

food down on the desk and walked out. His mind already racing, trying to remember what human children ate. Was it baby food? He would have to do a bit of research.

The turbo lift opened and he stepped in. He finally remembered something he read about kids loving hot-dogs, hamburgers, lots of french fries and of course the quintessential chocolate chip cookies.

What the hell were kids doing on a ship all alone anyway?

# # # #

Christoph heard someone rustling in a bag. Then a loud snap and the sound of fluid being mixed. An eerie green light illuminated the corridor as Kyle held up the light-stick. “We carry several of these in each medical bag.”

Stefan pulled his bag off and rummaged in the outer pocket. He was about to tear one open when Chris put his hand on top of Stefan’s. “Save it, we may need it more later. Now if we only had a tricorder we might be able to find the others.”

Kyle laughed. “We carry one in each medical bag as a back up if our scanners fail. You will also find a spare communicator, a small phaser, food packs, tissues and matches.”

Pulling out the tricorder, Stefan activated it. As he turned facing each end of the passageway he checked his readings. “The right leads to a dead end. No one is up here with us. In fact, all

life-signs seem to originate on the deck below.”

Walking off with the light-stick, Kyle knelt down to check the officer. He took out his scanner and ran it over the man. “It’s bad. No way can he make it down the tube. I’ll see if we can beam him out from here.” He touched the officer’s comm link. “Ensign Blackthorn to Aurora Vulcanus.”

“Sparks here, Ensign, what can I do for you?”

“I have a severely injured officer. He has multiple facial and skull fractures. He is unconscious and needs immediate care.”

“Understood, we are standing by to beam him up. Emergency team is on its way to the transporter room. Will beam on your signal.”

Kyle pressed a hypo spray to the man’s neck and stepped away. “He’s stable for the moment.”

The twinkling beam of the transporter lifted the man off the ship and the corridor returned to utter darkness. “What next?” asked Kyle returning to Christoph’s side.

“We go back down. To the left about five meters is a cluster of life-forms. They are weak, but still alive.” Christoph tapped his finger on the spot where the glow of life blinked on the tricorder Stefan held.

“How do we get you down?” asked Stefan.

“Going down is always easier. Go on, both of you.” He watched them climb down first and when the way was clear he went down as he’d come up. Hand over hand, feet hanging free.

Kyle and Stefan reached up and guided his progress until he stood on the deck between them. “Thank you. Kyle, will you take point?”

Holding the light stick aloft he lead the way, allowing Stefan to help Chris. This time they found the main assembly point. Ensign Meyers was trying his best to triage the mish-mash of security officers and children. The lad looked up and nearly fell over. “Commander, I’m so glad to see you. I’ve only got one guard to watch over them and they keep trying to run away...”

Christoph moved closer. “All right, take a deep breath and take a seat. Kyle, check the bleeding in that corner.” He pointed to a guard who had started a puddle. Stefan, can you help keep those victims in place. He knelt down on the deck and began his own assessments.

Once all were tagged according to protocol he was able to contemplate standing up. Not a smart move. Kyle appeared at his elbow to help. “Come on you need to sit.” He helped Chris to a storage bin and the Vulcan dropped down.

“How are they?”

“Assorted slashes and a few stab wounds. I’ve got them dressed and ready for transport. Three have sprained ankles. I’ll check the kids next.” Kyle

walked over to where Stefan was already scanning.

A tall blonde man walked in carrying a teenager. He wore the uniform of a Starfleet Marine and the girl struggled despite her wounds. Chris stood up and motioned for the man to deposit the child on the storage box. He remained behind her ready to restrain her at a moment's notice.

Chris smiled as he collected his medical scanner. "My name is Christoph and I am a doctor." He ran the scanner over her and then grabbed up his hypo spray. On the way to the girl's shoulder, she brought up her hand to block his movement. "No! Get that away from me!"

"I need to examine your injuries and it will be painful. Let me give you something for the pain."

"No injections!"

"Can you at least tell me why?"

"I know your tricks. You'll stick that in me and then take advantage of me. I won't let you!"

He put the hypo spray down and took up a pair of bandage scissors to cut away the fabric. "May I at least examine your injuries?"

She nodded and held on to the box with one hand as he cut the fabric of her filthy ragged pants. Both bones in her lower leg were broken and the one in her thigh had torn through the skin. Blood had

already coagulated around the wound. "Kyle, I'll need your help here."

He walked over and pulled several gauze packets from the bag. "Saline?"

"Yes, I want to rinse out the wounds and we'll be needing an air splint." He looked up into her grimy face. It will hurt when I splint your leg. Are you certain you do not want anything for the pain?"

"No injections!"

The two men cleaned the wounds, bandaged and splint the leg and she never uttered a word. White knuckles grabbed onto the storage container like it was a life line keeping her from the depths of hell. Tears streaked her face.

He cut the sleeve of her ragged top exposing her shoulder. The collarbone was broken and her arm hung. "We'll have to splint this have we got any slings?"

Kyle pulled out two. They put the arm into the proper position and then tied the sling into place around her neck. The second one was tied across her chest to keep the arm itself from moving. Chris took another set of scans and watched as the child's eyes rolled back into her head.

With the help of the marine they got her onto the floor and covered her with a silver blanket from the emergency bag. Shock had set in so Kyle set up an intravenous drip to keep her fluids up. Chris added some pain medication to

ensure the child would rest comfortably during the transport.

Ensign Meyers walked over. "I don't understand the readings. It's as if their bodies are young and their organs are ancient."

"Well, I suggest we begin to beam this lot up. They are all stable enough. Why don't you go up with the girl. She may need more attention before she reaches Sickbay."

The ensign nodded and hit his communicator. "Ensign Meyers to Aurora Vulcanus."

"Sparks, here, got some more ready to beam up?"

"Yes, four needing stretchers and then seven who can walk with assistance."

"Stand by."

# # # #

In her Ready Room, Admiral Lee and the Counselor sat and waited. Wounded security were returning to the ship along with a few of the Dante's crew. The reports from Harpy sounded like an ancient game of mazes being played out. Why? How had a trained crew become little more than savages in fifty years?

She'd sent a junior engineer and two computer technicians over to salvage the logs and computer core. Maybe given enough time they could sort out what had happened to that ship.

"Captain Harpy to Admiral Lee."

"Lee, here, what do you have?"

"Something is happening to this ship, Admiral. We're experiencing strange tremors in the metal deck plating and my hand just went through a solid desktop. Whatever caused this ship to appear may be happening again."

"Get our people off that ship. Grab whatever kid you can find, but get out of there."

"Understood."

The admiral hit the com link. "Kang, we'll need all transporters now. I want my people off that ship."

# # # #

In groups of five the worst were beamed up. Their triage tags aglow indicating the severity of injury. In two minutes the lot had been sorted and transported. Christoph turned to the Marine. "We need to find the injured and sick. I know for a fact there has to be some."

"I know where they are, we just haven't been able to reach them." He led the way down the corridor and into a side passageway. Two Marines jumped to attention. "Back behind the bulkhead are the targets you want. Problem is they are heavily armed. We can't get them to stand down."

Metal plates that normally covered the walls had been stripped away. Heavy layers of blankets had been hung as if it were a way to give the occupants some privacy and still share the warmth. A fire-barrel stood against the far end of

the corridor. Stefan crouched down and pulled back the blankets. He took the light-stick and poked it in trying to see. Something cold sliced his arm and he jerked back, bleeding on the deck.

Kyle pulled some gauze from his bag and pressed it to Stefan's arm to try and staunch the bleeding. Christoph found two slings and a thick absorbent pad. They bandaged the cut. Tying one of the slings tight to form pressure on the wound. The second sling was fashioned to hold Stefan's arm to his chest above his heart to slow the bleeding. He nearly fainted and they helped him to lie down in the hall. It was very cold so Kyle wrapped a silver blanket around him. "We need to beam him to the ship." His communicator worked but the signal was weak. "It's no good we'll have to move him, the transporter will never be able to lock onto him." He pulled a triage tag from his bag and set it to indicate the type of wound and severity. He clipped it to Stefan's sling.

"I'll take him." The blonde Marine scooped him up like an infant and started back down the hallway.

"They're like animals," said the curly red-headed Marine, who brandished his side arm a bit too much for comfort.

Christoph peeled away the edge of the blanket and looked inside. It was very dark and he had to call upon the beast to see anything. He could hear the different heart beats of six kids. Someone was very close to death. He dropped the cloth. "Six of them and one is nearly dead."

A noise coming up the corridor attracted their attention. A Marine detachment had rounded up two teens. One looked very familiar. "Lucien, tell your friends to come out so we can help them."

The blonde kid in wrist binders laughed. "He's not the captain of this vessel. They won't listen to his commands."

Christoph moved to stand in front of the youth. "And you are?"

"Captain Karol Vaschel. I'm the only one they will obey."

"Then give the command to stand down. That child in there needs help or she will die."

He cocked his head and smiled. "Too late to save Julie, she will die with the next phasing." His stance was defiant and he tried to look tougher than he was.

"Explain." Christoph was losing patience with these kids.

"This ship moves in and out of time. The next shift will kill her. It's going to kill us all."

"Then there is another reason to come away with us, or have you come to enjoy living like savage animals?"

Karol locked gaze with Christoph. "What do you offer? Torture, experimentation, rape or pillage?"

Chris took a deep breath and looked deep into the boy's eyes. He took control. "I am Commander Christoph from the USS Aurora Vulcanus. We

stopped to offer aid and rescue. You have been out of touch with Starfleet Command for a very long time.” He pulled back and released the boy’s mind.

Karol shook his head as if to clear it. “Are you really from Starfleet?”

“Yes.”

“I never dreamed they would actually send a rescue mission.”

“Well, Captain, it is time to trust someone. You and your crew can’t survive much longer on this ship. I can give you medical care, hot food and a safe place to rest. What you do after that is up to you, but we need to do it soon.”

Vaschel laughed as the deck plates trembled under their feet. “Yes, it is almost time for the ship to phase.”

Over the comm links Christoph heard Captain Harpy giving orders to beam out immediately.

“Karol, can we get to your wounded?”

“Balder, come out.”

A grimy boy with shaggy red hair crawled out from under the cloth. He held a Bowie knife, dripping with Stefan’s blood. It was caked with all sorts of dried debris.

Kyle dropped down and pulled the first child free. A Marine picked her up and took off down the corridor. He kept pulling children until at last he saw the dying one. She was too far to reach and so he crawled inside.

“Leave me, I’m dying.” She moaned.

He pulled her loose and drug her out into the hallway.

“Giver her to me,” Christoph said as he opened his arms. Kyle picked her up and put her in the Vulcan’s arms.

Kyle picked up the one remaining child and they walked back down to the beam out point.

# # # #

Kang had his best people manning the transporters. Marines stood by to escort survivors. Captain Donahue stayed in the main transporter room to triage arrivals. His counterpart, Captain El Haider, worked in the larger auxiliary transporter. Not all of the wounded were kids. Security had a fair share of walking wounded.

It amazed El Haider that kids could inflict so much damage, but then again he’d seen it as a child in Cairo. Most of the wounds were deep cuts and twisted ankles. He received the officer who ran a foul with a bat and lost. He sent that one straight to the surgeon.

When the last group materialized he walked down to the main transporter to help Donahue. They were still pulling people through. Captain Harpy arrived winded and they helped her to one of the waiting stretchers.

One girl with multiple fractures arrived neatly packaged, IV started all ready for the trip to Sickbay, until her breathing

stopped. Both doctors worked to restore her airway.

No one noticed Ensign Kyle as he crumpled to the deck under the weight of the child he carried. “Can we get some help over here?” yelled the transporter tech as he rushed up to collect the child.

Ensign Meyers rushed over and ran the scanner over Kyle. He pressed a hypo spray to his neck and helped him to sit up. “Take it easy let the triox work.”

El Haider walked over to check the reading. “Get him on a gurney and follow us.” He moved out to take the girl with the fractures to sickbay. Meyers followed once he had loaded Kyle and the child onto a gurney.

# # # #

Christoph clutched the child to his chest as he followed the others down the tight passageway. The corridor was dark and close. They’d found a safe place to beam over.

As the Vulcan walked he listened to her small heart as it struggled. Even her lungs were trying to win the battle to live. She smelt sweet – the blood of a true innocent. The aroma called out to him, awaking the beast within.

*//“She’s dying, why waste her blood? Go ahead and give us a taste.”//*

*//“I will not take her life.”//* He argued with the beast, listening to him in his head.

*//“Can you not smell her sweet scent? She is still a virgin – pure of blood. There’s not a great deal but enough for a few swallows. Take it!”//*

*//“No!”//* Chris hobbled along falling further behind the group. His leg burned, the pain white hot.

“You’re very warm,” the child mumbled, trying to move closer to his shoulder. “Are you an angel?”

He looked down into her pale face. Even in the dark he could see she was almost gone. He smiled and moved his head down so he could whisper in her ear. “Maybe I am. My name is Chris. What’s yours?” She smelt wonderful.

“Julie.” Her voice little more than a whisper.

*//“Listen to her. The child wants you to send her home. She trusts you. DO IT!”//*

“No!” he shouted out loud as he hastened his step.

*//“It’s free for the taking, Who will know? Can you not feel the ache? Give us a taste and free yourself...”//*

“No!”

He could see Stefan waiting up ahead in the group. He turned and looked at Christoph, “Are you all right?”

The Vulcan read his lips and shook his head. Through the bond he sent the command to go on ahead, that he would follow.



*//“I want her blood. I’m stronger than you are. Give her to me!”//*

Christoph walked into the assembly area and took his position. He felt her move and he dropped his head again. She smelt wonderful. His fangs descended. His eyes changing. His heart beat filled his ears. He felt the beast moving forward to take control. He opened his mouth. Julie never whimpered as he bit down into her neck. The beast sucked at the warm fluid of life as the sparkle of the transporter beam yanked them from reality.

# # # #

Kang stood behind the controls of the main transporter. He was pulling them away from the ship as fast as he could.

“Admiral Lee to Transporter Room.”

“Kang here.”

“That ship is deteriorating fast. Tell me you got everyone off that ship.”

“Aye, Admiral, the last group is beaming over now.”

“Excellent.”

Kang worked the controls. He’d had a solid lock when the beaming began, but now it wasn’t holding. He tried re-routing the energy to add more strength to the pull. If he could just get them into the pattern buffer they stood a chance. Everything he tried failed to hold. He had one last trick, but would it work?

He watched the buffer and two shapes, then four took form. He let out a Klingon expletive. He had the last four locked into the pattern buffers and off the ship. With a punch of a button he began the materialization process. Four figures sparkled and almost formed. A loud crackle filled the air and the smell of ozone filled the room.

“What happened?” Asked Captain Donahue as he rushed forward.

“Something is still trying to pull them back.” He flipped another toggle and started over. This time three shapes twinkled, held and solidified into existence. Two teens and Lieutenant Petros dropped to their knees, gasping for air.

Captain Donahue rushed forward, scanner in hand. He took some readings. The blonde teen tried to stand up and fell backwards. Donahue kept him from hitting the deck. “Easy, Son, I’ve got you.” He picked him up and handed him down to a waiting Marine.

Stefan tried to stand but with only one arm he was off balance. The captain helped him off the pad and onto a gurney. He was gasping and wheezing. He looked about trying to find Christoph. “Where is he? Chris was right there?” He reached out to point where his friend had stood.

Donahue pressed a hypo spray to the lieutenant’s neck. “Take it easy. Your friend will be right here.” He had to push him back onto the gurney.

“But he was just in front of us.”

“Rest.” The captain moved to the one teen who still knelt on the pad. His chest was heaving to catch his breath. He put the hypo spray to the kid’s neck and then helped him down to a Marine who was waiting with a blanket. The boy was trebling. They all were.

Donahue moved to the doorway. “Get a gurney in here now and bring some portable oxygen.” He knew whoever was in that pattern buffer was going to be in bad shape.

Kang tried the sequence again. A lone figure sparkled and then crumbled away. There was a loud pop, like an explosion. Acrid smoke rose from the pad where the figure stood.

“What happened?” Donahue asked as he moved closer in preparation to pull whatever materialized down from the pad to safety.

“A minor short.” Kang checked the panel beneath the controls and then moved to the pad. He took a reading and went back to his control. The pad was gone. He would have to bring them through using a different point of materialization. He adjusted his controls and tried again.

The shimmer coalesced and Christoph, still holding a child, crumpled to the deck. His bad leg trapped under his weight. He clutched Julie, his face buried in her hair.

Donahue rushed to him and Stefan jumped off the gurney. “Don’t touch him! Let me.” He pushed past the captain as Christoph lifted his head.

There on his mouth was the shadow of red blood. The fangs were showing and his eyes were almost silver. Stefan blocked everyone’s view. “Chris, can you hear me? It’s all right we won’t hurt you.”

Christoph opened his mouth, his tongue found the evidence. He tried to wipe his mouth with his hand as Stefan reached out. “Don’t, I’ve got her.” His teeth were receding and his eyes were blue again.

Donahue stepped up onto the pad and ran a scanner over both the commander and the child. “Give me the girl.”

“No, she’s almost gone. Nothing more we can do anyway. Just help me up.”

Stefan, using his good side pulled as Donahue took the other side. They got him to his feet and down to the waiting gurney. He sat down, pulling his cast up onto the surface. He wouldn’t lie back.

“Admiral Lee, this is Kang, we have all of our people on board.”

# # # #

Stefan stayed at Christoph’s side while Donahue hovered. The gurney was pushed along to Sickbay. Karol and Lucien walked in the middle of their long train of survivors. They seemed docile now, easy to herd along.

“What do we do now, Chris, Taaj will be in Sickbay. She’s gonna be very angry.”

“May I suggest,” interrupted Donahue, “we take your gurney into your office. We can check you both out and then

send you on your way before anyone can stop you.”

Christoph studied his face. “You’d be willing to help me?”

“Yes, if you had not been over there we might be beaming back dead bodies about now.”

The child in his arms moaned and he leaned down to whisper in her ear. “You’re safe now, Julie, you’re home.”

“Yes,” she looked out as they reached Sickbay. With her last breathe she whispered, “Mom.”

# # # #

## 06:00 Hours Day 2

Captain Vaschel allowed himself to be herded with the others from the transporter room, they were being taken to Sickbay. Following behind a group of medical technicians who were carrying the ‘younger’ members of his crew, he managed to look around at the ship that had pulled them from the Dante.

Sickbay opened ahead and he hesitated in the doorway, watching as his crew were surrounded by nurses, technicians and doctors. Turning he watched the Aurora’s Chief Medical Officer being hauled in on a gurney, and Julie. His throat tightened, she was going. Her head lolled and rolled to face him, and her gaunt, pale face suddenly brightened, her eyes looking past him, as she mouthed the word “Mom” a weak

smile forming as her eyes glazed and closed.

Turning away he caught sight of a woman standing off from the crush of medical staff. She closed her black eyes and Vaschel wondered if she were one of the empathic species that had recently been discovered, what were they called, he lowered his eyes trying to remember.

“Captain, if you would come this way. We need to run a full evaluation of you too.” Raising his eyes he found the woman had approached, unheard above the sound of commands and counter commands from the various teams. Her green eyes regarded him coolly.

Following tamely, too emotionally drained to question for the time being, he allowed her to run her tests, answered the questions that were put him.

“Out!” He registered that the voice held no anger. “So sue me.” He realized that he had fallen into some kind of reverie, and looked about anxiously. The woman with the changing eyes was shooing a group of medics out of the side room in which he found himself.

Lying rigid on the bed, he watched her stand guard for a moment longer in the doorway and looked up as she returned to the bedside.

“I don’t know about you Captain, but the psychiatric division drive me to distraction.” She was flicking controls on the scanner as she spoke, scanning the readouts.

“My name is Karol.” She paused in adjusting a scanner, and laid a hand on his arm.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you Karol.” Her grip tightened slightly. “I am Taaj.” Her smile was suddenly too much and the tightness in his throat felt as though it would suffocate him. Arms wrapped about him and held him close as he sobbed brokenly.

Exhausted from the outburst, he clung to the Doctor, the material of her shirt bunched in his fists as his head lay against her shoulder. Someone stepped into the room. “Ensign Taaj.” She barely moved her head in acknowledgment.

“What the hell do you think you were doing clearing Commander Christoph to join the mission to the Dante?” The Doctor leaned her cheek against his hair and rocked him gently.

“I did not clear the Commander for any such thing, Admiral.”

A tense silence followed her statement. Vaschel sighed raggedly and relaxed against the Doctor. Steps approached the bed.

“Where is the Commander now?” The steps halted.

“He is in triage. I will be ordering him to his quarters, and withdrawing him from duty pending an appraisal.” The gentle rocking continued.

“You will perform that appraisal Ensign, and report to me at 08:30 hours. This time, I want the truth from you!”

“Very well Admiral, 08:30 hours, your office.” The Doctor stroked a hand through his hair and began to hum quietly, and slowly, without realizing when, Vaschel fell asleep.

# # # #

Kyle walked into the CMO’s Office and collected the child. She had died in the Vulcan’s arms. He noticed she had some dried blood on her neck. He wrapped her tightly in the raged blankets and left.

Christoph felt exhausted physically and emotionally. His leg screamed as he swung it over the side.

“You really should rest.” Captain Donahue ran the scanner over his patient and looked into the blue eyes. “Do I need to tell you, or do you already know?”

“I know the walking boot was not one of my better decisions.”

Stefan worked to unfasten and free the cast with his good arm. He placed the thing behind Christoph’s desk.

“True, and your surgeon will no doubt give you an ear full when she finds you.”

“That must be later. There is a briefing I must attend in an hour and I’ll need all the data regarding the survivors, as well as our people and their injuries.”

“Look if I get the information for your report, do you think you could at least lie down for a few minutes? Your energy reserves are dangerously low and I wouldn’t want to hear that you collapsed

at that meeting. I'll send all the data you need to your quarters."

"All right, you win."

"Stay where you are, Lieutenant."

Stefan turned and gave the captain a scared look.

"Take a seat I need to check your wound. You wouldn't want to get septic now, would you?"

Christoph held out his hand. "It requires stitches, but if I know Taaj she will walk through that door any minute. Can you stitch him up somewhere else?"

Donahue took a deep breath, walked to the door and signaled someone. "Okay, you both win."

Kyle walked into the office. "How can I help?"

"These two need to make a fast getaway to the Commander's quarters. I need to stitch the Lieutenant's arm. Feel like helping me push this gurney to their rooms?"

The ensign laughed. "We better hurry, the Surgeon was trying to stare holes in the bulkhead. She is anxious to get her hands on them."

Donahue slung his bag over his shoulder. "Come on, Lieutenant, might as well jump up. We'll push you both to safety."

"I can walk," Stefan argued.

"So can I," insisted Christoph.

"Not negotiable. You both ride or I call the Surgeon in and let her do her thing. "You asked for my help so we do this my way."

Stefan sat down next to Christoph. Scott took point and Kyle followed. They left through the side door unchallenged and with very few people staring. Most officers look away to give as much privacy as possible to the poor soul on the gurney.

# # # #

Arri listened to the overhead chatter and sent up a large pot of hot chocolate to Sickbay for the children as they arrived. He'd have to wait to send food, but at least warm drinks awaited them. Everyone had their orders. This was going to be a long day, but a rewarding one for those who had the privilege of feeding refugees, guest and crew.

One thing bothered Arri. He hadn't seen his friends Stefan or Christoph. Maybe they had come in while he was in the back cooking. The mess hall was full of tired looking people. Worst of all this recent stop wasn't part of the original mission. Who know how many times worse that might be and they were already spent.

# # # #

## **07:00 HOURS DAY 2**

All the department heads gathered for their morning briefing. Christoph was the last to arrive. He was on crutches

still clad in the grime of the Dante. No one knew it, but the inside flap was stained with Julie's blood. He took a seat near the door and Stefan, sporting a clean sling collected the crutches with his good arm and walked out.

Captain Harpy walked in. She'd taken time to freshen up and sported a clean uniform. She looked tired and poured a cup of coffee before she sat down.

Admiral Lee arrived last. She sat down and surveyed the group, allowing her gaze to linger when she reached Christoph. She would deal with him afterwards. She poured a glass of water and took a sip.

"All right, lets get started. We are back on course heading for Sarojin. I'd like an update on what we found on the Dante. Let's start with engineering. What happened with the transporter and will it be a problem when we try to beam down to the planet?"

"One pad shorted out due to an extremely strong external pull. When that ship phased out it tried to take the team beaming up. That phenomenon should not be encountered when we reach the target zone. I have a team tearing down the transporters and servicing them. They will perform when they are needed."

"Good, what about the Dante?"

"She's dead in space, Admiral. She has no working power. Her warp engines are gone and the nacelles are warped and twisted. You couldn't get spare parts from that mess. The warp core has been

neutralized. The engineer inspected the engine room and found it had been cannibalized."

Captain Harpy leaned forward.

"Admiral, we found most of the ship to be cannibalized, adapted to support life on two decks." She sipped from her coffee. "Life support was bare minimum for an adult, but for children it was more than adequate."

"What did we find on the bridge?"

"Ensign Mendosa found extreme damage. The dome was pulled away by external forces – had to be the result of being sucked into the black hole. Our computer technicians managed to pull the core elements so we in effect have her data storage units. It will require some restoration," reported Lieutenant Simmons from the Computer Science Department.

"I want logs and data pertaining to the disappearance made available as soon as possible. I want to know what happened to her crew? How many did we recover?"

Christoph cleared his throat. "We retrieved 13 officers and crew. One was DOA. Captain Vaschel said that fifteen members were alive at the last count. He could have been confused. We spotted thirteen life-forms and all were recovered."

"And what exactly are their conditions?" She stared at the blue eyes across the table from her.

Christoph never squirmed or blinked. “As I have said, Ensign Julie Robbins died in transport. In truth she was almost dead when we found her. Little could be done for her. Lieutenant Nanette Parker sustained fractures to tibia, fibula, femur and clavicle while resisting capture. Two of the very young ones have fractured arms, all are old breaks in various stages of recovery. We’ve found a lot of cuts and bruises. At first glance, all are malnourished, anemic and some have breathing issues and a couple have elevated temperatures. Until complete workups can be performed that’s the best I can give you.”

“All right, that covers the kids, what about our people?” She finished her water and poured another glass.

“We had a lot of deep gashes, a few stab wounds, about a half dozen twisted ankles. One security officer sustained severe facial and skull fractures due to an attack by a metal club. It is expected that everyone will make a good recovery.”

“I want detailed reports on my desk by 1100 hours. Meanwhile, we need a list of who was recovered. Captain Harpy will prepare a report for Starfleet Command. I have already told them we found this ship.”

“Understood,” Harpy nodded. Exhaustion was already forming deep shadows on her face.

“I would personally like to thank Arri for an outstanding buffet last night. You and your staff did this ship proud. Keep in close touch with Sickbay. I want those

kids fed as soon as possible.”

”Admiral, they’ll need to be cleaned up first. Right now they are ragged, filthy and bare footed.” Harpy wore the look of a parent who just saw their pride in joy walk in covered in mud.

Lee took a deep breath. “Not to mention they are going to be scared of us. Keep them together as much as we can and house them accordingly.”

The Counselor leaned forward. “We must access their mental states. They will feel displaced, at a loss for what to do next. They will even experience guilt for being a survivor.”

“I’m sorry, Admiral, but they have to be debriefed. Starfleet is going to demand it.” Harpy fixed the counselor with a look of someone who didn’t quite trust the counselor’s judgment.

“We will work something out once we know the medical status. If there is nothing more, we are adjourned. Commander Christoph you will remain behind. I would like to speak with you. The rest may leave.”

When the counselor failed to leave the admiral stared. “You’re services are not needed, Commander, please leave us.”

Captain Harpy stood up and walked towards the Counselor as if she might have to escort the commander out. The Counselor rose and both women walked out.

Admiral Lee sipped her water, eyes studying the Chief Medical Officer. “I

am gravely disappointed in you, Commander. Did I not tell you that you were not to be a part of the away team?"

He met her gaze. "Admiral, you stated I was not allowed to beam down to the planet. You never said I anything about beaming ship to ship."

"Don't go all Vulcan with me. You are supposed to be on limited duty, Mister, not running around like some damn hero. Have you no concern for your own well being?"

"I was not in any danger..."

"Wrong, you could have died in that transporter accident. You, Sir, are too valuable to Starfleet to risk indiscriminately. I am amending your duty status further. As of this moment, Commander, you are confined to your quarters. The Surgeon will be paying you a visit to access your condition. I will be asking specific questions and she will not be covering for you this time."

"Admiral, I chose to go to the Dane. To save our people and a few of theirs. I did what any other doctor would do given the same circumstances."

"I am not arguing that you weren't effective, You were needed and a commendation will be placed in your record. But I am worried about you. You cannot keep running around as if everything is all right. You're very ill. I've read the reports. Don't force me to send you to a Starbase Hospital. If Ensign Taaj can't help you, we'll get Captain El Haider or Captain Donahue to review your case. It's up to you."

"Captain Donahue has already perused my records. He will be sufficient. What about Lieutenant Petros and Ensign Blackthorn?"

"Oh, yes, your cronies in this little caper. I won't discipline them for being loyal. The Ensign will be given some time off to recover from the transporter incident. Lieutenant Petros has his own injuries to take care of. He will also be examined and if unable to watch over you, I will find someone else to enforce bed rest."

Chris felt himself grow paler at that threat. He looked down at the table top. "I will abide by your decisions, Admiral."

"Good, then see to it that you do. The Counselor would love nothing more than to get inside your head again. I will try to keep her from your door, but only if you cooperate to the letter. Is that understood?"

Christoph sighed and looked up. He felt defeated as he leaned back in his chair. "Understood."

Admiral Lee stood up and walked to the door. She spotted Stefan and motioned for him to come in.

"Lieutenant, I am counting on you to help Christoph to his quarters. He is to remain there until I say otherwise. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Admiral."

"Good, now get out of my sight." She walked out, leaving the boys in the briefing room.



# # # #

Christoph flung himself as best he could, onto his bed and lay glaring at the inanimate contents of his room. Sent to his own quarters, like a wet behind the ears Cadet! Anger distracted his usually methodical mind, his thoughts raging chaotically.

Stefan watched his friend trying to shift into a more comfortable position. The door intercom buzzed. Rising with a resigned sigh, Stefan opened the door. Ens. Taaj entered without speaking.

Returning to his chair, Stefan looked up at the Surgeon but the expected easy smile was absent. Taaj stood in the centre of the room, back straight, head high. Her eyes boring through the bulkhead above Christoph's bed.

"What, exactly, were my instructions to you Commander Christoph?" She asked, her voice as quiet as usual. The CMO glared up from the bed, his frustration driving him to shout at the Ensign.

"You don't understand - I had to get over to the Dante, I ha...". Christoph's voice cut off and he grabbed his throat, eyes widening in shock. Stefan began to rise, and cried out as he sat back down heavily, no longer in control of his legs. "I passed you fit for partial duties, Commander." Taaj continued in a conversational tone. "I instructed you not to attempt walking, without crutches, for several weeks yet." She looked around the room in a disinterested way as she spoke. "I did not clear either of you for an away mission."

Stefan struggled for a moment longer against the force that held him and gave up.

"I did not instruct you, Commander, to fit a walking boot and stagger off on a heroic act of stupidity."

With two swift steps she moved to the bed and caught hold of Christoph's leg, raising it abruptly for inspection, throwing him backward. Checking her scanner readings, Taaj rested the device against her chin, nodded to herself, lowered the limb and stepped away.

"You have spoken eloquently on the subject of trust, Commander." Christoph stared. "Trust, is an alien concept to Ekon. It took considerable effort to override my instinctive behaviour and place trust in you."

Stefan looked up at the Surgeon then over to Christoph.

"Perhaps it is wrong to deny our natures." She mused as she ran her scanner over Stefan, and studied the screen. "Whatever - There will be no second chance to betray me Commander." She continued in the same reasonable, quiet tone. "You have failed to follow my simplest instructions Commander, Lieutenant - you leave me no option."

Both men stared at the Surgeon.

"This will be unpleasant for you in particular Commander."

Christoph frowned, hand still gripping his throat, unable to speak.

“As you have proven un-trustworthy, I have no choice but to enforce my instructions.” She looked directly at Christoph, and he glimpsed something there, not pity, something he could not quite understand.

“Your mixed heritage has given you certain aspects of telepathy Commander, you will instinctively try to block me. Your efforts will be futile.” Her eyes locked with his. “I had no great desire to harm you, Commander, but the more you try to resist, the worse it will be for you.”

Christoph gagged, and began to cough as Taaj released control of his vocal cords. She nodded curtly to Stefan, who moved to the bed, to offer what comfort he could, relieved to be in control of his own body once more.

“Your foolish actions also force me to make a full and un-censored report of your actual condition to the Admiral.” Christoph looked up startled, but held his tongue. “Kyle will bring your next meal.”

“Taaj...”. Christoph pushed himself up, swallowing against the tightness in his throat.

“The Admiral is expecting my report.” Taaj gave a short formal bow and left. She was gone from the room, and neither man spoke for some minutes. Each considering and weighing the events of her visit and the import of her words.

“Christoph?” Stefan began hesitantly. “I couldn’t move from that chair, she held

me there totally. I couldn’t move.” Christoph caught hold of his hand.

“I know, Stefan, I know.” His eyes were haunted, and his free hand rubbed at his throat. Not able to comprehend how Taaj had been able to control his body so precisely, and to hold Stefan at the same time. He swallowed. She had warned him against resistance, he wondered just how far she could, or would, go.

# # # #

Commander Drakus Aelurus sat in her office in the security division. She would be taking a team down to Sarojin in search of Dr. Ruben Hawhar and his team who were studying the Sadzi. The data regarding the Sadzi streamed across her terminal.

They were city dwellers who had built a magnificent walled-city in the foothills of the rugged mountain range on the northern hemisphere. They had very intricate beliefs and customs that had to be understood before she went down.

As she perused the data she made mental selections of who she wanted to take along. She would prefer the company of the Vulcan scientists and they had survival skills that could be needed given the complexity of the growing disaster on the planet since the explosion.

Later in the day she would have to present her logical argument to the Marine Colonel if she was to be successful in her selections. If she had her way the Marines would stay among themselves and not get in her way with

their testosterone overloaded enthusiasm.

# # # #

Riding the turbolift up to the Admiral's office Taaj leaned against the wall deep in thought. The lift stopped a couple of times for crew to get in and out. Taaj watched them through each other's eyes. Reaching her destination deck she exited, a smile approaching a sneer on her lips. "Trust?" She thought, straightening her jacket as she approached the door to the Admiral's office. "Is a sop for the weak."

Pressing the intercom button she schooled her face to an emotionless mask as the Admiral called out "Come!"

"Take a seat Ensign!" Taylor Lee glanced at the Surgeon briefly and turned back to her screen. This problem with the CMO was a distraction she could do without at this point in time. Turning back abruptly she fixed Ensign Taaj with a stern look.

Taaj returned the look calmly. Silence stretched out, and Lee found she was almost holding her breath. Patch had been right, Ensign Taaj was not one to fold under pressure. The Admiral made a brief mental note never to play poker with the woman.

"I want an accurate record of the CMO's condition, Doctor." Taaj settled back in her chair, eyes focussing on a point midway across the room.

"Since arrival on the Aurora Vulcanus Commander Christoph has lost precisely

8.7 pounds. He had, prior to joining this Ship, suffered displaced bimalleolar fractures to both legs. I have rectified the deformed healing to one leg, the other has yet to be re-set."

Lee nodded.

"His unauthorized participation in the away mission to the Dante, has resulted in additional bruising to both muscle and cartilage tissue, the coral implants used to replace lost bone mass have suffered no displacement or damage. New bone continues to infiltrate the matrix."

Taaj paused for the Admiral to ask any questions she may have. Lee glanced at the monitor screen and back at the Ensign, signalling her to continue.

"His long term malnutrition has led to degeneration of muscle mass, in particular this is causing difficulty with his heart. This is my major point of concern at the current time."

The Admiral took a breath to speak, but Taaj continued.

"The Commander's cardio-pulmonary problems have been exacerbated by the development of pneumonia due to aspiration of vomit, following an overdose of sedative given by Nurse MacKenzie."

Lee thought she saw a slight tightening of the skin around Taaj's eyes at the mention of MacKenzie. "Was that a dose prescribed by yourself?"

"I had prescribed 15 mg of Zopiclone for Commander Christoph, and 2.5 mg for

Lieutenant Petros should either have difficulty sleeping, with instruction to use Amitriptyline at a dosage of 75 mg for the Commander and 50 mg for the Lieutenant should the Zopiclone be ineffective.” The Ensign’s head tilted slightly to one side as though listening to something, and continued. “Nurse MacKenzie did not wait to see if they would sleep without drugs, and administered Ketamine, considering the Commander’s cardiac problems, the dose was potentially lethal.”

Lee sat forward attentively. “Thankfully, the Commander’s Romulan heritage has proven useful, that aspect of his genome mix provided greater resistance than a Vulcan/Human hybrid alone would have.”

“You removed MacKenzie from all duty pending further investigation.” Lee consulted her screen. “She is still removed - do you think she could be returned to reduced medical duties before we reach Sarojin?”

“Under no circumstances, Admiral.” Taaj studied the nails of her left hand. “I will not tolerate the threat she presents to any of my patients - I’m sure she could be made use of elsewhere though, somewhere she doesn’t have contact with living things would be best.”

Lee turned to check her screen, noting the computer’s recording of the conversation.

“Commander Christoph?” She began again. “What duties is he fit for?”

“He’s not fit for any duties at this precise moment. His weight will have to

increase by at least 6 pounds before I am prepared to pass him fit for the lightest of medical duties.”

The words appeared on Lee’s screen.

“No duties at all?” Lee was shocked. They would reach Sarojin in less than 12 hours and they needed all the medical staff possible to deal with the expected casualties, not to mention the situation with the survivors of the Dante. Perhaps she should get a second opinion from one of the Doctors that had arrived on the Seleya.

“Commander Christoph and Lieutenant Petros are mine Admiral.” Lee’s eyes widened at the Ensign’s words.

“Your patients, of course.” The Admiral shook her head slightly.

“The Lieutenant will be fit for light duties tomorrow, though I will maintain control of his rehabilitation. I will do what I can to speed up the Commander’s return to duty. He will make much better progress now.”

“Given the secrecy the pair of you have demonstrated so far, how can I be sure that Commander Christoph will make the progress you promise?” Taaj blinked slowly, and Lee wondered at the almost sleepy smile on the woman’s face.

Christoph sweated, and grunted in painful effort as he tried to stop the spoonful of Quinoa and vegetables entering his mouth, without success. He struggled not to chew, to spit the food out, but his jaws worked and the muscles of his throat swallowed. Stefan looked

on desperately, unable to help his friend as Christoph reached out and lifted another spoonful of food.

“Let us say, I have seen the error of my ways, Admiral.” Taaj said quietly. “The Commander will make excellent progress now, I guarantee it.”

# # # #

Sparks checked the equipment bins looking for needed parts to enhance the communication buoy. He had a feeling they would need at least two with boosted gains and shielding to prevent damage from the debris field generated when the moon Rani exploded.

The workroom was already crowded with technicians working on sealing comm units against atmospheric elements. All of the units needed boosting so signals could cut through both distance and disruption from storms.

In his mind, Sparks kept compiling a list of all the equipment needed by both away teams. When he sat down at his desk he put together the specs and loaded them on a plastic computer disk, all ready to present at the big meeting. He didn't mind disasters just the inevitable meetings that took place when everything was still pretty much hypothetical. He had no doubt the day would be very long and trying.

# # # #

Christoph propped himself up in bed, his leg on a mound of pillows. Everyone had treated him like he'd been a bad

little boy, sending him to his room. No one cared that he'd taken a risk to save the lives of others. If they had died the blame would have been placed on him as well for failing to do his job. Either way, Chris had landed in the dead center of a Kobayashi Maru. He tried to let go of his anger. Each discipline of meditation failed miserably and the anger built. By the time Kyle arrived with their breakfast he was barely civil.

Stefan took his tray to the desk and sat down to enjoy his meal. Kyle placed the other tray on the bed next to Chris and then stepped back out of reach. “I have instructions to wait while you eat.”

Chris shook his head. So Taaj had made her next move. He was surprised she had not insisted on the Ensign feeding him like a toddler. Everything changed the moment he pulled the cover off the food. Something he could not resist forced him to pick up the bowl and the spoon. Mouthful by mouthful he was forced to chew and swallow. No matter what he tried he was forced to swallow the food. She was controlling his body and Taaj was not even in his quarters.

“I'm sorry. I wish I could help,” Kyle backed away from the bed.

Stefan rushed up. “What have you done?”

“Nothing, I brought the tray and I can't leave until he's done. I want to go, but I can't.”

When Christoph looked up at Stefan he was helpless. His hand found his mouth and forced another spoonful in. He could

feel the beast growing angrier at the loss of control. It was trying to break free. He wanted it to if it would stop him from swallowing the stuff. His eyes were changing and already he could feel the pressure of teeth wanting to descend.

He stuffed the last spoonful into his mouth and then the controlling force broke. His hand dropped the spoon and the bowl hit his lap and rolled off the bed. He coughed and gagged until he caught his breath.

“Chris, are you okay?” Stefan inched closer.

He turned his head and held up his hand. “Stay back. Leave me,” he growled unsure he could control the beast.

# # # #

LTCOL Gavrilov had read the reports about the Oseni as provided by the group leader Dr. Justin Gerhard. He had always enjoyed mountain climbing and this mission would mean a chance at some exploration. Recon could be a blast if you chose the right members.

He would not consider taking Vulcans, they were too busy analyzing everything and putting a dampener on all the fun. Still women always presented some form of liability on such a mission he would rather take them than a Vulcan. Besides, their records made them out to at least enjoy camping and hiking and that meant skills that he could count on.

Taking LT Ely-Cri Drake was a given, especially when backed up by Captain Asad El Haider and the PO3 Tigel who

could give medical back up. Who knew what sort of injuries they would find when they reached the Oseni.

As he formed up the team he also prepared his arguments so Aelurus would bend to his desire and give up any claim she had to the people he wanted. Negotiations of these sorts were very often like a well played game of chess. He grinned at the possibilities.

# # # #

Asad El Haider stood in quiet discussion with Scott Donahue to one side of triage, both glanced to the main door as it sighed open admitting Ensign Taaj. One of the nursing staff hurried to her side as she swept through Sickbay, eyes fixed on the floor.

Hardly slowing the Surgeon issued a string of commands, and disappeared into one of the offices. Reappearing almost immediately with a mug in one hand and padd in the other, she passed between them.

“Technical meeting’s through there.” She indicated with a wave of the padd.

“So much for the introduction Asad.” Donahue turned to his colleague with a grin. “A bit snippy isn’t she?” El Haider shrugged.

“A bit telepathic too - so watch what you’re thinking Scott!” He watched the Surgeon marshalling a team of technicians and smiled as she turned about, checking triage before heading for the meeting room.

Following into the briefing room, El Haider scanned the gathered team, and headed over to sit next to Soror. The Vulcan nodded once in greeting, and returned his gaze to the screen in front of him.

Taaj spoke briefly with Dr O'Neill, handing her the padd and pointing to a number of entries. El Haider wondered at O'Neill's frown and sharp look at her colleague, the squaring of her shoulders and firm nod. He watched the Surgeon leave the room.

"Ladies, Gentlemen," Dr. O'Neill was rising to her feet, and a hush fell. "Commander Christoph will not be joining us, he has been withdrawn from duty." She paused to give the statement weight. "Ensign Taaj will be manning Sickbay this morning, and can be called in as and when surgical input is required."

A brief flurry of introductions followed and then they got down to business - Sarojin.

Taaj listened at the doorway for a moment and continued on to the office, checked the schedule on her desk monitor, placed her empty mug in the replicator and walked out into triage as the main doors opened to admit a group of disgruntled crewmen.

"Gentlemen - come in - 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5." She pointed to each in turn, flicking a hand in the direction of the beds. The men moved slowly in the direction indicated, muttering amongst themselves.

"This is stupid!" Taaj looked questioningly at the speaker. "We're heading for a major disaster, you should be getting ready - not pulling people from important work!"

"Getting ready?" Taaj took a padd from a passing Nurse, signed it off and handed it back. "We" she indicated Sickbay with a vague wave of her hand, "are always - Ready." The man huffed and stood next to his allocated bed.

"It helps if you're lying on the bed - gives us a better reading from the scanners."

Grumbling he boosted up on to the bed and sat glaring at the Doctor who returned his scowl with a smile and a gesture. Lying back he glared at the ceiling.

"Excuse me, Doctor?" The Surgeon turned at the timid enquiry. A young woman stood watching the proceedings with wide, almost startled eyes.

"Ensign Q - Just the person, the meeting's through here." Laying an arm around the Ensign's shoulder in a friendly fashion, Taaj steered the woman toward the briefing room. "You!", she looked back at her unwilling patient. "Stay put - you don't want me to come looking for you."

Imogene shrank back at the sound of voices in heated debate, as several faces looked up from monitors around the table. The arm about her shoulders gripped a little tighter. "Hang in there Q." The Surgeon whispered.

“This is Ensign Q - Ship’s Archivist.” Taaj looked about the expectant faces. “I’m sure she will be able to get much more information out of the Ship’s systems, in far less time than any of us could.” Soror rose to his feet.

“Ensign.” He indicated the seat he had just risen from. “Please, take this monitor. Any assistance you can offer will be greatly appreciated.” Taaj gave her a shove, and winked at her before returning to triage.

“How are you holding up No. 4?” The man glared at her and fixed his eyes on the ceiling. “You know, come hell, high water or planetary sized disasters, the health of the crew of this Ship is our first duty.” He remained stonily silent.

“It will be some hours before we reach our destination, at which point, regular physicals will be postponed for the duration.” Taaj flicked a series of controls and noted the readings on the scanner. “Until we get there however, it’s business as usual.” She patted him on the shoulder.

“Right - that should be you for the next 12 months - off you go!” Re-setting the machinery she ignored his parting scowl. Chadwick came to her side with a report to be signed off.

“They’re all griping about coming in for physicals.” She handed the padd over.

“Fear of the unknown affects people differently.” Taaj studied the report quickly, and signed off the required prescription. “Blustering and false

aggression - young creatures the galaxy over are the same.”

Chadwick looked at the padd the Surgeon held out to her, and looked up. “Are you afraid?”

“No.”

“Not even a little bit?”

Taaj considered the question, her eyes growing distant. “No.” She held the padd out again, and Chadwick took it slowly and walked away, looking back over her shoulder with a troubled look.

# # # #

Christoph turned his head and looked at Stefan. “She has done this to me!” His voice had the eerie quality of the beast.

Stefan looked very afraid and Chris could smell the change as the human sat down on the bed. “What can I do to help you?”

Breathing heavier, he sniffed the air and found the sweet aroma of Stefan’s blood. It called to him. “You know what I require.”

He pulled his arm from the sling and then pulled both it and the tunic over his head. Stefan sat very still his broad chest heaving with every nervous breath as he slowly leaned closer.

“No! I cannot!” Chris argued with the beast.

The door chimed and before anyone could answer Commander Kylan had let



herself in. She stood there watching and reaching out to Christoph with her mind.

He looked up, his eyes already completely changed to a glowing red. His fangs had also descended to their full length. He watched as horror filled her face. She was tapping into his private hell. He took a ragged breath and pushed her mentally away!

Kylan screamed, staring at the monster.

# # # #

Captain Harpy went over her notes for the briefing. This would be a much larger crowd than the normal department heads. She needed a bigger venue and decided on the Observation Lounge. She contacted Arri to see what could be done.

“We’ll need the long tables set up in a rectangular fashion. I’ll have communications to set up a multi-sided view screen in the center. Could you also set up some refreshments? It’s been a very long morning for some of us.”

“I assume you’ll be wanting the usual coffee, tea and juice? Pastries or something heartier?”

She smiled. “To me it feels like it should already be lunch. I’ll leave it up to you. All department heads will be attending as well as the guests that came in on the Seleya. Can you handle that?”

“The room can be set up in five minutes. The food will take a bit longer.” He gave a big smile and a wink. “Don’t worry all will be ready at the appointed hour.”

“Thank you, Arri, what would we do without you?” She turned off her comm.

# # # #

Taaj switched off the scanner and eased the last of the crewmen out of Sickbay. Today’s regular physicals over and done with. The tactical meeting was progressing smoothly, only a couple of surgical queries so far.

The hours slid by and the medical storage facilities gradually filled with drugs and equipment. Chadwick sealed another crate and placed it carefully on a heavily loaded shelf. Looking about what was left of the storage space she frowned.

“Taaj?” She caught the Surgeon’s attention. “We’re running out of space in here.”

“Yes, we certainly are.” Taaj studied the storage room. Looking at the floor her eyes narrowed. “Give me half an hour, I’ll get you some more storage space.”

“It has to be chilled...”

“I know, don’t worry, I’ll get you the space.” Taaj glanced around Sickbay once and headed out the door. Chadwick stood for a moment, gnawing at a lip then turned and went to the medical replicators. If Taaj said she’d get the space, then the space would be got.

The Nurse was on her break when Taaj returned. She watched the red haired woman get her customary mug of tea and looked up as Taaj approached.

“Right then Chadwick, that’s your storage problem sorted.” Pulling out a chair Taaj sat and swung her feet up onto the desk, leaning back with a sniff.”

“Where?”

“D46-S Deck 4.” Taaj took a mouthful of her tea and cradled the mug with both hands in her lap.

Chadwick sat forward, a frown creasing her brow. “D46-S Deck 4?” Her eyes widened. “But those are your quarters, Doctor!”

“Were my quarters, until this problem is over, it’s a cold store for medical supplies.”

An emergency klaxon sounded and Taaj dropped her feet to the decking, reaching out she hit the nearest Med-comm unit. “Sickbay – state the nature of your emergency!”

“Who is that?” A voice sounded harsh and high from the unit. Taaj looked at Chadwick an eyebrow rising slowly.

“This is Doctor Taaj, Counselor Kylan?” A noise came from the comm unit, and Chadwick pointed to the Emergency Technician’s Office. Taaj shook her head.

“You’ve got to get a team down here right now, Doctor!” Kylan’s voice burst from the unit.

“Take a deep breath, Counselor, and tell me what’s happened.” Taaj was rising as she spoke, gesturing to Chadwick to keep the woman talking. She lifted a

medical kit from the rack and headed for the door.

Ignoring the turbo lifts, Taaj took to the Jefferies tubes propelling herself rapidly through the ducts towards Deck 5. Emerging into the accommodation corridor she walked briskly to her destination and keyed in the medical override.

Kylan swung around as the door opened, her wide eyed stare took in the Surgeon, Taaj – alone. The Counselor shifted her weight as though to step closer, and shrank back.

“Now then, Counselor, what seems to be the problem?” Taaj looked about the room, noting the strain showing on Stefan’s face. Her head twitched to one side, her eyes lowering and sliding toward the hunched figure on the bed.

Hands grabbed at her arm. “Can’t you see?” Taaj looked at the Counselor, who clung to her desperately. “It’s awful, unbearable.” Kylan’s voice rose as she spoke. Laying a hand over the woman’s, Taaj looked back toward Christoph.

“Stefan, please take care of Kylan for me.” Taaj lifted the Counselor’s hands from her arm and passed the woman to the Lieutenant.

Moving directly to the bed, Taaj studied the hunched figure, the Commander’s hands gripping the edge of the bed, skin stretched white across his knuckles. She crouched in front of him, placing a hand on his shoulder.

“Get away from me.” She reached out her other hand and claspng Christoph’s chin raised his head, looking into his face. On the other side of the room Kylan gasped and turned away sharply, leaning in to Stefan who looked at his friend in anguish.

Taaj looked into the Commander’s eyes and saw deep into his mind and soul. Her face softened and lit with a smile of wonder, the hand holding his chin relaxing to cup his face. She saw with eyes and mind all of this creature before her and found it to be, “Beautiful, so beautiful.” She murmured, engrossed in her study of all that was Christoph.

He stared back, his eyes a deep crimson red, his mind reaching out instinctively. Anger. He blinked. Consuming rage. His eyes widened a little. Death and destruction. An overpowering desire for – he swallowed. Faces, so many, many faces. Despised, alone, yearning. Conflicting emotions battered his senses.

His hand came up to cover hers as he realized that he was seeing into the real Taaj, not that carefully constructed shell that was on display to everyone. They leaned back away from each other, regaining control of themselves, re-asserting their mental shields. Taaj stood, withdrawing her hand slowly. She stared at the bulkhead over the bed for a moment. Turning, she smiled at the Counselor.

“Nothing to worry about, Counselor.” Kylan stared at her, looked briefly at the Commander and returned her gaze to the Surgeon.

Taaj seated herself next to Christoph, a thoughtful expression on her face. She drew a breath and exhaled slowly. “It would appear that we have more than just Medical Degrees in common, Commander.”

Christoph held himself rigid aware of the close proximity of his colleague, of the increasing need to feed that grew within. “You should not sit there, Taaj.” He growled, twisting away.

“Do you still wish to join your mind with mine – just mine?” Taaj gazed at the flooring, head cocking to one side quizzically. She glanced his way, noting the tension in his limbs. He mumbled aggressively.

“Stefan, could you sit with the Commander for a while?” Taaj stood, allowing the Lieutenant to take her seat. “Counselor.” She smiled at the ashen faced woman, indicating that she should step outside.

“What the hell is going on?” Kylan burst out as they exited into the corridor. Taaj shrugged.

“The Commander has been under great stress, Counselor, nothing more. However, emotional transference is fairly common in telepathic species.” Kylan stared, her face showing disbelief.

“Stress?” She took a couple of steps away, turned and stepped back, crowding the Surgeon’s personal space. “What I witnessed has nothing to do with stress!”

“It must seem that way, but you will appreciate the suppressed violence of the Vulcan and Romulan psyche can occasionally manifest itself quite dramatically.” Kylan looked past the Surgeon, realizing that the woman had neatly blocked her return to the Commander’s quarters.

“Thank you for calling me so promptly, Counselor, I am sure that the Commander will be all right now.” It was a dismissal, absolute and final. Kylan stared at Taaj, her eyes narrowing. Turning on her heel she began to march away.

“Counselor?” She turned back. “Your perfume is most attractive, what is it?” Exhaling an expletive, Kylan stormed away.

# # # #

Arri dispatched a team to set up the room and another set about preparing the refreshments. He decided on fruit, pastries, cold cuts, cheese, assorted veggies and small rolls for making sandwiches. Something for everyone and considering how long everyone had been at work it was also the logical choice. An army never won a war on an empty belly!

The junior cooks were already slaving over pots of chicken noodle soup and macaroni and cheese, certain to please any child. He would have hamburgers and fries for the teenagers and of course the required chocolate chip cookies. He still had to find a recipe for Coke Cola as he knew human children loved sugary drinks. Arri wanted everything ready

once the green light came to feed the Dante’s crew.

On the down side, he was required to attend yet another dreadful meeting. It was quickly becoming the one bad thing about being a department head. He checked his computer for any last minute requests for lunch and sent the menus for the patients confined to sickbay on to the monitors in the prep area. Everything would proceed as planned while he prepared to be bored stiff in another meeting.

# # # #

Ensign Hilda Von Ricktovn returned to her quarters. She’d been unable to find Arri anywhere and as a matter of fact neither was the new Captain Dream-Boat, the love of her life. She had dreamt of him all night and how they would take long walks in the moonlight along the sandy shore, the water lapping at their feet as they walked arm-in-arm.

Her comm blinked. Reluctantly she switched on the view screen. Another message from Captain Harpy detailed how the Admiral expected her revised report in thirty minutes. She slid her disc into the slot and looked at the mess, even more confused than last night.

After removing what the captain had crossed out she had very little left. There was nothing left to do but try to bull her way through. She proceeded to pad her report in the same manner she had while posted at the Academy. It had always worked there, no reason to assume it would not work here.

Fifteen minutes later she had something that at least looked like a good report to her. She had five minutes left to send it to the Admiral. She took a deep breath and hit the button. Pleased with herself she walked over and sat down on the bed to contemplate the next stage of her assignment – beaming down to the planet.

She looked over at her open closet and began making a mental list of what she might need to take with her.

# # # #

Christoph felt Stefan return to his side as he struggled to keep the beast at bay. He'd been seen and now they were both liabilities who could not be trusted. The thought of Kylan seeing him fanned the already growing anger, stirring up the desire to feed on them all.

Taaj had walked the counselor outside and he listened to their conversation, realizing that Taaj was still somehow connected to him. She didn't betray him and with relief he was able to slid up a new shield and sever the final link to the Surgeon.

Stefan's heart beat wildly as he waited, already feeling the need through the bond. His blood giving off the heady scent that was unique to the human. "Drink from me," he whispered in a deep husky voice as he brushed a hand across the Vulcan's cheek.

When their gazes locked the hunger grew. "I cannot." Christoph's voice little more than a breath of air. "You are not strong enough." He turned away

grabbing on to the edge of the bed once more.

Through their bond Chris told Stefan get a bag of blood and thaw it out. Taaj had triggered the change, she had done this to him.

The Vulcan half of him watched as Stefan went to the secret panel. In all his life he had always been the one in complete control. He pulled the strings of others, bending them to his will. His logical half started to wonder if coming to the AV wasn't some colossal mistake. Nothing had gone right since they beamed on board.

What was Taaj? How could she crawl in and out of his mind like an ant looking for food and water. With her kind of control she could conceivably kill them all if angered enough.

*//“You should have let me out! I could have ripped her to shreds! I could have drunk her dry!”//*

*//“No, you couldn't.”//* He argued in his head trying to regain some control.  
*//“Taaj is not like them.”//*

The beast watched Stefan thawing out the packet of blood. He could already smell it and his thirst grew. In two large strides Chris reached the door. He grabbed the glass from Stefan's hand as he poured the blood.

Chris gulped it down and then picked up the bag and drained it dry. Stefan backed away, his eyes as large as saucers. Finished, he wiped his mouth on the back of his sleeve and hobbled back to

the bed. On the way he became aware that the cast had been crushed under his weight. He took a deep breath and sat down on the bed. With one graceful movement Chris stretched out and rolled over, facing the wall. He felt his eyes returning to normal and the teeth had already disappeared.

Stefan approached the bed and Chris couldn't face him. He was too embarrassed, "Don't."

# # # #

Captain Harpy worked in her office preparing for the meeting. She sent notification of the meeting to each department as well as to Sickbay where the visitors were already in a meeting. She'd done all she could but something in the back of her mind nagged on and on. The one person she really needed at that meeting was not technically available. Harpy made a bold decision as she hit the comm button. "Captain Harpy to Commander Christoph." As she waited she tried not to hold her breath.

"This is Lieutenant Petros, the Commander is indisposed."

"Look, I know he is not officially on duty, but I really need his help. Is there any way you could get him to a meeting in 25 minutes?"

Stefan let out a sigh. "I can try."

"Good, I'll send you the particulars. Do the best you can." She terminated the call and prayed the Lieutenant could pull it off. She needed Christoph's experience and he wouldn't technically

be working. Besides, she was never one to squander a resource. The Admiral had dumped this mess into her lap so she was free to call the shots.

# # # #

Arri worked fast to get things set up as the XO wanted. He'd pushed his staff since yesterday and was beginning to wonder when he would be able to reward their service. It had paid to clean the lounge immediately following the party. As he checked the final arrangements he wondered how many more of these sessions he would not only need to cater but attend. Sometimes being a Department Head was not all that glorious.

He checked the prep room in the lounge and made sure it was stocked with additional needs: extra ice, condiments, napkins, chips, things that Humans always needed and usually forgot to request ahead of time.

# # # #

Christoph still faced the wall. He wasn't asleep. He was too embarrassed by his recent loss of control to face Stefan's concerning smile. Lying in the world of his own self-hatred he listened to the comm link and Stefan's conversation. As the human approached, he rolled over onto his back.

"Chris, you have to get up."

He pushed up onto his elbows and looked at his feet. "I heard the conversation, but I believe we have a more pressing problem at hand."

Following his line of vision, Stefan found the ruined cast. He moved closer to inspect the damage. "It has to be replaced. No way can you make that meeting with this thing in pieces."

"I'll have to. I can't very well waltz into Sickbay and ask for a replacement. Can you imagine what Taaj would do? See if you can find any support bandages in the cart. Maybe we can fashion it into a splint until later on."

Stefan rummaged through the drawers. "No luck, but I did find a roll of surgical tape." He held up the white silk tape.

"Better than nothing. We'll try to tape it together and if I keep all weight off of it we might get lucky and make it through the meeting. I'll get Kyle to replace it later."

With his arm in the sling and the tape in one hand, Stefan walked back to the bed. This mess would require both hands. He eased his arm from its cradle and began to wind the tape around Christoph's foot several times. He repeated the movement over and over every few inches until the entire thing looked like the back end of a zebra.

"One thing about it, everyone will see me coming." They both laughed.

Using the crutches Christoph set out as his Surgeon had originally intended. All weight removed from the wounded ankle. One thing that confused them both was the location of the meeting. Why the lounge?

They found out when they arrived. Everyone was already there, mingling and talking among themselves. Captain Harpy walked up. "I'm glad you could join us. I've a seat right here for you." She motioned to the one at the edge of the table closest to the door. "Lieutenant, I'm afraid you'll need to wait for him. I didn't clear this with the Admiral and I wouldn't want her to see you loitering about. We have some extra seats and feel free to help yourself to the refreshments."

# # # #

Admiral Lee worked at her desk. She read over the report one more time, checking her facts. It explained how the Dante was found, her condition and listed the names of the survivors. What it really lacked was an explanation for why her crew had gotten younger. There was too much data to review before they could possibly have that answer. She had the Computer Science Division already working on reconstructing the log entries and various data files. The report was the best she could come up with given the late hour of the morning. It listed the pertinent facts, enough to support her requests. She closed the document and sent it along to Sparks. He would dispatch it with the next packet to Starfleet Command.

The survivors, the children, needed to be reunited with their loving families. The real question was – did they have any still alive? Society wouldn't be willing to accept the possible implications of growing younger in a world where everyone got older. If she were in their shoes, what would she want?

# # # #

## 09:39 HOURS DAY 2

The briefing started once everyone had found something to eat and drink. Most had been up since at least 04:00 hours and the day was still young. Harpy opened the session by reviewing the Admiral's plans.

“Upon reaching Sarojin we will be sending down two large away teams. The Marines will perform standard reconnaissance, with scientists and physicians going along as support. Formalization of these teams will occur as the day goes on. Right now we need to understand how each department will support the efforts in general. We will begin with Communications.”

Lieutenant Sparks leaned forward and activated the view screen. Various communication devices filled the viewing area. “Communications on the surface will be difficult at best due to environmental factors. We have endeavored to protect the standard issue communicator from possible corrosion due to atmospheric conditions. Each unit has also been boosted in hopes of making the signals stronger and able to reach a longer distances. The head-sets, a Marine favorite, are being sealed against corroding elements and should be ready by mid-day. They are also being reconfigured to increase signal strength and range. This being said, you should have no problems communicating on the surface among the teams. If there are severe atmospheric disturbances, we may have more trouble communicating between

ship and surface. I've toyed around with an older model of communicator and found it will house needed components to provide better gain between ship and away teams. Each team will be outfitted with these as well. I would also like to suggest that transdermal tagging be used should communications go completely out. This will enable the ship to retrieve each member.”

Captain Harpy smiled and nodded. “Very good, Lieutenant, what's being planned for communication with Starfleet once we arrive?”

“Given that we have no idea how far away the planet has traveled from the USS Galveston, I would suggest we drop a communication buoy when we arrived. We can activate it and use it as a relay station. Given the fact that the Galveston is totally silent this may be the best way to reach Starfleet. I plan to look into getting communications with the Galveston established once we reach them.” He leaned back and sipped his tea.

“Arri, first off we offer our thanks for setting this up on such short notice. This man is a real miracle worker. What are your plans once we reach the planet?” She watched his expression shift to one of nervousness. She could tell he hated being put on the spot.

“With the Marines taking the away teams down I understand why the rations arrived with our guests. At least with the rations I know everyone down there will have food. We plan to have warm food awaiting the away teams return as well as for any refugees that may beam up. I



hope once a base camp is established to be able to set up a rudimentary kitchen where warm food can be provided. Meanwhile, the galley is gearing up to provide warm nourishing meals 24 hours a day during this crisis.”

Harpy grabbed a sip of steaming coffee and then looked over at the CMO. “Commander Christoph what plans have your department come up with to handle the ongoing crisis?”

“The survivors of the Dante are being treated and will soon be housed outside of Sickbay. In fact, all patients will be moved into their own quarters by the time we reach the planet. Meanwhile, my staff began to set up a make-shift hospital on the hanger deck. This facility will handle the care of patients requiring more extensive care. Sickbay itself will become a triage and emergency treatment station. If more space is needed it will be requisitioned. Stores is currently fabricating the necessary supplies. Physicians will be accompanying the away teams, enabling our ability to stabilize them earlier, thereby saving more lives.”

“Assuming we bring up refugees what will happen to them?”

All eyes once more focused on Chris. “They will be triaged for general health. Injuries will be taken care of first. As resources present themselves we will try to improve their overall condition. Experience has taught me one thing which I must share with each and every one of you at this table. You cannot save them all. No matter what we do, some are going to die. It is a cold reality.

Assess your patients and utilize the resources to save those who have a chance at a new life. Don’t try to prolong a life that would no doubt be lost in a day or two regardless of what is done.” He looked down at the table, acutely aware that she was sitting at the opposite side, staring at him, studying his every move. When he looked up their eyes locked and for an instant he felt her pull.

“What about your staff? Will you have enough?” asked T’Hara as she fixed him with her cool gaze.

“I plan to tap into every trained professional, be they AV crew or visiting physician. If we all pull our weight this will work. Also many members of the general crew are certified in first aid. Many are trained as first responders and can work in triage to assess patients as they arrive. Hopefully, the additional supplies that arrived on the Seleya will be enough to handle what ever disaster we find ourselves in.” He looked away, reaching for the glass of juice Stefan had sat before him.

Harpy smiled and nodded as Christoph looked in her direction. “Commander Kang, could we get an update on the transporter issue. I would not want to encounter the same issues when we need to beam someone up for urgent care.”

He cleared his throat in what almost sounded like a growl. “I have two teams tearing down the transporters. They will be in top order before the day is out. The pull from the Dante as she disappeared caused a minor short in one pad. We are boosting the power to the transporters in

hopes that similar forces when encountered by the planet will not cause in a repeat performance.”

“Good,” Christoph mumbled as he adjusted his position, trying to take pressure off the already smashed cast.

“What about a setting up a base camp once the teams beam down?” asked LTCOL Gavrilov.

“You find the location and I’ll beam down the materials and the manpower to set it up. Emergency shelters and generators are already standing by on the hanger deck. Other supplies are being assembled. They can be taken down via shuttles or beamed using the larger transporter. Engineering stands ready to go.”

Gavrilov shifted forward in his seat. “My Marines are always ready. We will take point and establish contact with the colonies. Those going along with us should have had some survival training. Anyone who hasn’t should let us know straight away. Teams will be balanced to provide for issues dealing with the untrained.”

Christoph hated the way he bantered the word trained around as if it were some dirty social tagging device. He was glad he couldn’t go along. Sometimes it paid to be the one left behind.

“Team leaders are already mapping out their plans of action. Using the last known coordinates we plan to drop down into the two zones. One will stay above ground while the other tries to locate those who live below. Depending

on conditions either one could be more dangerous, we won’t know until we can get some surface scans. Mechanical drones are ready to be launched once stable orbit is achieved. They will take scans and readings of the planet allowing us to have an overall picture of what is going on down there. We will not walk blindly into a trap, Captain, and we will not go unarmed.” He leaned back with a smug air of confidence.

“Very good, then, my office will be coordinating with each of you as the day progresses. The Computer Science Division has made all data regarding Sarojin available to you from any terminal.”

Captain Donahue leaned forward. “What about the Dante and her crew? Any further news?”

Captain Harpy took a deep breath. “We are reconstructing the data retrieved from their computer. Medical is still processing the survivors. Starfleet Command has been apprised of the situation and we are awaiting their reply. Formal debriefing will no doubt be carried out before the day ends. Right now we lack answers.”

“I would like to offer my assistance. If there is anything I can do to help your staff please let me know.” Donahue leaned back and others nodded in agreement. He’d offered his expertise and they were uncomfortable having not done it themselves.

Harpy stood up. “If there is nothing else, I will adjourn the formal meeting. Feel free to enjoy the refreshments and talk

amongst yourselves.” She moved closer to Christoph and leaned down. “I would like to speak with you and the Lieutenant.”

# # # #

The admiral was still deep in thought when the comm link disturbed her concentration. “What is it, Ensign?”

“Urgent call from Admiral Mackay.”

“Put it through.”

The monitor activated. The UFP symbol followed by the smiling face of Admiral Mackay filled the screen. “Lee, we’ve read your report and quite frankly we are confused. Am I right to assume you found members of the Dante’s original crew still alive?”

“Yes, we found thirteen.”

“That is amazing after fifty years. What’s this cryptic message about the survivors being physically ages seventeen to six?”

“It’s true, Admiral, we found children. Internally they are a hell of a lot older, at least parts of them are.”

There was a long pregnant pause as if the news were just sinking in. “We have not completed our discussions, but we want you to move forward with debriefing the crew, health permitting, of course. Please extend them all courtesy due their ranks. Try to make them feel safe and welcomed, Admiral.”

“That has been our intention. My people are still running exams on the more ill members. These kids were organized, but they reacted like wild animals when we arrived. Several of my own crew were injured in the process. This aberrant behavior makes me dubious of extending too much freedom at this point.”

“Understood, keep your crew safe, but debrief them. We’ll look into the feasibility of reuniting them with their families. Keep us apprised and I’ll contact you again.” He broke off the transmission from his end.

# # # #

Arri was cornered by the Vulcan couple T’Rhea and Soror.

“I’m sorry to bother you, Captain, but I would like to inquire if it would be possible to obtain certain Vulcan dishes while on board? My husband has a medical condition.”

“Of course, I can most likely meet any of your needs. We have a number of Vulcans serving on the AV.”

Soror continued to stare down at the deck plate as if embarrassed. He pulled a small blue computer disc from the pocket of his robe and offered it. “My physician has provided both diet and specific recipes.”

Arri accepted the disc. “Would you prefer to take your meals in the mess hall or shall I have them delivered to your quarters?”

“My husband needs to rest. It was a most difficult journey. If you will prepare the meal, I will collect the tray.”

“As you wish. Will you be needing some variation of this to take along on the away team?”

“Unnecessary, I have brought along Vulcan rations that meet my physician’s requirements.”

Arri nodded. “Let me know if I can be of any further service.” He gave a slight bow and walked towards the food.

Those two sure made a strange pair. He’d met other Vulcans. Most women were usually the quiet observers, allowing their husbands to do all the arranging. It was becoming all too evident who wore the real trousers in that family.

He looked up and caught Harpy and the boys moving into the corner. They sat down at a small table. Well, that couldn’t be good.

# # # #

Christoph sat staring at the table’s surface. He already knew what was coming – another lecture or scolding. Captain Harpy took the seat across from his, leaving Stefan the one remaining place. He leaned his crutches against the wall and looked up. The room felt cold and uncomfortable.

She smiled and looked into his eyes. “I wanted to thank you for saving our people and those kids despite your physical limitations.”

“The Admiral was not pleased.”

“She wasn’t on the Dante. Meyers froze...”

“It wasn’t his fault. He’s young and inexperienced. Next time he will perform better.”

“And you are very kind.” She studied his face for a moment and then sipped at her glass of juice. “I am worried about you, Christoph, especially now that I see you are barely able to move. Your cast looks like it needs to be replaced. I can’t help but wonder why it wasn’t?”

Christoph looked down at the table again. “There was insufficient time for a replacement before this briefing.”

“Oh, then it just happened? I thought it was damaged while we were on the Dante.”

“No, I was foolish and forgot I no longer wore the boot.”

Harpy laughed and it sounded like sweet music in their corner of the lounge. “We all make little mistakes. But seriously, your input has been valuable today. I hope you won’t mind, but I would like to consult you further as this mission moves forward, even if the Admiral won’t permit your actual participation.”

He looked up feeling relieved. He’d been ready for a proper verbal thrashing. “I would be honored to help in any way I can.”

She looked over at Stefan who sat munching on a cookie, like a mouse with

a piece of cheese. "And thank you, Lieutenant, for watching over Christoph. I may never really understand your symbiotic relationship, but I can respect it. We needed everyone's help on the Dante. I'm sorry you were among the injured. I trust your arm has been taken care of and you are not in a lot of pain."

Stefan smiled and looked a bit startled by her concern. "It's been stitched and bandaged. Should be good as new in a few days."

"Take care you two and if you either of you ever need a favor I trust you will feel free to call on me." She smiled as she stood up and walked off towards the food.

Chris sighed and slumped in the chair. "I'm glad that is over." He suddenly felt very exhausted and dreaded the long journey to his quarters. He was about to get up when Captain El Haider walked up with a small tray.

The Captain sat his offering on the table. Three glasses of juice and a plate of cookies. He sat down in the empty chair. "I thought you might enjoy some refreshments. Those crutches make it virtually impossible to mingle over food."

All three laughed as he handed out the glasses. "Seriously, that cast of yours has to be replaced and soon."

It never ceased to amaze Chris how humans continue to state the obvious over and over as if it were the first time anybody had seen the situation. "Yes, it does."

"I understand you were quite the hero over there. You did a great job packaging the wounded. It made our job a lot easier." He took a sip of juice and picked up a cookie. "You should ask that handsome young Ensign to fix up your leg. I'm certain she could do a better job than the Lieutenant did with the tape."

"We didn't have time to stop off in Sickbay first." Chris was beginning to get annoyed with this man.

"Well she was quite beautiful when I spotted her in the arboretum last night." He broke the cookie and popped a piece in his mouth and smiled.

"Was there something I could help you with, Captain?" Chris was tired and his patience growing thinner by the minute.

"No, nothing in particular. We didn't see much of you last night and then when the Doctor said you were withdrawn from duty I couldn't help but wonder, why?"

Chris sat up in the chair about to push it back and stand. "The Ensign can be overly protective."

"Ah, the motherly instincts of the female nature. While it can be most annoying it is still an attractive feature for any woman."

"Perhaps, but if you will excuse me, I really must be getting back. The Admiral will be most upset if she finds me here." He grabbed the crutches and scooted his chair back.

“Yes, of course, may I give you a hand?”

“We’re fine. Enjoy your snack.” With Stefan at his side he managed to move away from the table and out to the turbo lift.

He leaned against the far wall. “That man is besotted with Taaj. Wait until he tastes her wrath.”

They both laughed.

# # # #

Admiral Lee read through the final medical reports on the survivors and her away team. They had been very lucky that no one was killed. It frightened her to think people could be reduced to wild animals in an effort to sustain life.

Captain Harpy walked in from her briefing and dropped on to the couch.

“You look tired,” the admiral said as she poured a cup of coffee from the carafe and held it out towards her XO. “Here you need this more than I do.”

Harpy got up and took the cup. She settled back onto the sofa and took a sip. “I am tired but we’ve a great deal to do before I can even consider a nap.”

“I heard from Starfleet. They want us to move forward with the debriefing. Meanwhile, they are looking into the possibility of reuniting these kids with their families.” She leaned back in her chair.

“That’s got to be one difficult call to make, given the state of the situation. Some of them are almost ninety and yet they look only seventeen. I wonder if they have any family members still alive? Glad I’m not the one making those decisions.” She yawned.

“I have an idea. We all need to rest before we begin debriefing anyone. Let’s start at 13:00 hours. You will have time to catch a nap and the kids will have time to eat and sleep. Maybe if we are all fresh no one will buckle under the strain.”

Harpy drained the cup. “Sounds like a good plan.” She sat the cup on the edge of the desk and walked out.

Admiral Lee returned to her reports and began making a list of questions. Many needed probing into and she had no doubt that some would bring back painful memories. The questions for the medical staff were growing exponentially.

How had their aging been reversed? What would be the long term implications of such a condition? Could it be reversed? Could being exposed to these people pose any potential threat to her own crew?

Lee had a feeling that the entire Life Sciences Division would be pondering the cellular implications of what they’d found. She made a note to ask T’Hara to take a look at the data as well. No point in wasting potential even if it might mean exposing Christoph to her affections once more.

# # # #

Arri returned to the galley happy that he wasn't a Marine. There job sounded like a real nightmare. He much preferred catering to the millions than trying to find the proverbial needle in the haystack they were expected to perform when they reached Sarojin.

The children, or rather the officers, were being fed in the mess hall and they looked half starved and in need of clothing, a bath and some sleep. Their appetites seemed to be good and when no one was watching they smiled and teased one another as if they were siblings.

He smiled and went into his office to check on special requests from Sickbay. Five of the Dante's crew were still patients in the ward and he found the usual detailed instructions for their dietary needs. Seems the dietitian was working overtime. He passed the menus on to the cooks.

# # # #

Christoph lowered himself onto the bed and sighed. He was exhausted from the effort it had taken to attend the latest meeting. His chest ached and his arms felt like wet noodles. He propped the crutches against the bulkhead and stretched out. He closed his eyes and listened to Stefan as he put things away and looked after all the smaller details of life.

"Lieutenant Petros to Ensign Blackthorn."

"Kyle here, what can I do for you?"

"We have a bit of a problem in the Commander's Quarters."

"Understood, do you need anything special?"

"Casting materials."

Kyle chuckled. "On my way."

Chris listened as Stefan walked towards the bed. "He is coming."

"Have I ever told you how well you have mastered the art of cryptic messages?"

They both laughed. "I wasn't sure who might be listening in. Can I get you anything?"

He opened his eyes and looked up at his companion, shivering. "No, I'm too tired."

Stefan picked a blanket off the linen cart and covered Chris. He grabbed the scanner from the bedside table and ran it over the Vulcan.

"You don't need to tell me. I already know I'm running a fever."

The human walked into the bathroom and returned with two white tablets and a glass of water. "Here, take these now before it gets worse."

Chris pushed up on his elbow and reached out to take the medicine. He washed it down with the water. He put the half empty glass on the night stand

and was lying back when the door to his quarters opened.

Kyle had let himself in and was heading for the bed. “Don’t be angry. The Captain insisted in coming along.”

Donahue walked behind Kyle and when he moved to the side he wore a wide smile. He had a large medical bag slung over his shoulder. “I thought you might be in need of a real Physician.”

“What happened to this?” Kyle asked as he examined the cast.

“Can you replace it?”

The ensign smiled as he pulled out his scanner. “I should be able to do something.” He ran his scanner the length of Christoph’s leg. “I’m really confused,” he said as he looked up at the Vulcan. “I checked your records before I left Sickbay. Taaj took scans earlier today and this doesn’t add up.” He looked perplexed as he studied the readings.

“What do you mean?” asked Donahue as he moved to stand next to the ensign. He checked the scanner. “What’s wrong?”

“According to this scan the bone mass has increased by one week of growth. That’s impossible.”

Donahue took the scanner and ran it over the leg again. “No the scanner isn’t lying.”

“Taaj took her readings three hours ago and since then there’s been a least a weeks worth of bone mass. How can that

be?” Kyle looked at Donahue and then they both looked at Christoph.

The Captain moved to the side of the bed and ran the scanner from head to toe, taking full scans of Chris. “The bone growth is not the only change. You had esophageal ulcerations and now I can find no trace of them. It would seem that your stomach had stopped sending digestive juices to your throat days ago. I do however, detect some red blood cells still within your digestive tract.”

Chris met their confused looks. “I fed earlier and it triggered the regeneration process. It works on the cellular level and would account for your readings.”

Kyle’s wide-eyed stare turned into to a jaw dropping moment. “Wow!” He shook his head and regained his professional composure. “Okay, I can replace the cast, but you’re not gonna need it for much longer. Next time you’re in Sickbay we can see about fitting you with a proper walking boot. Unless you’ve healed further and don’t need the cast at all.”

“The leg has healed as far as this feeding will permit.” He smiled at their astonished looks. Stefan stood to the side trying not to laugh at their reactions.

“Could you heal other injuries, say internal organs for instance?” You could see the Captain’s mind racing to its conclusions.

“If you are referring to my heart, no, I cannot repair it. It would require a great deal of blood and my supply is quite limited. No, time will sort that issue out.



It isn't the first time I have had this sort of problem."

Donahue moved closer. He leaned down over Chris and ran his scanner over his patient's chest and the location of his Vulcan heart. "Maybe not, are you experiencing any tightness in your chest?"

"A little, it was a long way back from the meeting."

"My scans indicate something is attacking the lining which protects the muscle of your heart. I need to run some tests to be certain, but if it is an infection you will require immediate treatment."

"No, if there was something wrong I would know it. I'm tired, nothing more."

Stefan sat down on the edge of the bed and grasped Christoph's hand. "Please, Chris, listen to him. You're already running a fever, something must be wrong."

"What would it hurt to let me take some blood? I'll run some tests and we'll see where we stand. I won't haul you down to Sickbay."

Chris looked from one worried face to the next. "All right, run your tests and scans if you must, but let me rest."

Kyle finished his work on the cast and then drew the blood samples. Donahue ran some additional scans and started to leave. They turned back to watch Stefan making Chris more comfortable, covering him with extra blankets.

He closed his eyes and listened as the three walked out into the corridor. Using the bond, he listened to every word they spoke.

"Look, I can't be sure what is causing this new infection. I'll process the blood and contact you as soon as I know something. Keep your friend warm and quiet." Donahue placed a reassuring hand on Stefan's shoulder.

Chris could feel Stefan's worry as he walked back into the room. He sat down in the chair next to the bed and asked, "Can I get you anything?"

He opened his eyes and smiled at Stefan. "I'm fine. How's your arm?"

"It's sore, but don't worry about me, Chris. Take a nap it will make you feel better." He smiled and stretched his legs out in front of him. His own eyes growing heavy.

# # # #

Going over all the reports, Admiral Lee began listing questions for medical to answer. Problem was the only geneticists on board were Christoph and T'Hara. Each time the Admiral asked for answers she was given the same reply, "Unknown at this time." She needed solid facts and she hesitated to consult Starfleet Medical without exhausting her own people first.

"Admiral Lee to Sickbay."

"Ensign Taaj here. What can I do for you?"

“Has anyone in your department come up with an explanation for the genetic anomalies in our young guests?”

“We are charting unknown waters, Admiral. Answers will take time.” The woman’s expression was one of neutrality as she gave a lop sided smile.

“Yes, that’s what I thought you would say. I’ve decided I am going to give you some help, Ensign. I want you to tap into the genetic knowledge of Commander Christoph and Doctor T’Hara.”

“The Commander has been withdrawn from duty and is unavailable. I will contact Doctor T’Hara.”

“Ensign, has the Commander’s brain been impaired by his physical condition?” Lee wanted to watch her squirm.

“No, Sir,” she replied without so much as blinking.

“You put him off duty to rest his body. Could he not give you an appraisal of the data while staying in bed?”

“The object of rest, Admiral, is to be quiet in both body and thought.”

“Ensign, I am ordering you to at least show him the data. Tap into his expertise and then work with T’Hara. Perhaps if he feels needed it will hasten his recovery time.”

Taaj’s expression turned dark, so she was annoyed after all. “Admiral, it is against my better judgment but I will comply with your order and brief the

Commander, Sickbay out.” Taaj terminated the call on her end.

Admiral Lee was growing more certain that the Ensign could be a real impedance to the function of Sickbay, or she might surprise them all and turn out to be a fine officer someday.

Now she needed to drop the other shoe, so to speak. She activated the comm link. “Admiral Lee to Doctor T’Hara.” She waited while the Vulcan learned of the page.

Two minutes later the comm channel opened. “T’Hara here.” The woman wore a neutral expression.

“I’m sorry to intrude on your preparations, Doctor, but I really need someone with a strong background in genetics to review the data we’re compiling on the young survivors of the Dante. Would you be willing to take a look and give me an appraisal?”

“I would be honored.”

“Ensign Taaj is in Sickbay. She’ll find you a place to work and supply you with all of the data. I look forward to hearing your theories on the matter.” She turned off the comm and let out a sigh. It was done. It may not have been the wisest move considering Christoph’s history with this woman. She needed answers and two heads were always better than one.

# # # #

Ensign Blackthorn and Captain Donahue made a quick return and Stefan escorted

them into the sleeping area. Chris tried to push himself into a sitting position and gave up, too exhausted to really care.

Donahue wore a huge smile as he walked over to the bed. "Commander, I have to say you are genetically amazing."

"Really?" He studied the human faces and shook his head. They were like a bunch of kids discovering a shiny new toy.

The Captain sat down in the chair next to the bed. "I have compared earlier scans with those we just took and something is definitely changing. On the cellular level there is massive activity as if your body were replacing old cells with bright new ones. In your case it's almost like an invasion, if you will. I believe that is what is causing your fever." He ran his hand scanner and shook his head. "Still rising. I ran your blood work and there is absolutely no sign of infection. Of course it is too early for the cultures to show anything, but I will bet real money they are going to come back negative. Your blood counts are all normal except for your copper level and it is still dropping..."

"How? I'm not bleeding anywhere."

"It could be internal, maybe GI..."

"No, I have none of those signs."

"Then perhaps there is another reason. You may not be producing any new platelets. You could be using up what you already have. Without producing

new cells, your counts would continue to fall."

Chris stared at the space near the foot of his bed. When he looked up he saw the worried faces of Kyle and Stefan. Was it even possible? Bone marrow produced blood cells on a regular basis. Why wasn't his? "Could we perform a test to confirm the lack of cell production?"

Donahue chewed his lower lip. "We could, but I'm worried it could do more harm than good. I really need to run this by someone with greater knowledge of Vulcan physiology..."

"No, absolutely not."

Stefan moved to sit on the foot of the bed. He put a reassuring hand on Christoph's good leg. "Come on, Chris, T'Hara is already on board. You know she is your best choice..."

"Hold on," Donahue interrupted. "I could ask her to review the case. She wouldn't have to know who the patient actually was."

He met the human's gaze. "I would rather not stir that particular pot."

Donahue smiled and dipped his head. "I believe you will find she is already on the job. When we left Sickbay Taaj was begrudgingly letting T'Hara use your office. Seems the Admiral wants answers only a genetics specialist can provide."

"Damn," Chris said under his voice. "She does seem unavoidable. All right treat my case as hypothetical and get

your answers. But please do not tell her who the patient really is.”

Stefan stared at Chris, his hand still on the Vulcan’s shin. “Why not, she’s gonna find out sooner or later anyway.”

He looked down at the blankets and sighed. “I may as well explain things to all of you. Unbonded female Vulcans are naturally attracted to unbonded males. Nature steps in when we ignore things.”

“But I was under the impression she had the hots for you because she likes human men.” Stefan wore a confused expression as he tipped his head to the side.

“She prefers humans. Nevertheless, her attraction to me is natural given the fact that I was never bonded in childhood. She doesn’t understand that it is part of what draws her to me.”

Donahue cleared his throat. “It does explain a great deal. I will use discretion. Right now I want you to rest. I’ve cancelled the antibiotics, you don’t need them and it should help your stomach.”

“Thank you, does Taaj know?”

“Not yet, I made it appear as if the medication had run its course. Kyle will bring your meals as planned. He’ll keep you informed on what turns up. Meanwhile I don’t want you to lie there worrying. Complete rest is your best ally at the moment. Can you sleep or do you need a little help?”

“I can sleep.”

Donahue stood up and placed a hand on Stefan’s shoulder. “Take care of him and I’ll be in touch.” He and Kyle turned and walked out.

# # # #

T’Hara read through all of the data. How did this happen? What event could have caused the mutations, if indeed that is what she witnessed in the slides. She was soon lost in her own thoughts as they raced through the possible implications.

Captain Donahue walked into the CMO’s office. “Could you spare a moment, Doctor?”

She looked up at him. “How can I help you?”

“I’m in a bit of a dilemma with a recent patient.”

“Please sit and enlighten me.” She gave him a half smile as she studied his handsome face.

“My patient is a Vulcan hybrid and for the life of me I cannot understand why he is not producing platelets.”

“Are you certain? That is very rare for Vulcans. Have you considered any recent injuries, active bleeding, or other causes for blood loss?”

“There is none that I can detect. He did suffer severe malnutrition and his copper count is quite low.”

She studied his face. He was not telling her everything. Human’s chewed at their

lips when they were nervous. “Have you given this patient a transfusion?”

“Impossible at this time, given his genetic makeup.”

She took a deep breath and let it out as a sigh. “You have a serious problem, Doctor. Has the patient sustained any orthopedic injuries within the past three years?”

“Yes, bilateral ankle fractures. They were improperly set and one has recently been corrected.”

“Was anything unusual found during the surgery?” She watched as he shifted in the chair.

“Nothing was reported by the surgeon.”

“Then I would consider replicating the lost blood by adding elements based on his genetic signature.”

“You wouldn’t consider any testing of the bone marrow?” He looked rather confused.

“What you propose is very difficult. Vulcan bones are extremely dense and the marrow is not easily dislodged. It could have been studied at the time of surgery, assuming some hardware was necessary to repair the ankle. Small cuts into the bone would have yielded testable materials. Still, if the problem is as severe as you say, one might have to consider donor marrow to restore blood production. Unless of course, you opt for chemical stimulation.”

“Is that even possible?”

She nodded and glanced down at her hands folded on the desk. “Some experiments have been conducted. A drug was created which turns on blood production and allows the body to replace its own lost supply. I must caution you, it is very risky as it puts a strain on the liver and spleen.”

He smiled and his face lit up as if the sun had shown down on him. He was so handsome it made her heart beat faster. “I shall look into the research. Thank you, Doctor.” He got up and walked out of the office.

In her mind she was making a list of possible patients and none of them fit the criteria he mentioned. Who was this mysterious hybrid?

# # # #

## **13:00 HOURS DAY 2**

The debriefing took place in the usual formal manner. The Board was comprised of Admiral Lee, Captain Harpy, Commander Kylan and Doctor O’Neill standing in since the CMO was unavailable. The briefing room had been set up in typical military courtroom fashion. There was a long table at one end for the board to sit at. Flags stood in their customary place on each side. A smaller table sat in the middle of the room for the person being interviewed. On the side was a smaller workstation for the court reporter and in the back were several rows of chairs.

Eight members of the Dante’s crew were herded into the room by a Security Officer. They were clean, fed and after a

nap looked less like wild animals. The ship's stores had managed to replicate appropriate uniforms from the Dante and it seemed to help with their demeanor. They sat down in the empty chairs in silence. Two girls clasped each others hand. The security guard took his station at the door.

After a formal boatswain's whistle sounded, members of the board walked in and the officers stood at attention. Once everyone found their seats, a nervous hush fell over the room. The girls huddled together in the back of the room.

Admiral Lee struck the ships bell three times and then began. "Let the record show that as of 1300 hours the Board has convened to debrief the seven surviving members of the USS Dante. The other five are still under the care of Sickbay. Their testimonies will be heard at a later date. Does anyone have any questions before we begin?"

Pregnant silence filled the small room. The admiral looked at the young faces and then at the board. "Very well, the board calls Karol Vaschel to the stand."

The lanky lad stood up and walked to the small table. He pulled out the chair and sat down, folding his hands on the table.

"Please state your name, rank and position for the record," instructed Ensign Pricott, acting as Court Reporter.

"Karol Vaschel, Captain, Commanding Officer of the USS Dante." He kept his voice level despite its tenor quality.

"Could you please tell us, in your own words, what happened to your ship the day Xhosa became a black hole?" The Admiral watched as he fixed his blue eyes on the table where she sat.

"The Dante was in a position we believed to be a safe distance from Xhosa. While at station keeping, we recorded as much data as we could. Our mission was to observe the birth of a black hole. We were unprepared for the rapid shift in planetary dynamics which pushed the event horizon beyond our location. As we watched the planet collapse in on itself, our ship was sucked into the growing gravity well. The ship passed through the black hole and into what we believed to be another universe."

"When your ship appeared, we discovered massive structural damage. When did that occur?" asked Captain Harpy. She let her eyes stray past the captain as she watched the reactions of the other officers. The girls huddled together, clinging as if afraid something would happen if they let go of each other.

"The gravity well was inescapable. It latched onto my ship, drawing us farther and farther in. You could hear the hull snap and pop. Within the ship it appeared that reality was being stretched and warped. We all lost consciousness at one point. I believe the nacelles were twisted by those forces." He shifted in his chair, starting to slouch like a teenager.

“Was that when the dome of the bridge exploded?” Kylan watched his every move.

Karol chewed his bottom lip. “No, we were on the bridge when the event horizon expanded. The bubble was lost during the sixth phase. By that time most of the bulkheads were vulnerable to forces which made them unstable.” His eyes looked haunted and he pulled himself up from his slouch.

“Would you define unstable?” asked Captain Harpy as she leaned forward.

“Solid objects experienced molecular changes. Sometimes you could pass your hand through metal deck plates and heavy furniture.”

Admiral Lee met his gaze. “You stated that the ship ‘phased’ what exactly do you mean?”

“A scientist could better explain the phenomenon. It was more like a shift from one plane of existence to another. The chronometers would run backwards sometimes. Stars would appear in positions different than found in the known star charts. It was very difficult to hold on to any sense of time or place.” He looked down clearly disturbed by his own revelation.

“What happened to your crew, Captain?” Dr. O’Neill narrowed her eyes, looking beyond the young Captain. “You had 210 souls on board. Why did we find only thirteen?”

“Going through the black hole affected the crew – our bodies. Each phase took a

further toll. Some died when the ship re-solidified. They would be trapped in the bulkheads or other solid objects. We noticed after about a dozen phases that it was starting to affect our bodies. Each phase made us physically weaker. A sickness soon crept among us. The youngest members of the crew fell ill first. Overnight we began to notice that the older members were starting to look and feel younger.”

The Admiral’s expression changed to one of great concern. “Are you saying that the crew died in phasing and that the surviving members continued to experience changes to the point you grew younger and smaller?”

“Yes, and we learned something else. As we became younger we soon discovered that as you reached six years of age you were unable to physically stand the stresses of the phase itself. The next phase would kill you. Some of your own crew witnessed that when Ensign Julie Robbins died.”

O’Neill nodded and continued in a cold clinical voice. “An autopsy is scheduled for later today to help us understand those changes...”

“No!” yelled an older teen, the large burly one. He wore science blue and jumped to his feet. “You cannot perform an autopsy! We must be allowed to take care of her! We promised her.”

The Doctor gave the lad a hard stare. “Commander, she is dead, there is nothing to be taken care of.”

“Please, don’t cut Jules up!” screamed the youngest girl, her tears streaming down her face.

The Admiral picked up the small hammer and struck the desk three times. “I want everyone to calm down. We will entertain no further outbursts. Do you understand?”

Vaschel turned around in his seat and gestured to his crew. They sat back down and he turned around to face the board. “I apologize for their conduct.”

Commander Kylan watched the girls dab at their tears and the Commander put a reassuring arm around the sobbing girl’s shoulders. “Captain Vaschel, how were your dead comrades laid to rest? Did you bury them in space?” Her eyes fixed on his blue ones as she probed his mind. Waves of emotion assaulted her mind, forcing her to withdraw.

“At first we did. Using the photon torpedo bay we ejected their bodies into space. As we lost all power we had to find other ways. I must ask you to understand, Commander, survival means doing everything necessary to prolong life. I had no other choices.” He averted his eyes, clearly uncomfortable with her stare.

Admiral Lee regained control of the inquisition. “How exactly did you manage to survive? I know for a fact the food stores would have run out. You would have needed water and oxygen.”

“Hydroponics extended the food supply and strict rationing took care of the rest. Eventually we learned to make use of

bodily wastes and decay.” He looked down at his hands as he rang them, clearly a sign of distress over what he’d done.

“Are you saying that you treated a fallen comrade as if he were an animal destined to feed a family?” Dr. O’Neill wore a appalled look and her voice dripped with disgust.

“Yes,” he whispered, barely audible as a tear slid down the young face.

The silence in the room became unbearable. Even the sobbing girl was quiet. Captain Harpy found her voice first. “Admiral, I believe we would all benefit from a small recess.”

Admiral Lee nodded. “We shall reconvene in fifteen minutes.”

# # # #

Stefan sat at the desk reading a favorite novel on the view screen. Christoph had fallen into a deep sleep. He wanted to stretch out too, but hesitated not wanting to wake Chris. Instead he settled on a blanket and an old friend, “Dune”. With the blanket wrapped around his shoulders he was soon lost in the book. His head started to nod as he fell asleep.

Turning off the monitor, Stefan pulled the blanket around and draped it over him from head to toe. The room had grown colder and he was shivering. Too tired to get up and adjust the thermostat, he leaned back in the chair and rested against the bulkhead, giving over to sleep.



With a sharp sting at his neck, his eyes flew open. Taaj stood over him as he sat up. “What?”

She placed a hand on his shoulder. “Easy, Stefan, you’re running a fever. Are you in pain?”

“Some, why are you here?”

Taaj applied another hypo spray and then moved to stand before the desk. She held up seven plastic disks. “The admiral wants Christoph to review these files. I argued against it and was overruled.”

“He’s asleep.” Stefan ran a hand through his hair.

“I know, I checked on him before I woke you. Would you give him the message when he wakes?”

“I will.”

She gave him a smile and turned before walking out the door. “If either of you need anything, call me. I do not wish to see you suffer.”

# # # #

The small band of survivors made use of their recess to console the girls. Karol fetched a cup of water for the youngest who was still sobbing. Andreas held her tight trying his best to be of comfort.

The Debriefing Board had moved back into the adjacent room where they could observe behavior via the view screen. “It’s hard to believe a human being can be reduced to cannibalism in order to survive.” The Admiral shook her head.

“I’m not certain I could give the kind of orders that Captain Vaschel had to make.”

“It is absolutely disgusting,” muttered Dr. O’Neill as she watched.

“Would death be more honorable in your eyes, Doctor? Would you prefer they participated in mass suicide?” asked Commander Kylan.

“Yes, it would be preferable over eating another human being.”

Kylan moved a few steps away from the Doctor, in obvious reaction to the woman’s emotions. “Perhaps, but one never knows to what lengths he might go to in order to remain alive. One can never say for sure until faced with that situation. It takes great courage, Doctor, to put the life of your crew before every decision.”

“Eating one another is not a very moral decision.” O’Neill moved towards the replicator and selected a cup of tea.

“Morals are often a luxury one cannot afford if one is to survive. Captain Vaschel had a great deal of lives to watch over.”

“Oh, your saying it’s all right to eat your crew mate if he’s already dead. What if they aren’t dead and your starving? Would it be moral to kill one man so others could live? I for one do not live by your shades of gray.”

“No, you do not, for in your own stubborn way everything is black and white. If it is off a shade then you excise

the flesh away. Your own prejudices provide the gray areas in your world, Doctor.” Kylan moved to the opposite side of the room as if suddenly the very air had become polluted.

Captain Harpy, who had watched the argument grow decided it was time to speak with the Doctor. She approached from behind. “Doctor O’Neill, I must ask if your emotional bias is getting in the way of your objective observation. As a board we must remain neutral to weigh all the facts.”

She spun on her heel splashing her tea on her uniform. “Are you asking me to step down?” Anger flashed across her cold eyes and threatened to erupt.

Admiral Lee had heard enough. She turned away from the view screen. “I am sorry, Doctor, but I must ask you to leave. I will find someone else from medical to take your seat. It is clear that you are too judgmental in regards to these proceedings.”

O’Neill put her cup in the bin and huffed out of the room. With her exit they faced another dilemma – who could replace the woman?

“I really need Commander Christoph, but he isn’t up to the strain.”

“What about Ensign Taaj?” asked Harpy as she walked closer to Admiral Lee. “She is very experienced and does not appear to have issues of prejudice...”

“No, not her. Maybe we should look outside of our ship. What about Captain El Haider or maybe Captain Donahue?

They are both Combat Physicians. Surely they have seen this sort of thing and understand the requirements for survival and what it can do to the body and mind.”

Kylan turned to face her friend and smiled. “You want Captain El Haider. He has served on similar boards and has demonstrated the neutrality we need.”

“Well, Harpy, care to see if you can locate the man? Also we may as well get Arri to bring our guests some refreshments. Maybe with something to nibble on they will feel better.”

“Aye,” she said moving to the corner workstation to complete her tasks.

Admiral Lee pulled a chair over and watched the kids while Kylan joined her. “Thank you, that woman had to go. She was upsetting them and contaminating the environment.” She paused and turned her head to study the Counselor’s face. “How vulnerable are those kids?”

“The young officers are very scared. I sense a great deal of guilt in the Captain. Survival guilt is normal. And we should not be alarmed if any or all of them break down during the proceedings.”

“I know they are seasoned officers, but I see a bunch of scared kids that need mothering.” There she had said it and now maybe she could move beyond the desire to comfort each and every one of them.

“It is a very normal reaction, Admiral. As a female we experience our maternal nature when we see a child that is hurt or

abandoned. Perhaps having a male on this board is exactly what we need to ensure we maintain the required objectivity.”

# # # #

Commander Drakus Aelurus sat at the table looking over personnel rosters. She sipped on a cup of tea, awaiting the arrival of Lieutenant Colonel Gavrilov. Somehow they had to finalize their teams. Working with Starfleet Marines was always trying in the best of circumstances.

He marched into the situation room with his aide in tow. Enough testosterone walked in through the door to ignite a war. They sat down at the table and laid computer disks before them. The aide placed a pad before himself and held the stylus ready to make required notes.

She took a deep breath and began. “Colonel we have to firm up these away teams. I’ve made a preliminary list of who I would like for my team.”

“Of course you did. I too have taken the liberty to outline my choices.” He slipped a disk into the viewer and on the screen appeared a list of names. “Of course I would prefer Captain El Haider for medical, I’ve worked with him in the past. I also plan to take along Lieutenant Ely-Cri Drake.”

“I surmised as much.” She knew his preferences and was prepared to give him the two he wanted. She put her own list into the viewer and in a moment both appeared side by side. “Your two requested members are of no concern to

me. But I must insist that T’Rhea and Soror come with us. Especially in light of the fact that T’Rhea was a member of the surface colony.”

A small smile broke out on his rugged face as he looked up to meet her gaze. “I have a better proposal. Why don’t you take all the Vulcans. Doctor Daniells and Doctor Aurek will be quite adequate. Do you happen to know if either of them have any survival training?”

“According to their Starfleet dossiers they have limited training in that area. It should keep them alive if given adequate instructions along the way.”

He chuckled. “Good, never did like women too prone to taking the lead at every turn. The admiral asked me to make a concession in this selection of our teams. She wants Ensign Hilda Von Ricktovn, the Chief Planetary Science Officer, to go along with us. I pulled her service jacket and the woman will be a complete liability to any team.”

Aelurus nodded her left eyebrow climbing up under her bangs. “Yes, you are correct. Whoever takes her along must be prepared to watch her every move. She will be like an infant going into a war zone.”

“Well, I’m afraid the Ensign will become our first casualty. She needs to be on the surface team to do her job, but it will mean you’ll have to take a baby-sitter along. Perhaps since you are a woman, the Ensign will listen to you.”

“An illogical assumption given that the Ensign has spent a great deal of time in

my brig. The woman is a complete screw up and I can't help but wonder how she has managed to stay in Starfleet."

He looked down at the table, his brows moving closer together. "Perhaps this is exactly what is needed to finish off her career. Would you prefer one of my Marines to go along as that sitter. I could find someone who won't cave under her whining attitude."

"That might just be an excellent idea. Too bad we cannot wait and send her along with Captain Harpy once we find a location for the Base of Operations to work from."

He looked up and smiled. "I would love to but Admiral Lee was adamant she go down in the first landing. Seriously, I believe we need to make sure our teams have members trained in tactical weapons. We have no idea what chaos we may be walking into. I took the liberty of selecting equipment for my team. I put a list on here, in case you need assistance in that area." He pushed a red disk towards her.

"Unnecessary, my team is already packed and assembling their gear in the staging area. I know how your mind works, Colonel, and I happen to know you have done the same. This meeting was more a formal matter to appease Command."

He rose and laughed. "You are very good. Then I shall file my report with Admiral Lee and leave you to make yours." Gavrilov and his aide marched out with their masculine air of authority.

She let out the breath she had been holding. Why did human males require so much posturing? It was a totally illogical behavior and she for one was happy the colonel was not going to be on her team.

# # # #

Arri did his best to throw together some refreshments for the young officers. He made sure there was juice and cola as they seemed to be the favorites. After selecting sandwiches made from cold cuts with trimmings they could add, he selected fruit and chocolate chip cookies. He loaded it all on the small push cart and headed to the briefing room.

The Dante's crew sat huddled in the corner and when Arri pushed the cart in, he couldn't find an appropriate table to lay out the food. He tapped his communicator, "Captain Arri to Crewman Yenni."

"Yenni here, Sir."

"Grab one of those small folding tables and bring it to the Briefing Room. Admiral Lee ordered food for the survivors and there's no place to put it. Hurry."

"On my way."

He watched them sit there trying to comfort the young girl. What had the board done to reduce an officer to tears? He grabbed a couple of the napkins and approached. "I'm sorry they did this to you." He held out the napkins and a

small frail hand reached out and took them.

“Thank you,” she sobbed and then opened one to blow her nose.

“Admiral Lee felt you might be getting hungry. When the table arrives I’ll set up the refreshments and you’ll be able to help yourselves.”

A huge smile broke out on the Captain’s face and his eyes sparkled with tears he could barely contain. “Thank you.”

The door open and in walked the Tellarite with the folded table. Together they made quick work of assembling the refreshments. Yenni walked out returning to his duties.

Captain Vaschel walked over with cautious steps. He picked up a glass of juice and a cookie and took it to the young girl. She took a sip, choked and sputtered. The burly Commander held the glass as she reached out for the cookie. The officer held it in both hands and nibbled around the edges, eyes roving the room as if looking for someone or something that might be watching, waiting to steal her food.

Arri moved closer. “You are safe here. No one will steal your food. We have plenty to share.”

The young Captain looked up and smiled. “Old habits take a little while to break.”

“Yes, they do and you have watched over them for so long. Now it is time to

see to your own needs. Please, help yourself, I know you are hungry.”

Vaschel moved to the table and picked up a sandwich and a glass of cola. He sat in the nearest chair and munched. “It’s good.”

“I can fix anything you would like. It’s just hard to know what young officers might enjoy.”

He laughed. “We’re not that young. I’m actually ninety-five years old, but I still like a good juicy hamburger and fries.”

“Maybe you could make a list of the things you and your friends would like to eat. I’ll see what I can do to work them into the menu. I know there must be something you have missed over the years.”

“You have no idea. I will see about that list.” He took another massive bite and the sandwich was gone.

“If you will excuse me, Captain, I must be getting back to the galley.” He bowed, collected the cart and was on his way. It felt good to help them and he wanted them to feel safe enough to enjoy their food.

# # # #

T’Hara walked out into triage. Taaj was with young Ensign Maverick who was still having some problem with his asthma. The surgeon was administering another breathing treatment as the Vulcan walked up. “Doctor, I will require a DNA sample from each

survivor as well as each member of the away teams.”

Taaj looked up. “I understand. When I am finished I will collect the specimens. Where will you be?”

“In the lab.” She turned and walked out of Sickbay. What she really needed was to see Christoph. She had a few theories she wanted to run past him, after all, he had been her instructor. It only seemed logical to consult him before she started the actual experiments.

She had another reason to see Christoph, he had evaded her last night at the party. She wanted to see him for more than professional reasons. Her mind wandered as she walked. Was he married yet? Could she rekindle their relationship? Should she?

Her feet found the correct location and she rang the door buzzer. An answer came from deep inside and the door slid open. She walked in and noticed how warm and comfortable the cabin was, much warmer than most humans enjoyed. She could smell spice and musk and it proved to be very alluring. Once past the doorway she noticed an unfamiliar man at the desk. “I am looking for Commander Christoph. The placard outside indicated this to be his cabin.”

“It is and you are?”

“T’Hara, Admiral Lee asked me to look into the genetic anomalies of the survivors. He was my instructor and I wished to ask his opinion.”

“Of course, but the Commander is indisposed. He said you might turn up. Taaj delivered the data earlier, but has not been able to peruse the files.”

She tilted her head to the side and studied the man, there was something familiar but she could not place it. “Is he very ill? They told us he had been withdrawn from duty.”

“Yes, he requires complete rest and quiet. I’m sorry but any questions you may have will have to wait until he is stronger.”

“I understand. Please have him contact me when he feels up to a visit. Meanwhile, I shall send along my findings. Ensign Taaj will be collecting some fresh DNA samples. I am sorry, but I will require a sample from both you and the commander.”

“We shall comply.”

She bowed and walked out. It felt all wrong in that cabin. She couldn’t remember if that was the man who always stayed close at hand, as if Christoph ever needed anyone’s protection. She ran through her memories and something did not feel right. Anytime she had called Christoph a male had always answered. She assumed it was a secretary or teaching aide. Here on this vessel it made no sense for the Chief Medical Officer to have a personal secretary. Why was someone using his desk? There did not seem to be any shortage of housing and if the man was indeed gravely ill he would be in Sickbay like the survivors. Nothing she’d seen or felt was logical,

even her feelings for Christoph were illogical.

# # # #

When the Debriefing Board re-assembled Captain El Haider had taken the newly vacated seat. Karol Vaschel took his previous seat at the small table. Admiral Lee struck the ship's bell and then began. "Captain, you said that some of your dead comrades were buried in space. Is that a correct statement?"

"Yes, we used the torpedo launch system to jettison them from the ship."

"What happened when your power failed?"

"We were forced to abandon the practice. Survival means sacrifices, Admiral. With each phasing we learned which decks were more vulnerable. We congregated on the safest decks. My engineer re-routed the power to keep life support going on these decks. With time we shut down the unused decks and sections."

"Okay, we must assume that these precautions would limit the exposure to danger and yet you still continued to experience a loss of life. Can you tell us why?"

Captain Vaschel looked up, his blue eyes shiny with tears barely kept at bay. "Some of us began to get sick. I think it started when the invaders appeared on our ship during the fifth phasing."

El Haider leaned forward. "Can you describe this illness?"

"It started with fever and would progress to diarrhea and vomiting. Our Medical Officer thought it was viral until rashes began to develop. It wasn't long after that some of us began to die."

Harpy tilted her head as she asked, "These visitors, did they identify themselves?"

"If they did we couldn't understand them. They were aliens of some sort. They carried weapons and when a female member of my crew did not comply they opened fire." He looked down and rubbed at his left eye.

"This attack on your female crew member, was it of a sexual nature?" She watched the group in the back fidget, especially the youngest, who tried to bury her face in the Commander's broad shoulder. He held on to her as a father with a frightened child.

"Yes, as it turned out it would not be the first time." He looked up tears streaming down his face. "We had to protect them, it was my duty. We were vulnerable and alone. Those of us able to found things to make weapons of and we developed a plan of defense."

Harpy smiled as she nodded her head. "Yes, we witnessed first hand your methods of defense."

"We had no choice. Trust doesn't come easily, Captain." He scrubbed at his face with the back of his hands.

"Do you have any idea what these visitors were looking for?"

“Some took technology and others grabbed random parts, food and clothing, things that made no real sense. A few tortured us and I have no idea why? Our universal translators could not understand their languages. Others came for flesh, companions for a moment or two...” he broke off unable to keep his voice level. He looked down in shame.

“It is all right, Captain, we are not judging you and your crew. We merely wish to understand what happened to you. I must say you became very good at evading the enemy and protecting the younger members.” Harpy smiled at them.

“We had no choice,” his voice barely a whisper.

“Could you tell the Board what you did with the remains of your fallen crew? If you could not eject the dead into space, how did you dispose of the decaying bodies?” The admiral tried to wear a neutral expression but it softened into a smile when Karol looked up.

“Over time we learned to harvest what we could.” He sat there in that chair and looked every inch like a vulnerable and beaten child.

“Pardon me, but did you say ‘harvest’?” El Haider stared at the boy in the hot seat.

Tears filled the blue eyes as they pulled away to study the table’s surface. “Yes,” he whispered.

In the back of the room the two females, clung to their male counterparts as if reliving some terrible memory.

“Captain Vaschel, could you elaborate?” asked the Admiral as she watched him wipe his tears on his sleeve.

“You have to understand food was short, other supplies had run out. It would have been a crime to waste resources nature gave us. Our very survival required adaptation.”

Kylan leaned forward. “Did that include feasting on human flesh?”

He held his gaze level, looking just in front of the board. “I did what was necessary to prolong our lives. I am not proud of those decisions, but given the circumstances I would make them all over again to protect my crew.”

“Can you detail this processing I assume the body encountered?” Kylan studied them as she probed for the Captain’s secrets.

“You would need to question my CMO. He worked out all the details.”

“As the Commanding Officer of the Dante you bear the responsibility for your crew’s actions. I would have thought you took an active part in those preparations.”

He met Captain Harpy with a tearful gaze. “I know my duty, Captain, but the details were more than even I could bear. Sometimes it is easier to turn a blind eye and let someone else figure out what must be done.”



Admiral Lee straightened in her chair. “Very well, Captain, you may step down. The Board calls Stefanos Andreas to the stand.” She watched as Captain Vaschel slunk to the back taking a seat next to the crying girl. He pulled her to his chest and proceeded to give her comfort.

The burly teen took the vacated seat. He sat at attention, his head held high with an air of pride.

“Please state your name, rank, and position for the record.” It was the only time the court reporter ever had the opportunity to speak.

“Stefanos Andreas, Commander, Chief Medical Officer.”

“Commander, what sort of illness cropped up as a result of your ship entering the black hole?”

“Initial contact caused a ship wide loss of consciousness caused by severe nature of the gravity well. A few suffered injuries during this time. Later when the phasing began, we started to notice a generalized weakness creeping through the crew. Low grade fevers, aches and pains. The real problem started when the first aliens arrived. They appeared on the vessel so any protection we could have gained from use of transporter filtering was unavailable. We were unprotected and vulnerable to their diseases.”

“What about the food and water supply? Could you attribute any illness from these?” Captain El Haider studied the Commander.

“No our food was safe enough at first. Hydroponics started to notice mutations in the vegetables. We figured it was from the phasing. We ate what grew, Captain, like anyone would. It wasn’t until much later that we noticed some of the plants were causing diarrhea and severe stomach cramping. Soon we abandoned most of the crop.”

“Were you unable to bargain with any of these visitors for food?”

“How could we, Admiral, we could not understand their languages and they never gave us a chance.”

“What about sanitation problems? Could this have contributed to a loss of life among the crew?” Kylan studied him trying to get into his head.

“We followed standard precautions. When waste began to accumulate we found ways to make use of it and doing so removed the threats to life. You can distill water from waste.”

Admiral Lee swallowed hard. She wasn’t sure she could have brought herself to drink that water even if they had to. “Okay, you harvested the waste products, but what about human decay. Corpses decay quickly without embalming.”

Commander Andreas laughed. “We had no way to embalm or bury them, Admiral. Yes, the human body begins to decay moments after it dies. Through a process we could extract the useable parts, such as muscle which could be cooked and eaten. Skin became leather for footwear and clothing. Even hair can

be woven into cloth or turned into rope. What could not be consumed was processed for its water and minerals. Nothing was wasted and nothing was left to contaminate our living space. We did not grow sick from decayed bodies.”

“Okay you addressed the how of this processing but what about the emotional aspect of death?” Kylan watched the officers in the back shifting nervously in their seats.

“We treated every death with great respect and ceremony. I’m not a butcher, Commander.”

“No one is accusing you of that, Mister Andreas, we are simply trying to understand how you as a community dealt with the complex issues and emotions of losing your friends and what had to have become family.” The Admiral needed to understand how they could do what they did.

“We developed a ceremony. Respect was always shown to the dead. The dying person knew their passing would serve the greater good. They understood they would live on in our bodies and memories. They died in peace and with dignity.” He gave them a defiant stare, challenging them to say otherwise.

“If I ordered you to explain in great detail how a dead body was processed, would you tell us the details?” Admiral Lee studied the Commander.

“I cannot in the present company. The Captain preferred I kept the sordid details to myself. His concern was with the final product which ensured our life.

Sometimes it is not a good idea to ask questions about what one is forced to eat and drink to live.”

Admiral Lee cleared her throat. “I won’t ask you for the details at this time. I would however request that you record your ceremony and procedures in great detail for the Board so we may better understand.”

The commander nodded. “Of course.”

El Haider cocked his head to the side. “Commander, why were you armed with a club? I understand you were the one responsible for rearranging the face of a security guard?”

“We learned to fight, to defend what was ours. When the phasers were empty we sought other weapons. It was my job to protect the women. I got very good swinging at things in the dark. I regret your man was injured, but we didn’t know you were from Starfleet when you appeared in that corridor.”

“We identified ourselves at every turn,” Captain Harpy interrupted. “It did not seem to matter that we were from Starfleet or anywhere else for that matter. I’d like to know why?”

“Over the years of phasing we had been invaded, tortured and even killed. On one occasion men arrived who spoke a broken form of standard. They seemed to know our past and used it to gain our trust. We ended up suffering great personal loss at their hands because we dared to trust them. I could not allow that mistake to happen again.”

“All right I suppose it does make a strange sort of sense,” Captain Harpy conceded.

“Could we have Julie’s body? I would like to perform the ceremony she came to expect.”

“Absolutely not,” Kylan shouted and then looked sheepishly at the Admiral.

“I am sorry but your request must be denied until I know further what this ceremony entails. We will give her a proper burial after the autopsy.”

“You would desecrate her small body to satisfy your curiosity?” Andreas was almost out of his seat.

“You can’t cut her up!” Screamed the youngest female as she flung her self to the deck. Kneeling with her hands raised as if in prayer. “You can’t!” She wailed.

The youngest male moved to her side. He knelt down and drew her to his chest.

“Clearly this is a volatile matter that will not be settled lightly. I suggest we take another recess so you may all regain your composure.” Admiral Lee stood up and the Board followed leaving the Dante’s crew to cry in private.

# # # #

Sparks sat hunched over a worktable. His back ached and he had knots for a neck. He stretched. Two more comm units awaited inspection. They had worked for hours making sure all the units and back ups were sealed against

anything the atmosphere could throw at them.

Ensign Marzm sat another workstation making repairs. Sparks stood up and stretched. “I don’t know about you, but I am tired and hungry.”

Marzm looked up and nodded. His hands kept at their work.

Turning back to the last two units he put them through their inspection and then laid them in the container. “Finished. Care to help me take them down to the staging area? I think we deserve a hot meal and a cool drink.”

T’Ken walked in with a container of headsets. “Marine issue and none of them are working. Makes you wonder what they do with them?”

“Who can understand anything a Marine does? We have enough of them ready to go. Those can wait until morning. I was about to take the containers to the staging area and then find some food. Care to join us?”

She shook her head. “I ate earlier. These need to be logged in and processed.”

“Okay, suit yourself. Come on Marzm these won’t get to their destination by themselves.” He handed one container to the Ensign and grabbed up the other.

# # # #

Ensign Blackthorn arrived with two covered trays. He used the override when no one answered. Stefan stirred as he approached the desk. “I brought you

some food, but it looks like I need to set up the cot instead.”

Stefan yawned and grimaced as he worked his neck. “I’m starved.” He shrugged off the blanket and cleared a spot on the desk. “Taaj paid a visit. Guess her injections made me sleepy.”

Kyle put a tray on the desk. “Well, you can’t rest well at the desk.” He walked on into the sleeping area and found Christoph already awake and pulling himself into a sitting position.

“Something smells wonderful.”

He put the tray on the bed and smiled. “Taaj said to eat up like a good boy and she won’t force feed you.”

Leery, Chris took the cover off and looked up. Kyle didn’t back away as before. He picked up the spoon and bowl. When nothing happened he smiled and dug in.

“You look better.” Kyle walked over to the corner and pulled the cot from behind the treatment cart. In minutes he had it set up and fitted out with linens and a pillow. He found Stefan at the desk. “Everything is sorted out in there. How is your dinner?”

“Not what I expected.”

Kyle laughed. “Blame it on Taaj. She believes in a light meal when you run a fever, less to throw up should it progress to that stage.” He pulled the scanner from his pocket and ran it over Stefan. “I guess that kid’s knife was pretty contaminated. She started you on broad

spectrum antibiotics earlier, that’s why you fell asleep.”

“Great, just what I need.” Stefan finished the soup and ate the last bite of his sandwich. He put the fruit and cookies on the side and covered the tray. “I’ll save them for a snack later.”

“I promise I won’t eat them. Come on you need to lie down.” He gestured and the Lieutenant followed. “I even turned it down for you.”

Stefan sat down and pulled off his boots and jacket. While Kyle walked into the bathroom. He returned with a glass of water. After pulling two white tablets from the treatment cart he stood before Stefan. “Come on take these. They’ll help your fever and then I want you to sleep. I’ll take the watch.”

Chris finished his rice and vegetables and watched his symbiont yield to the logic of his illness. He could feel the human’s discomfort through the bond and he tried to reassure him that everything would be fine.

Satisfied that Stefan was settled, Kyle walked over to the bed. He smiled as he ran the scanner over Christoph. “Good boy, you cleaned your tray.”

“I was hungry.” He smiled.

“I have been instructed to tell you that you are not to sit up at the desk reviewing the data. Captain Donahue knows about Admiral Lee’s request. Both he and Taaj feel you need to rest and regain some of your strength first.”

“Did he have any luck with T’Hara?”

“Yes, he learned something and is now in your office doing some research. Captain Donahue wants me to reassure you that he is doing everything possible to find the answers for you. Meanwhile, you are both to get some serious sleep. I will be here if either of you need anything. Can you sleep on your own or will some assistance be required?”

“We can sleep. Thank you, Kyle. When this is all over I owe you something in return for the hours you have given us.”

“Never mind, just get some sleep and regain your strength.” He lowered the lights and then settled himself at the desk.

# # # #

Arri and Ensign Karla Grant headed into the storeroom with a cart and two large airtight storage boxes. They pulled rations for the away teams. Even with assistance it was a tedious job. Following the lists they pulled necessary meals and water filling each container. Somehow he doubted the meals would beam down within the container. Marines preferred to stuff things into backpacks and the pockets of their uniforms.

He wondered about the Vulcans and what they would eat. Each prepared ration packet contained animal protein. Maybe in times of survival it didn’t matter. He pulled food for them as well.

They loaded the boxes on the cart and headed for the staging area. It was

organized chaos. Marines packed their gear, checked other equipment and gave the newly arrived Ensign a wolfish look. Arri unloaded the boxes, each marked for its destined team and they left before the excess testosterone became contagious.

# # # #

Admiral Lee watched the survivors via the view screen. It was all too obvious that they were breaking down. The girls were still in tears and LTCMDR Melbourne had joined the sobbing mess. Lucien Xavier paced the room like a caged tiger. “It’s no good, Karol, we’re going to have to tell them sooner or later.”

“No, we stand together. We are strongest when we are united.” The Captain moved closer to the crying females. “I know you’re tired, we all are, but we have to keep ourselves under control.”

The eldest female looked up wiping her tears on her sleeve. “Where are the others?”

“They’re still in Sickbay. Soon they’ll join us.” He smiled and patted her shoulder.

“What’s going to happen to us? I don’t want to be locked up in the brig. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Nina, they won’t lock us up in the brig. I’m not sure where they will put us, but it won’t be there. We have to stay together, watch out for each other.”

“I know, I’ll try to be strong.” She wiped her nose on her sleeve and tried to smile.

Captain El Haider stretched as he got to his feet. He walked to the replicator and selected a cup of tea. “Admiral, the officers need to rest. They need warm food and a bed to sleep in. If we continue to push them they will all break down. I believe we must consider their emotional states.”

“You would propose we adjourn for the day?” asked Kylan as she turned to look at the Captain.

“Yes, what could be gained by pushing them further. The logs from the Dante should soon be available, if not already. We need time to review them before we can debrief them further.”

“I disagree. We need to know exactly what they did to those bodies. We can’t begin to trust them with freedom until we do.” Kylan shook her head, clearly annoyed by the Captain.

“Kylan, I have to agree with the Physician. We are all too tired to push this further. For some of us it has been a very long day.” Harpy stood up and stretched.

“All right,” said the Admiral, “just what do we do with them? Clearly we cannot house them in Sickbay given our current mission.”

“You could adapt a couple of cabins. They clearly need to remain together as the supportive family they have become.” El Haider returned to the view screen. “What if we put them in a room

with a bunch of cots. They would have a sense of safety and could continue to watch over one another. I doubt any one of them would last two minutes in a room of their own.”

“You may have a point, Doctor. Harpy can you make the arrangements? A room for the girls and two for the boys should take care of things. See if anyone in sickbay could be moved in with them. The isolated members must be having their own adjustment issues. Maybe if they can stay together they will regain composure and make the debriefing easier.”

“Aye,” Harpy said as she moved to the workstation.

“We need to review the logs. Why don’t we take a break, change into more comfortable clothes and meet in my ready room. I’ll see if Arri can send us some food.”

# # # #

Ensign Hilda Von Ricktovn paced her quarters. She knew they were getting closer to Sarojin. She no idea when they would beam down. Worse yet, she had no idea what to pack or how to fit everything into the small backpack she had been issued. Should she pack skirts or pants? She would need the extra strength hair spray or her new hairdo would flop in the heat.

The comm unit chirped. She hit the button and the stern face of Commander Aelurus filled the view screen. “Ensign, I am required to ask you a couple of

questions before assigning you to the appropriate team.”

She nodded unsure what to say.

“Have you taken any Starfleet or Marine survival courses?”

“No, they were not required to be a teacher at the academy. Why?”

“It makes you a liability. You are a burden to any team who takes you along. Since you have spent so much time in my brig, I feel it safe to assume that you have trouble following orders and instructions.”

“How dare you? I don’t want to beam down to the planet. I don’t see why I can’t run my scans while up here on the ship.”

“You may have a valid point, Ensign. Let me run it past Captain Harpy and I’ll contact you with further details. Meanwhile, I am attaching of list of what you must pack into your backpack. Do not vary from the list. Is that understood?”

She nodded and the Commander terminated the call. On her screen was a list of less than ten items to be packed and none of them included her cosmetics, hair products, or colognes. In fact, the list allotted only two changes of clothes and those were limited to underwear and a spare sweater.

# # # #

## 2000 HOURS DAY 2

Admiral Lee sat in her ready room. She had taken off the uncomfortable jacket and opted for staying in the white command shirt and uniform pants. She had taken the liberty of removing her boots. Her favorite knitted shawl hung over the back of her chair in case she grew cold as the night moved on.

Harpy arrived in a pair of work fatigues. Beige pants and pullover sweater standard issue for away teams. She was ready to beam out when they reached the planet. El-Haider was already in his Marine fatigues ready for his away team. Kylan chose to come in a lose dress of purple velvet. She yawned as she sat down on the sofa.

Arri arrived on cue with a cart. He handed out four trays, each filled with one of their personal favorites. He left a tray of deserts on the desk and two large carafes of steaming coffee.

Extra chairs had been pulled in allowing everyone to gather at the desk to eat. Admiral Lee opted to listen to the medical logs allowing everyone time to eat. They were nothing remarkable. As it turned out the testimony given was accurate. She tagged them to be sent down to Sickbay.

There were mountains of data files detailing their findings when the transformations occurred. Only a scientist could make sense of them. These she sent along to Sickbay so both T’Hara and Christoph could evaluate the data.

They discussed all sorts of ideas regarding the utilization of the dead bodies. Problem was they found nothing in any of the files that outline a ceremony. What did it entail and why was it so vital to them? It didn't make any sense. A ceremony is a symbol, so what in this instance did it symbolize? Life after death?

“Bridge to Admiral Lee.”

She hit the comm button. “What do you have?”

“We're encountering planetary debris. Computers say it is what's left of Rani.”

“Very good, record as much data as possible.” She turned of comm off and stood up. “I guess this will have to wait. It would appear we are getting closer to the Galveston and the mission at hand.

Harpy, Kyran and Lee took their places on the bridge and El-Haider headed down to the staging area.

“I have the automated distress signal from the Galveston.”

Moments later the ship appeared on the main view screen. She hung at an odd angle, obviously adrift. She had no external lights and looked to be dead in space. Her main hull was missing plates in key areas. She had been hit hard. One nacelle was twisted and the other shorn off midway along her support pylon.

“Sparks, can you raise them?”

“No, just static, the external arrays are gone.”

“Helm, bring us in alongside of her. Captain Harpy take Sparks and Kang with you. I want to know how bad she's damaged.”

“Aye, on our way.”

# # # #

The survivors of the Dante were assigned four rooms. The girls would occupy two and the boys the remainder. With Sickbay preparing for the upcoming disaster it was decided that once their young patients were stable they should be moved out. Everyone felt the survivors would be more comfortable if they returned to their normal family units.

As they had grouped themselves on the Dante, Captain Vaschel shared a space with his CMO Stefanos Andreas and they moved Ensign Eli Maverick into their room. Eli was plagued with chronic bronchitis and had begun to show signs of slowly declining health. He was the youngest, seven now and Andreas liked to keep a close eye on him.

Commander Xavier bunked with LTCMDR Balder. They were like older brothers for LTCMDR Rhys Melbourne and Ensign Marcus Thomas. Taaj had repaired an old fracture which with time would restore the use of the Ensign's left arm and hand.

LTJG Kayla Habib shared with LTJG Saira Demetrius on the Dante. She'd been hurt evading the AV crew. Her arm was broken and she had a fever after surgery. With the first dose of antibiotics she felt better. She wore the cast and



sling like a badge of courage – proud she'd fought to defend her friends. Lieutenant Molly Elgan joined them. She had a flare up of asthma, but with new medicine she was breathing better and finally sleeping.

Lieutenant Nanette Parker sustained the most injuries when the AV appeared on the Dante. She'd spent most of the time asleep. Between surgery and pain medication she was out most of the day. Xavier and Andreas accompanied her gurney. Kyle Blackthorn had gone on ahead to set up a special orthopedic rig on the bed. The three settled their patient and left the Dante's Medic LTJG Nina Christabel to bunk in the room. She had the knowledge to care for Nanette.

# # # #

The Away Team materialized into chaos. Power was fluctuating with many areas already dark. It was cold and you could see your breath. Wounded were everywhere. "Kang, check out engineering. Sparks and I are going to the bridge."

They moved out. Turbo lifts were out and the Jefferies tubes were the only way to go between the decks. They had a long climb before they would reach the bridge. "Come on lets check Sickbay. I have a bad feeling."

They moved through the corridor. It looked like a scene from an ancient disaster movie. Crew members lined the corridor, some bleeding on the decking. Where were the doctors, the medics? The door to Sickbay opened. A lone Ensign stood in triage trying to do what

little he could, tears streaming down his grimy face.

Harpy moved to his side, "Ensign, who is in charge here?"

"I am." He shook and looked as if he would collapse at any moment.

"My name is Captain Harpy. We're from the USS Aurora Vulcanus. We've come to help you. Do you have any doctors?"

He shook his head and his eyes rolled up into his head as he collapsed. She grabbed him and with Sparks help laid him on the crowded floor. She hit her communicator. "Captain Harpy to Admiral Lee."

"I'm here, Captain."

"It's really bad, Admiral. We have wounded everywhere. One lonely Ensign remains alive to treat everyone and he just collapsed in my arms. Can you send those two combat doctors over and anyone else who can help?"

"There on their way. What have you found?"

"Kang is on his way to engineering. The power is spotty at best. It's very cold. Instinct told me to check on Sickbay before we climbed up to the bridge."

"All right, wait for the medical team and then try to reach the bridge. Admiral Lee out."

In minutes they could hear the sounds of feet running in boots. El Haider and Donahue burst through the main doors.

“Glad you could come. This kid did what he could, but it was no where near enough.”

Donahue moved in with scanner in hand. “We’ll take it from here, Captain.”

She nodded. “Come on Sparks we have a long way to climb.”

# # # #

Christoph woke up with a sudden urgency. He grabbed the crutches and stood. Stefan sensed the movement and sat up on his cot. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, go back to sleep.” He continued on into the bathroom.

Kyle walked into the sleeping area as Chris emerged. “Nature call?”

“Yes.” He went back to bed and Kyle helped him settle down again. “You don’t have to stay. I feel much better now.”

“No way am I deserting my post.” He smiled and pulled the linens back into place.

“I think you’re enjoying this,” said Stefan as he yawned.

“Right, how often do I get to sit and read while on duty?”

They all laughed until the comm unit on the desk chirped.

# # # #

Admiral Lee returned to her ready room. There was nothing more could she do on the bridge and she had a report to prepare. She outlined the results of the debriefing as well as observations of the crew’s behaviors. She still had more questions than answers but T’Hara would sort that out soon enough, or maybe Christoph since the Vulcan doctor was part of the away team beaming down when they reached Sarojin.

Since she made the decision to involve Christoph in reviewing the genetic data, he had gone mysteriously quiet. By now she should have had some report. T’Hara had filed several. She sighed. Maybe he was finally following his physicians orders and was sleeping. No, she had trouble picturing him following anything so mundane as an order to sleep.

“Captain Harpy to Admiral Lee.”

“What news do you have, Captain?”

“We made it to the bridge. Sparks says the communications are totally fried. He’s gone to check the auxiliary bridge. He hopes communications down there are useable. Kang has managed to re-route power to the life support so things are warming up. Power to many decks is out and he is trying to stabilize the grid providing power to essential systems only. One good piece of news, the warp core is safe. The engines are useless and battery life is limited, but with some conservation they should be able to make do until the tug arrives. You might want to alert the fleet that we need a hospital ship to get the wounded moved to safety. Donahue and El Haider are

gonna send the worst cases to the AV. Taaj and her teams need to stand by.”

“She already is. I alerted her when the captains beamed over. She is calling in her backup teams. Transport when you’re ready.”

“I have the second in command making copies of all logs and data pertaining to the disaster as well as communications with the colony prior to the explosion. I’ll bring it back with me. It might help us understand what lies ahead.”

“Keep up the good work, Harpy. I’ll have Arri waiting with something hot to eat and drink when you get back.”

Admiral Lee sighed. It could have been worse. They could have all died. She made a quick report and sent it with the other one so Commander Phillips could send it with the next packet to Starfleet Command. She stretched and realized it was going to be a very long night.

# # # #

## **22:00 Hours Day 2**

Lying back on bed two in triage, Taaj sighed heavily. She turned onto her front and hung her arms over the sides of the bed for a while. After a few minutes she turned over onto her back again and stared at the ceiling, eyebrows rising slowly.

She listened to the tannoy calling personnel to duty stations, noted increased activity and sat up, straddling

the bed. Her mind swept through the ship and a small frown creased her brow. Increasing her range she found what she was looking for, and more.

“Chadwick!” She yelled, hiking herself off the bed and heading for the regeneration units. The Nurse appeared smartly.

“Doctor?” Taaj cricked her neck one way then the other, adjusting the controls of the nearest unit.

“Incoming Chadwick, get your surgical staff in now, we are going to be busy little bees tonight.” She moved to the next unit and fired it up. A thoughtful expression crossed her face, and she tapped her comm badge.

“Sickbay to Commander Christoph.” She did not have to wait long for a response.

“Sickbay this is Christoph.” A tiny smile touched the Surgeon’s lips and was gone.

“Commander, you are aware we have reached the Galveston. They’re in a bad way,” she paused. “El Haider and Donohue have beamed over, they will be sending over the worst of the wounded soon. You are needed in Sickbay.” There was a heavy pause before he answered.

“I’ll be there right away.” Taaj adjusted the regenerator and moved on into the main operating theatre. Standing inside the doorway, out of sight from triage, she rested her head against the cool metal of the wall for a moment before straightening and moving on.

Satisfied that the theatre equipment was ready, she exited the theatre as Christoph entered triage. Chadwick watched them draw close, and wondered at the tension she sensed between the pair.

“Commander, you made good time.” They looked vaguely in the direction of each others face, not making eye contact.

“I am needed in Sickbay?” Christoph steadied himself on his crutches, staring past her shoulder. “I thought I was withdrawn from duty.”

“You were, Commander, you were.” Taaj’s eyes bored into his comm badge. “The Galveston has been hit badly, 11 dead so far.” A flicker of something crossed her face.

“A lot of walking wounded, some severe.” She looked away. “Donohue has the first batch ready to beam over.” She headed for the door, and turned. “Stay here, Commander, I’ll collect this first group from the transporter. We’ll talk when I get back.” She left with a group of emergency technicians.

Christoph looked about and made his way carefully to the control panel, firing up the scanners on all stations. Chadwick emerged from the Nurses office, her face showing surprise at his presence. She hurried over.

“Commander? What are you doing here?” Her attention was only half on him though, as she looked about Sickbay, checking on her teams.

“Taaj called me in.” He confided leaning against the nearest bed, and looked up as the main doors opened and the first group of wounded from the Galveston were hauled in.

“Sophi!” Taaj pointed to the first gurney coming through the door and the Cinrusskian flitted before the technicians guiding them to an emergency bay. “Commander! This one’s yours.” Taaj pointed his way and a group of technicians peeled off with their charge, transferring the injured crewman to the bed nearest Christoph without further ado, and turning back out the door.

There was no time to talk, to think even, he half heard behind him the sounds of struggling and incoherent, angry voice of the man Taaj was treating, as he assessed and treated his own patient.

Eventually he stood, gazing down at the stabilized man, unconscious and helpless on the bed before him. A technician appeared at his side. “Shall I move him into the regenerator, Doctor?” Christoph looked up.

“What?” The man pointed to the second, empty regenerator. Christoph saw the first unit was already active with someone inside.

“Yes, yes of course.” He followed the technician and watched as his patient was slid into the unit, setting the controls.

“You two are amazing.” Christoph looked at the technician quizzically. “Those have got to be the fastest RSIs I have ever seen in my life.” The

technician grinned with a shake of his head. "I could have sworn you didn't give them anything first." He shook his head again. "Must have missed it in the confusion."

Christoph gazed through the portal into the regenerator, brows drawn into a deep frown. He'd carried out a rapid sequence intubation and had no recall of it. He laid a hand on the door and wracked his mind trying to dredge up a memory of the act.

Looking around for Taaj, suddenly there was no time to talk, to discuss his 'return' to duty, as another group of wounded arrived almost immediately and the here and now took precedent.

"Anything we can do to help?" Christoph turned to see Donahue standing in the doorway, face smeared with soot and worse. He beckoned the Medic into Sickbay.

"Sit - sit before you fall down." The Captain complied almost eagerly. "What's the count?"

"20 dead, over 100 wounded. How are the 9 we sent over?"

"Still going for now." Christoph pointed to the regenerator units, and flicked a hand toward the HDU. "One's still in surgery."

"OK. Well, the Galveston is secured. We're headed after Sarojin." Donahue stood, looking down at himself. "I'd best go get cleaned up, looks like everything's under control here." With a slight wave he left, and Christoph

lowered himself onto the chair that had been vacated. He waited, and watched Taaj transfer her patient to the HDU, returning to check on the two incarcerated in their glowing cells.

"You should be off duty," Christoph said from his seat.

"And you should be resting in your quarters."

He bowed his head, looking up he followed the line of her eyes.

"What do you have in the Regenerator?"

"Lieutenant Vasquez. P, Engineering Division, plasma burns, depressed skull fracture, broken pelvis, 4 broken ribs and a dislocated wrist." Christoph nodded as he carefully rose and crossed the room.

"You need to eat." He looked up sharply at her. "Don't worry Commander, I'm not going to shove it down your neck this time." She glanced his way briefly.

"I could make things a lot easier for you." He frowned at her comment. "Right now for instance." He tried to figure out what she was talking about.

"Do your legs hurt?" His eyes roved from side to side as he thought about it and realised that, no, his legs, his ankles did not hurt, were completely pain free. He looked down at them in disbelief.

"You have no appetite, the medication makes you nauseous."

His eyes widened. “You can stop me feeling sick?”

She nodded. “Think about it, Commander, you’d have to trust me to have control of your body for a while - do you really want to do that?” She tidied a few things away and looked up as another Doctor approached.

Christoph leaned on a counter, considering her offer, hardly listening as she updated the duty Doctor. She came to his side and looked sidelong at him. “Think about it Commander, and let me know what you decide.”

# # # #

Admiral Lee was still at her desk when Captain Harpy walked in and dropped onto the couch. “The Galveston is waiting for the tow. Twenty-five are dead and at least one hundred and fifty souls suffered some sort of injury. Sparks has ship to ship communications rigged through the secondary unit. With the external array gone her range is severely limited.” She yawned and rubbed her eye with a grimy hand as the Admiral poured a steaming cup of coffee and pushed it towards her. “Thanks,” she got up and collected the brew.

“You earned a long nap, just wish I could indulge you.”

“You look pretty tired yourself.” Harpy took a sip.

“Were following the computer’s prediction and hopefully we will find Sarojin.”

“I don’t know, Admiral, this whole mess is getting worse by the minute. What if she’s traveling faster than the computer estimates. What if she doesn’t turn back at some point to circle back around its sun?”

“Yes, those are pretty much the questions I have and not one answer. The computer and the scientists on board all feel that if the planet is moving too far to return that at some point it will lose its momentum and drift in space. What worries me is can it sustain any life without a sun?”

“My thoughts exactly.” She drained her cup and stood up. “I’d better get cleaned up and down to the staging area.”

“Harpy, I don’t want you to go down with the first teams. Wait until we know more. You’re too tired and mistakes can get us into trouble when we’re exhausted. I’m sure the CMO would agree.”

She laughed. “Who exactly would that be? Christoph, Taaj or Doctor O’Neill?”

“I’m not sure who wears the bigger pants, but seriously, you need a good night’s sleep. Let the recon teams go down. There will be time to join them later.”

Harpy looked down at the deck plates and sighed. “You may be right. Nothing has felt right since we found the Galveston. I’d better see the teams off, you know, moral support and all.”

They both laughed.

“Attention All Hands. Recon Teams report to your staging areas. This is not a drill. Repeat: All Recon Teams report for immediate beam out.” Ensign Reva’s voice was clear and precise as he made his announcement.

Admiral Lee followed Harpy out onto the bridge. She took the center seat from Commander Phillips, who shifted to the science station. “What do we have?”

“We are in final approach to Sarojin. She is in an unstable spin, I would not recommend orbiting, Sir.”

“Helm, take us closer and put us on a parallel trajectory. You may have to make manual adjustments depending on her erratic movements.”

“Aye.”

“Mr. Phillips, what’s the surface like?”

“Tumultuous at best. Surface temperatures are above freezing, thanks to the volcanic eruptions. There is some instability in plate tectonics and storms seem to cover the surface. Very strong winds are kicking up the dust. They are gonna need night vision goggles. I’m picking up no ambient light and very weak life signs. Too much atmospheric discharge to get any accurate readings. Communications are going to be difficult.”

“Can you locate the coordinates where the last colonies were spotted?”

Phillips worked his console and looked into the hooded viewer. “I have one. No life signs in the area and there is a storm

approaching from the north. Good news there is no volcanic activity in the vicinity. The second set of coordinates, for the entrance to the underground civilization, utilized a dead volcanic crater. It’s now an active volcanic site. I would hazard to say the other entrances are no longer viable travel routes.”

“Admiral Lee to Captain Harpy.”

“Go ahead, Admiral.”

“We need to beam the surface team down now before the storm moves in. Until we can locate a way below the surface we may as well scrub the other team.”

“No way, Admiral,” said Gavrilov. “Drop us near the last known location. We’ll find a way down into the city. We can find them, Sir.”

“All right stand by.” She looked up at Phillips. “Get us into transporter range and send the teams down.”

He nodded and coordinated the efforts through the two transporters.

Within minutes forty men and women were deposited in two locations. She held her breath as if waiting for the next shoe to fall.

# # # #

## **22:45 HOURS DAY 2**

The first landing party materialized into the dark of night. Sand whipped exposed skin stinging and cutting it. Night goggles made it possible to see. Headed

straight for them was a massive wall of sand. Worst sand storm she'd ever seen. "Commander Aelurus requesting emergency beam up."

"Standby away team."

The transporter beam shimmered around them for an instant and then died away.

"What's happening up there?" She yelled to be heard above the roar of the approaching storm.

"Can't get a lock...signal....too much..." the unit went dead. "Damn." She hit her comm link again. "Aelurus to Gavrilov."

"Gavrilov."

"Wall of sand heading this way. Unable to beam up. Initiating Beta 3."

"Understood, best of luck, Commander."

"We're on our own!"

**(to be continued....)**



## MISSION TIME LINE ISSUE 3

### 22:45 HOURS DAY 2

Away teams have beamed down to Sarojin. A severe sandstorm has cut off Away Team 1 and we cannot beam them back or communicate with them. Away Team 2 beamed down into a safer area. For them the sand storm has not approached and they must move away from the volcano as they search for a way below ground. It is believed they can find a way down in the adjacent mountains. CAPT Harpy and Admiral Lee are off duty and resting. CMDR Phillips has the conn.

### 23:30 HOURS DAY 2

Away Team 1 forced to shelter in close proximity to each other under tarps that are being battered by sand nerves are easily set on edge. ENS Hilda Von Ricktovn begins to loose her bearings. She grows hysterical. Dr. T'Hara administers the Vulcan Nerve Pinch so she will not endanger anyone.

### 01:00 HOURS DAY 3

CMDR Christoph is awakened by the scent of fresh human blood. Stefan's arm is swollen, the bandage soaked in blood

as is the bedding. His temperature is 104 degrees and he is delirious. Kyle and Christoph rush him to Sickbay.

Away Team 1 continues to ride out the storm but the Ensign continues to rave on. T'Hara attempts a mind link with Hilda in hopes of helping her to calm down. It fails and now the ensign is screaming that she has been violated. CAPT Donahue is reduced to sedating the Ensign and security will place binders on her so she cannot harm anyone, let alone herself.

### 01:15 HOURS DAY 3

Taaj completed her exam of Stefan and has him in surgery. The sutures had ruptured and she finds a great deal of necrotic tissue. She finds something else – something that is reducing healthy tissue to liquid mush. She has to try and cut as much away as she can before the organism can reach healthy bone.

### 02:00 HOURS DAY 3

Away Team 2 is still hiking and they are feeling the outer edge of the sandstorm. They seek shelter in a cave. They have lost contact with the ship.

ENS Maverick awakens his roommates vomiting. CMDR Andreas goes to him.

There is bloody emesis on the bedding as well as a growing wetness. The Dante's CMO investigates and finds the bedding saturated with blood. He wraps the lad in the blankets and with CAPT Vaschel they head to Sickbay.

Christoph takes charge of the emergency. Scans reveal that the ensign's organs are beginning to fail. He is bleeding out. There is nothing left for them to do but to make him comfortable. Scans reveal the organ failure is due to advanced age.

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### **02:30 HOURS DAY 3**

Away Team 2 finds a cave and explores its depth. In the back they find an entrance to what has been a lava tube. They have a potential way down below the planet's surface. They begin to follow it and soon it empties out into an underground mountain range. Their journey is dangerous as the ground trembles and there is lava oozing from cracks in the mountains.

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### **03:00 HOURS DAY 3**

CMDR Phillips watches the surface storm grow to cover 80% of the planet's surface. Scanners also show the temperature is still dropping and the oxygen content is decreasing. They are still trying to locate transponder signals from the away teams but there is nothing. Their hands are tied.

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### **03:30 HOURS DAY 3**

LT Petros is awake after surgery. He is propped up in bed sipping tea. CMDR Andreas on his way out of Sickbay stops to talk. They discover each other – grandfather and grandson.

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### **04:00 HOURS DAY 3**

Away Team 1 is experiencing a decrease in the storm's intensity. While it has not stopped it has decreased enough for them to dig out from the dune. CAPT Donahue contacts the ship and requests the beam up of one medical casualty – ENS Von Ricktovn. She is to be admitted to Sickbay for further observation the CMO is on hand and takes charge of her case.

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### **04:15 HOURS DAY 3**

Away Team 1 is on the move, traversing the deep sand. They soon approach a great walled city. It should be the location of the colony. The outer walls are heavily damaged and sections buried by new sand dunes. This had been a city of tall stone structures, most of which are destroyed. Dead bodies and debris are strewn about the sand and half buried by the storm. No recordable life signs are found, however there is also a great deal of atmospheric discharge making the equipment unreliable at best. Scientists take their scans and all decide that setting up any base camp is not feasible. In fact, planetary evacuation is imminent. CMDR Aelurus contacts the ship with the data.

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### **05:00 HOURS DAY 3**

Away Team 2 continues following an ancient but well marked trail. Communications with the ship is out and they cannot reach Away Team 1. They are on their own.

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### **05:15 HOURS DAY 3**

Away Team 1 – CAPT Donahue starts to pick up some life signs but they are very weak and coming from a sand dune. With help of Marine members they dig down and find a hatch leading to a stone stairway underground. They investigate. It is illuminated, warm and life signs are numerous. Following the stone tunnel they soon find a large cavern and the people who sought refuge. They also find Dr. Ruben Hawhar.

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### **05:30 HOURS DAY 3**

CAPT Donahue finds a second cavern of wounded and sick. They have little resources and he begins to triage the victims.

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### **06:00 HOURS DAY 3**

ENS Von Ricktovn awakens in Sickbay. She is restrained and confused. She becomes very distraught, babbling on

about being violated. The CMO tries to examine her but she won't have it. He even offers a female doctor to validate her claims. She rants and carries on hysterically as her vital signs elevate. CMO is forced to sedate her further.

Wounded Sadzi begin to arrive and Sickbay swings into full force.

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### **07:00 HOURS DAY 3**

The Admiral's Morning Briefing. Admiral Lee, CAPT Harpy, CMDR Kylan, CMDR Christoph, CMDR Phillips, CMDR Kang, LT Sparks, and FCAPT Arri are in attendance. The admiral is updated covering the night's events and plans of action are made. Also plans are made to reconvene the Board to debrief the Dante Crew at 08:00 hours.

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### **07:15 HOURS DAY 3**

Away Team 2 has reached a wide valley where a city has sprung up. The sky above it is dark, but the city is alive, illuminated by phosphorescent rocks. They can feel the ground tremors, but so far no lava is visible. The scientists take reading of the planet's core the pressure is building and a large volcanic eruption is not long off. Still cannot contact the ship.

They explore and the city and find some damage from ground tremors. The buildings here are mostly 2 and 3 story stone structures carved from natural volcanic deposits. Soon they hear singing.

When they reach the temple, they enter it to find 80 adults who turn to stare at them. Dr. Justin Gerhard, colony leader, acknowledges the team as the ancient angels come to deliver the Orseni. Ryuk, the priest and prophet, recites the prophecy. He asks who is the Michail. It is Mikhail Gavrilov who responds. Ryuk asks for the Haidar and CAPT Asad El Haider responds.

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### **07:45 HOURS DAY 3**

CMDR Christoph in his office taking a moment to get off his feet. He calls up the genetic results of the latest tests and autopsy on ENS Mavrick. He has to find the common link.

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### **08:00 HOURS DAY 3**

The Board reconvenes to debrief the Dante Crew. Board Members are ADM Lee, CAPT Harpy, CMDR Kylan, and CMDR Christoph.

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### **08:15 HOURS DAY 3**

Away Team 2 in the temple feel the ground shake. Outside they see destruction, buildings crumbling and a fissure has opened allowing a red river to flow past the temple. Inside they are unharmed. Again the prophecy told the Orseni that the temple would protect them until the Day of Deliverance. Another loud rumble and ground tremor this time a creak is made in the sky

above the city. Sand is filtering into their world. Then it splits open as rock from above tumble down forming a new mountain range to an opening through which the scientists can see stars. They must prepare to leave the temple.

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### **09:00 HOURS DAY 3**

Away Team 1 – CMDR Aelurus working with Dr. Hawhar convince the Council of Princes to meet with Admiral Lee to discuss evacuation. Dr. Hawhar plays on the fact that the CMDR’s first name is Drakus. He uses this to identify her as the one who would come to lead them to “The Xavier” who stands in judgment of their lives. He alone says who will go to “The Kristof” for admittance to the promised land. She will contact the Admiral with the details.

Away Team 2 sends a recon party up to see if they can reach the surface safely. CAPT El Haider examines the children and find them healthy, but unprepared for so difficult a climb. The Marines contact the ship.

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### **09:15 HOURS DAY 3**

Away Team 2 begins to evacuate the survivors. The first group of 40 adults will begin the climb to the surface. CAPT El Haider asks Ryuk about the safety of the children and suggests that the adults help them to the surface. Ryuk states the prophecy and it is only The Haidar who can guide their young feet to safety. He will have to organize his 30

kids into two groups with older children helping the younger ones.

The debriefing board is adjourned.

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### **09:30 HOURS DAY 3**

Admiral Lee and CAPT Harpy along with CMDR Kylan meet with the Council of Princes in the briefing room. Admiral Lee offers safety and transportation. Starfleet will help to relocate them. Maert, who is both prince and prophetic priest, urges caution that “The Lee” could be a false prophet sent to tempt them into sin.

Admiral Lee and party agree to leave them to discuss matters amongst themselves. Meanwhile she will seek out CMDR Lucein Xavier. She is certain they will need his help if they are to convince the princes to allow further evacuation.

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### **10:00 HOURS DAY 3**

Starfleet sends word that ships are on their way to help with relief. A hospital ship should arrive within 3 hours to take on patients. Starfleet agrees with planetary evacuation having reviewed the Admiral’s reports and requests.

CMDR Xavier meets with the Council of Princes. They accept him because Maert identifies the lad as fitting the description. They will follow his judgment and agree to evacuation.

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### **10:15 HOURS DAY 3**

Away Team 1 – Scientists find a cache of data stored by our colony and send it up. They beam up as well with the data they had accumulated. It is all sent back to Starfleet for further analysis.

CMDR Christoph is becoming aware that his own body is undergoing mutations which seem to affect only his human DNA. The beast is growing stronger. He is feeling the need to feed. He is healing faster and something is increasing both his body temperature and heart rate. There is still no sign of infection. His fatigue is growing a side effect of elevated vital signs. He will keep quiet about the mutations for now as they affect mostly his inner beast.

LT Taaj tries to get CMDR Christoph to rest, he is near collapse. He will consent to get off his feet in his office. He won’t leave Sickbay until LT Petros can. He does consent to consume some red blood. He combs through the genetic info on the Dante members. He notices a growing instability on a cellular level and makes some notes for T’Hara.

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### **10:30 HOURS DAY 3**

Another Dante member is rushed to Sickbay. ENS Thomas is brought in by LTCMDR Balder. The child is weak in a great deal of pain. Signs of renal failure is noted as well as some heart failure. CMDR Christoph and LT Taaj try to save him but organ failure progresses so fast they can do little but make him comfortable as he bleeds out.

Starfleet Command contacts the ship. Preliminary review of the data predicts that Sarojin is following a dangerous trajectory. One that within 10 days will threaten major systems killing millions. Another computer module predicts that the planet could tear itself apart within the next six hours.

So many walking wounded are beamed up there is no place to put them but in the passage ways. They are given blankets and warm food. Medics continue to provide first aid.

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### **11:00 HOURS DAY 3**

The Debriefing Board resumes. ADM Lee, CAPT Harpy, CMDR Kylan and CMDR Christoph are on the board.

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### **11:15 HOURS DAY 3**

Dr. T'Hara returns to the lab and reviews the Dante Data. She find's Christoph's notes and carried out the ordered tests. She wants to speak with him but the note indicates that he is tied up with a debriefing.

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### **12:00 HOURS DAY 3**

Away Team 2 reports in that the first group of adults have reached the surface and they begin to beam up. We see mostly exhaustion, scrapes, bruises and a few sprains.

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### **13:00 HOURS DAY 3**

The debriefing is finished and the Board Adjourns. They will meet in the Admiral's Ready Room to go over the testimony.

Christoph is near collapse and is helped to sickbay. He is examined. LT Taaj decides that something must be done so she will allow LT Petros to leave Sickbay. They need the space and the boys need rest. ENS Kyle will be sent along to enforce the rest.

Hospital ship arrives and clears out the AV's makeshift hospital ward. Arrangements are made to beam the more critical cases directly to them.

Away Team 2 have begun to send up the first of the children. They are tired, dirty, scared, hungry and very cold. We see a lot of cuts and scrapes. One or two have broken bones. Fifteen have reached the ship.

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### **14:00 HOURS DAY 3**

Two empty cargo ships arrive on scene. They heard the distress signal sent out to the fleet and since they were in the neighborhood dropped in to help. The Orseni will be sent to one and the other will take the Sadzi. The AV starts to empty its halls.

Away Team 2 sends up the last 40 adults for processing through medical.

Admiral's Special Briefing: Admiral Lee, CAPT Harpy, CMDR Kylan, LT Taaj stands in for Christoph, CMDR Kang, LT Sparks, FCAPT Arri attend. The visiting scientists present their data and our computers agree that Sarojin must be moved off her present course. They must decide how. Updates are given to the Admiral and then talk turns to who should play a role as "The Kristof" to further cement the evacuations.

Away Team 2 send up 14 more children we learn one is trapped with CAPT El Haider when another quake threw them off the rock face. They have fallen down more than half way towards the city and come to rest on a new ledge. The child is screaming and he is not moving. Transporters cannot lock onto the captain and beam him out. He must reach the surface. Marines climb down.

El-Haider is barely alive. They get an airway established and splint his fractured neck, but there is little hope to move him with so many broken bones. The child is hauled to safety and equipment is ordered from the ship. He does not have long to live unless he can reach the ship....

**(To be continued....)**

## **Additional Data Planet Sarojin**

### **Sadzi Population: Beliefs**

Over a thousand years ago a High Priest foretold that men must mend their ways or the Great One, whose name must never be spoken, would punish them with a sea of sand. It was said he would send portents that the end of time was coming.

End of Time Portents include great ground tremors that would cause the land to split apart and swallow the wicked. The sky would turn dark and never lighten again. There would be sandstorms so violent that they would consume whole cities. People would perish from the lack of food, water and shelter.

The High Priest, who stood as prophet and voice of the Great One, also foretold that a group of beings would appear from the sky. They would bring salvation for the righteous. Among this group is one called "The Drakus" who will guide the faithful to safety. It is through The Drakus that the people will find safety. Through this angel they will meet with "The Xavier" who will stand in judgment of their readiness to reach "The Kristof". This final angel, The Kristof guards the gates to the promised land. The Sadzi must pass through these gates to reach the land where they will live as one with The Great One. This will be the time of great joy, man will no longer struggle against evil.

### **Council of Princes:**

The ruling body of the Sadzi. Comprised of leaders from the six tribes:

Basir

Damek

Hilel

Akim

Karif

Maert (This man is Prince and High Priest of the Temple)

### **Orseni Population: Beliefs**

The Orseni severed their ties and connections with the Sadzi who were carrying out genocide against them. They found a way below the planets surface and have survived. They have always been a small group but they live by the laws of the Great One. When they went below their Priest was chosen to receive the Great One's words for their new life. He was prophet and priest who delivered a number of prophetic works. One of these dealt with the Last Days of Man.



According to the Last Days of Man prophecy, the world they left behind, the land above would be cleansed of and made ready for the Great One's Chosen Followers. There is also a list a portents so they might be ready when the Last Days come. These portents speak of ground tremors, increased heat, red rivers of liquid stone. One tremor will crack the great stone ridge and open a passage way the surface where from the grounds of the temple they will be able to see stars in the sky. On the Day of Deliverance visitors will appear among them – a band of angels come to guide them up into the promised land where the Children of Araki will once more live in open air.

It is said that two of the Angels will be chosen guides. The Angel Michail will appear before the assembled adults. He will lead them to “The Kristof” who will judge the chosen and admit them into the promised land to live with the Great One. The second angel, Haidar, will come to judge the children and guide them to eternal salvation and “The Kristof”.

The Orseni believe that when the Day of Deliverance comes only the strong of body and mind will be allowed to follow the angels. This means the sick, the injured, the old and the very young (under the age of 4) will choose to remain behind for the sake of the Orseni future. They will willingly sacrifice their lives to save the righteous.

### **Orseni Leaders:**

Council of Elders: Responsible for the laws and guidance of the people to ensure they live as the Great One dictates.

Watari

Ryuzaki

Hideki

Ryuk – The current Voice of the Prophets and High Priest.



**Name:** Prince Hilel  
**Hair:** Black Long Braid  
**Eyes:** Blue-Green  
**Height:** 7 foot  
**Marital Status:** Married 1 wife Always looking for another wife.  
**Offspring:** 3 Sons ages 3, 5, and 7

**Tribe:** Elhrad  
**Beard:** Black, Well Trimmed  
**Age:** 35  
**Weight:** 300 pounds

Charismatic and very handsome. Aware of his good looks.  
He is very artistic – paints and sculpts. He plays the lute in his spare time.  
Well read and very passionate.  
The Elhrad are a very artistic tribe. Some of the best work comes from them.

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**Name:** Prince Karif  
**Hair:** White Shoulder Length  
**Eyes:** Deep Blue  
**Height:** 6 foot 10 inches  
**Marital Status:** Widowed  
**Offspring:** 5 grown sons and 17 grandchildren and 6 great-grandchildren.

**Tribe:** Kardal  
**Beard:** White, Well Trimmed  
**Age:** 60  
**Weight:** 200 pounds

He is a teacher of architecture and history. He does historical research in mythology.  
Well educated man. He has a weathered face and a kind smile. He puts fear into his students with one glance.  
He loves music and dance. Still active socially but prefers the company of men.  
The Kardal are teachers and healers.

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**Name:** Prince Maert, High Priest  
**Hair:** Light Brown Shoulder Length  
**Eyes:** Gray  
**Height:** 6 foot 5 inches  
**Marital Status:** Single  
**Offspring:** None

**Tribe:** Azaryah  
**Beard:** Light Brown Well Trimmed  
**Age:** 25  
**Weight:** 200 pounds

Spends all his time in the temple studying the sacred scrolls. He is unmarried because it is not allowed until he is 30. He lives in a religious community.  
Charismatic, quiet with soft spoken voice. He can assert himself when it is needed.  
He sits in judgment over the moral issues of all the tribes.  
He is their spiritual guide his word becomes law.  
He was raised in the temple and groomed since birth to take the position of High Priest, the reincarnation of the one who came before.  
He is the keeper of the ancient prophecies.

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## CHARACTER SKETCHES – OSENI COUNCIL OF ELDERS

**Name:** Watari  
**Hair:** White, Shoulder Length  
**Eyes:** Blue  
**Height:** 5 foot 10 inches  
**Marital Status:** Married  
**Offspring:** Two Grown Sons, 4 grown grandsons and 6 great-grand children

**Complexion:** Very Fair  
**Beard:** No Facial Hair  
**Age:** 60  
**Weight:** 150 pounds

He enjoys painting and playing the lute.  
He is still actively a teacher of cultural arts.  
He is very intelligent and a sage.

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**Name:** Ruzaki  
**Hair:** White Worn In Long Braid  
**Eyes:** Violet  
**Height:** 5 foot 11 inches  
**Marital Status:** Married  
**Offspring:** One Adult Son, Two Granddaughters

**Complexion:** Very Fair  
**Beard:** No Facial Hair  
**Age:** 55  
**Weight:** 160 pounds

A quiet man with great charisma. Always smiling and very compassionate.  
He is a scholar interested in science and healing arts.  
He is a trained healer and still practices his craft.  
He enjoys poetry and music.

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**Name:** Hideki  
**Hair:** Black, Shoulder Length  
**Eyes:** Pale Blue  
**Height:** 5 foot 9 inches  
**Marital Status:** Widower  
**Offspring:** One Grown Daughter, one Adult Grandson and 2 great-grandsons

**Complexion:** Fair, Almost Translucent  
**Beard:** No Facial Hair  
**Age:** 65  
**Weight:** 160 pounds

He loves studying law. He serves as the one who settles disputes.  
He is charged with keeping the civil law. One on a council of 20.  
Enjoys sculpting in his off hours and hiking.  
He is very passionate about the law.  
In his day he was very popular with the females. Still very attractive.

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**Name:** Ryuk, High Priest and Prophet  
**Hair:** Platinum Blonde, Shoulder Length  
**Eyes:** Gray  
**Height:** 6 foot  
**Marital Status:** Single  
**Offspring:** None

**Complexion:** Fair  
**Beard:** No Facial Hair  
**Age:** 35  
**Weight:** 175 pounds

He is a Priest and Prophet and as such lives in a religious community in the service of the people. He is the moral compass.

His job is to keep the Chosen Ones on the straight and narrow path to salvation.

Very Charismatic and quite handsome.

## CHARACTER SKETCHES FEDERATION COLONY LEADERS

<b>Name:</b> Dr. Ruben Hawhar	<b>Race:</b> Human
<b>Position:</b> Scientist and Leader – Sadzi	
<b>Hair:</b> Gray, Short Cropped	<b>Complexion:</b> Dark Tan
<b>Eyes:</b> Brown	<b>Age:</b> 45
<b>Height:</b> 6 foot 1 inch	<b>Weight:</b> 200 pounds
<b>Marital Status:</b> Single	<b>Education:</b> University of New Berlin

His special field is archeology, anthropology and dabbles in geology. Charismatic and can persuade anyone to do what he wants. He has violated the Prime Directive and is close to the High Priest. Writes poetry in his spare time and is said to have composed a book of prophetic writings patterned after the Sadzi.

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<b>Name:</b> Dr. Justin Elrad Gerhard	<b>Race:</b> Human
<b>Position:</b> Scientist and Leader – Oseni	
<b>Hair:</b> Curly Brown, Shoulder Length	<b>Complexion:</b> Light Tan
<b>Eyes:</b> Green	<b>Age:</b> 30
<b>Height:</b> 5 foot 9 inch	<b>Weight:</b> 180 pounds
<b>Marital Status:</b> Divorced	<b>Education:</b> University of New Auburn

His interests are archeology and anthropology. He is a scholar of ancient history and religions. In his spare time he researches ancient prophecies. Compassionate, overly kind, curious and at the same time charismatic. Physically handsome he is no longer interested in women and prefers to live as a monk.