

Origins

In 2370, the United Federation of Planets and the Cardassian Union signed a treaty establishing a DeMilitarized Zone between their governments. The rise of a group called the Maquis threatened to renew conflict over this region. To avoid warfare, the Cardassian government authorized the installation of a defensive outpost to maintain the neutrality of the DMZ. StarBase Aegis, a small-scale Spacedock variant, was placed in orbit above Canar II and entered operational service on 2371.08.18.

[Lieutenant (j.g.) Ereiid Sej, chief of operations]

"...that's very nice, Ensign Sorehl. Now get it done. Sej out." With a curt, cursory tab to the panel in front of him, the Trill at the Administration console appears to be the only static object within the bustle of the room. Panels lining the walls and ceiling are intermittently open, revealing the jumble of optical and isolinear circuitry beneath, their innards scrutinized by various technicians and crewmen with tools in hand.

His concentration focuses on the inundation of data on the half-functioning consoles in front of him, occasionally glancing upwards to the local area traffic displayed on the large main viewscreen.

The turbolift doors open and out strides another figure, the shoulders of his uniform red, his spots denoting another Trill. His pips signify one of greater rank. "Report, Lieutenant?"

Sej glances up from the console to spot Commander Jennan Ayer across from him, equally unfazed by the commotion. The chief of operations pulls up several status displays and accesses the mental notes he's had to make in the four hours since the Commander's last visit. "The **Lexington** offloaded the first shipment of runabouts this morning, as well as the bulk of the medical supplies."

Looking around himself, Ayer noted the disarray of what should be a center of stability and order. "And what about this place?"

Ereiid had been afraid that question would come up. "The last of the StarFleet Corps of Engineers left last night aboard the **Prague**. The engineering departments of the few ships in dock have been lending a hand, but we're more or less on our own here." Sej brings up the master systems display on the console. "Most systems are at least partially operational, but we're expecting a big turnaround once Bridger and his people get the main computer fully online."

Slightly disappointed, Ayer steps back toward the lift. "Very well, then; keep me apprised."

"Oh, and Commander," Sej turns and searches frantically before handing Ayer a PADD. "This arrived from Admiral Nechayev. I think it's about our new CO."

In response to Cardassian demands for a neutral base, the Federation Council selects former Klingon officer TSara zantai T'ZaY as commanding officer of StarBase Aegis.

EXECUTIVE OFFICER'S LOG

COMMANDER JENNAN AYER, REPORTING

I have just received orders that the "neutral" party the Cardassians insisted be in command of Aegis has been selected. It is the renegade Klingon, TSara. Her reputation as an efficient troubleshooter precedes her. However, her methods are aggressive, and I'm concerned that bringing her in will be something like dumping fuel onto a forest fire. Still, we have a young crew, and fire is good at forging strong officers. I look forward to meeting the legend.

Ayer walks over to the mirror in his office. "nukenesh!" He spits on the mirror. "No, that's wrong. Nuk neTH." He spits again. "That still isn't it." He wipes the mirror clean. "nuqneH, HoD TSara. Better." He cleans off the mirror again, and decides to give his throat a rest. "I wonder if spitting is polite to Klingons?"

Grinning, he opens the comm to OPS. "Sej, inform the crew that HoD TSara will be arriving in two days to assume command."

There is a pause before the chief of operations answers, "Aye, sir."

HoD TSara arrives, bringing her personal bird of prey nas SuS'a' and its staff.

[Ensign Sorehl, mission operations]

"...and I have cleared the runabout *Allegheny* for active service. That concludes my report," Ensign Sorehl finished. Lieutenant Sej, tending other matters at the Administration console, grunted acknowledgment. The Trill seemed to have little use for platitudes. As a Vulcan, Sorehl found them cumbersome himself. It was refreshing to serve with someone who did not complicate conversation with them.

"The CO's staff - the Andorian and the, ah... K'Cavok person - you took care of them?" Sej asked bluntly. Sorehl nodded. Sej paused thoughtfully. "They were a bundle of joy, weren't they? Your assessment?"

"I found them both rude and arrogant. In front of me, they spoke openly of their disdain toward StarFleet and its officers. They were prime examples of incivility. I was suitably honored."

Sej took a moment to register the last comment, then blinked, actually looking up from the console at the Vulcan. "Say that again?"

His assistant took on a documentary-like tone, "Klingons traditionally react to a Vulcan presence by assuming a brusque, open manner. It is their way of honoring our doctrine of emotional mastery; by showing no concern for bruised egos. I understood the compliment."

The Trill twisted his lips, avoiding a smirk, and returned to his console. "Somehow I doubt you were singled out for their display."

"Nevertheless," the Vulcan countered, "I have chosen to infer the most positive explanation. I am certain if others on our staff will govern their own irrational and emotional sensitivities, they will come to accept these arrivals as valuable additions to Aegis."

Sej hummed in response, again distracted by the duties he directed. Sorehl nodded, then stepped away from the Admin platform. Sej watched him go. Privately, he hoped the Vulcan was right. Valuable additions were just what Aegis needed...

Weeks after the arrival of HoD TSara comes the unexpected invasion of Cardassia by the Klingon Empire, placing unforeseen demands on the new station.

CAPTAIN'S LOG
HOD TSARA, COMMANDING

If being placed near the Badlands with angry Federation and Cardassian colonists wasn't enough to hone our diplomatic and tactical skills, this new twist in Alpha Quadrant history will certainly fill the void. The Klingon Empire has chosen to believe that the recent civilian shift in Cardassian politics signifies a Dominion threat, and Gowron has invaded. StarFleet has chosen to honor their treaty with the Cardassians, which has meant the dissolution of the Khitomer Treaty. I have no great love for Gowron's political views; of late he thinks only of glory and nothing of the future of the Empire.

This leaves Aegis in a precarious position. For the moment, we have been left without harassment from the fleet. Some in the Federation credit the fact that I am Klingon in command, even if I am a renegade. However, I doubt that will stop Gowron should he decide he wants to control this sector. At this time, we may be merely an insignificant Federation blotch on his map. I don't question that will change the moment we oppose his will.

If there was a Dominion plot, I believe it was to divide our alliances, making us weak, and thus easier to conquer. The days ahead of us are dark; we must be prepared for the worst. I am placing the station on continuous alert status for the time being; the **naS SuS'a'** will increase its patrols. I have taken the chief of operation's suggestion and will have Dakla and K'Cavok incorporate Klingon combat methods into the training of these StarFleet officers.

If we are to be targets, we shall not be easy ones.

[Lieutenant (j.g.) Ereiid Sej, chief of operations]

Commander Ayer enters hurriedly and takes his seat toward the head of the table. "If I may have your attention," he begins. A quick hush falls over the room, damping out the low, casual murmur. "I'm sure you're aware of the current development between the Klingons and Cardassians, as well as their attack on Deep Space Nine. Unfortunately, we have either the time nor luxury to debate the consequences of such political actions. The reality is they exist, and we have to damn well prepare for them. Lieutenant..." Ayer motions over to Sej to continue.

Ereiid brings up a map of the region on the main display from his seat, with skirmish sites involving the Cardassian Union and Klingon Empire conspicuously sandwiching Aegis. "StarFleet Command has issued indefinite sector alerts to over one-hundred and forty sectors, primarily along these regions. We happen to be one of them.

"Starship patrols are being supplemented. StarBases 401 and 211 will get priority weapons upgrades. Unfortunately, despite the major shifts in power within the Cardassian government, we are still held by the treaties that limit our own tactical capabilities." A collective murmur of disappointment arises.

Ever the tactician, Lieutenant Dakla Pierson is the first to articulate the concern. "You mean if attacked, we're bound to not have means to defend ourselves?"

Grudgingly, Ayer answers. "We will be limited to the armaments we currently have under the treaty agreement. Until legitimate authority on Cardassia allows us to do otherwise, StarFleet expects us to adhere fully to every letter of the treaty."

Sej adds, "And by the looks of it, it may be quite a while until 'legitimate authority' on Cardassia Prime is stable enough to be revising any treaties."

Ayer shifts uncomfortably in his seat. "And unfortunately, despite the former treaties between the Empire and the Federation, diplomatic channels are having little success. We're being forced into this conflict whether we like it or not."

With the Khitomer Accords dissolved, questions emerge about HoD TSara's continued role as commanding officer.

[Lieutenant (j.g.) Sorehl, chief science officer]

TSara glanced up, her attention diverted. Lieutenant (j.g.) Sorehl stood impassively before her desk. "No," she replied, "you are not disturbing me. Speak."

The junior officer nodded. "I have noted a potential deficiency in staffing. It appears that deployment of the **naS SuS'a'** leaves the station without adequate officers to conduct security. As such, I would like to direct a request for additional personnel - officers assigned strictly to station security."

TSara surveyed the officer before her. Were it not a Vulcan before her, she might question the motivation of such a request. The new strain on Federation/Klingon relations had created new challenges to the ability of the crew to work together. "Security isn't your department, Mr. Sorehl," she noted.

On the otherwise placid face, an eyebrow lifted. "It is merely a concern I became aware of. Of course, any such officer would report to Lieutenant Dakla."

TSara muttered an acknowledgment. *A diplomatic answer*, she reflected. Silently, she wondered if StarFleet had put him up to this. With the recent changes, a stronger Federation presence would allow them to spy on her and her staff, to monitor their allegiances.

"If I may speak candidly, captain?" Sorehl stepped forward, lowering his voice. He took her silence as an invitation to continue. "The effects of the Klingon incursion into Cardassian space will undoubtedly take months to ripple through the quadrant. Logically, one might conclude you may be dealing with emotional reactions to that event. As a Vulcan, I am not qualified to address them. However, if I may be so bold, may I give you a personal observation?"

Cautiously, TSara nodded.

"The Federation Council singled you out as the individual to command this facility. There may be those who will question the continuing wisdom of that decision. Mistrust may be renewed. However, the StarFleet officers of this station recognize you as their duly appointed commanding officer. You have earned their trust." He paused briefly to emphasize his final point. "If you are equally trusting of them, I assure you, they will not question your loyalty."

TSara suppressed a smirk. "This is your logical deduction?"

"It is merely a statement of opinion. You may dismiss it as such."

TSara huffed. "I have not been aligned with Imperial dogma for some time. With the condemnation the Empire is receiving, it seems I am renegade from a nation of renegades."

"There is no dishonor in that."

"Next, I suppose I'll be lecturing you on logic. **naDev vo' yIghoS. JIwoQ!**"

Sorehl gave a abrupt nod and dismissed himself.

The Maquis Threat

In its formative days, Aegis contends with various Maquis threats to peace in the DMZ. The first connection

[HoD TSara, commanding officer]

"Commander Ayer, in my office, DaH!"

TSara's voice blares into the Command Center, the irritation in her tone obvious to even the most insensitive Vulcan. Sorehl arches a brow, and passes a glance to Ayer, who has obviously heard her as well, judging from the look on his face.

"My guess is," Sej comments as he climbs up from the computer pit, "she means now, Commander." A wry smirk graces the lines of his face. He looks up at Sorehl and begins discussing problems with several of the engineering consoles at aft, leaving the first officer to frown to himself. Ayer sighs, and wonders what else

the captain has found to displease her as he approaches her office. He has already noted she only slips into Klingon language when she was annoyed. Which was getting to be more often.

She looks to him as he enters her office and motions silently for him to look at the communication currently on her terminal. The face of Gul Makos appears onscreen, and his voice sends a chill through Ayer even as the message comes to an end.

"...and so, TSara, you can see the importance of your immediate action in this matter. You cannot allow this practice to continue. If you do, be assured that our forces can handle the situation in our own manner, and the Federation may not find that to their liking," Makos smiles malevolently, obviously wishing for her failure. He continues, his voice tendered with a dread. "Oh, and welcome to our little corner of the galaxy. I hope you find your stay here a pleasant one." Again the evil smile, and the transmission cuts off.

Snarling fiercely, TSara clicks off the terminal. The Trill steps back momentarily, worried she may just spit in anger, and not wishing to be her unintentional target.

"What was that all about?" Ayer queries.

TSara looks at him and growls. "It would seem there is an underground down on the very planet below us to assist the Maquis in obtaining supplies. Makos has advised me that his troops have captured a Maquis ship, and their cargo hold's full of materials known to have come from Canar II." Her face becomes hard. "Medical supplies and a few weapons. He's claiming a breach of treaty and demands reparations if we don't put a stop to it." She frowns, "Makos has already had the Maquis executed. His intent is to find the sympathizers and execute them as well."

"Of course," Ayer echoes.

TSara looks at him darkly. "You will see that this does not happen, Commander. Get down there and find out who is funneling supplies to the Maquis, and put an end to it. Dismissed."

Leads from an investigation on the surface of Canar II suggest an Orion transport docked at Aegis is carrying a shipment of slaves. A confrontation with the Orions turns violent.

[Lieutenant (j.g.) Sorehl, chief science officer]

Dakla clung to the Orion captain's arm tightly, as if her mere touch could keep the man from hurting Sorehl. She remembered from training simulations how the Vulcan avoided violence, and she had to do what she could to protect him. "Captain, a little courtesy may win you favor in the Federation," she offered. She smiled without showing her teeth, trying to be as non-threatening as possible.

He didn't buy it. "Your keenness is beginning to annoy me, little antennae-one." He shrugged her off and turned to Sorehl. Dakla waited for some sign, any sign, that she should take action against the green pig.

Sorehl felt his head strike the solid bulkhead as the Orion shoved him backward. Both legs betrayed him, yielding as he crumpled to the deck. Vulcan stamina alone prevented him from losing consciousness. He shook his head, eyelids fluttering.

That was enough. Dakla was on the Orion instantly, twisting his arm into a wicked hold. "So much for courtesy," she lamented through grit teeth. He wrenched violently, flailing, and tried to bring his leverage to bear. The Andorian security chief was just as tenacious. "I tried to be polite," she chided.

The Vulcan started to stand, pointing toward the docking seal. "Behind you," he managed. Dakla shoved her adversary forward and pivoted to face more attackers. The Orion captain stumbled over Sorehl as he slammed into the bulkhead. Four members of the Orion crew closed in on Dakla.

K'Cavok turned his attention from verbal sparring with his insolent new associate once he heard the sound of a skirmish just ahead. "bIjatlh 'e' yImev!" he snapped, insisting Ensign LaRoche stop speaking. He saw his friend take down an assailant with a spinning kick. Warm blood pounded into his forehead at the thought of coming to her aid. "Battle!" he bellowed, crouching as he surged into the fray.

LaRoche let his hand drop to his phaser, then rushed after his companion.

Having felt her wrath, two Orions backed away from the Andorian female. Dakla touched her hand to the throbbing spot on her lip, drawing bluish traces of her cobalt-based blood. *A solid punch*, she admitted.

"Let us even the odds!" roared the thunderous voice behind her. K'Cavok barreled in, tackling the two nearest Orions. Four others poured into the now-cramped docking area. The area strobed with orange light as LaRoche fell to one knee, dropping three with his phaser. "Maybe not as fun, mais c'est plus elegant comme ca!" the StarFleet ensign shouted, praising the elegance of the sidearm.

The fighting more balanced, Dakla deftly blocked an incoming blow, countering with a solid kick to the abdomen. Still unsteady, Sorehl got to his feet, tapping his commbadge. "Sorehl to Ops. Ereiid, initiate security protocol..." The request ended abruptly as the Vulcan took a right cross to the mouth.

Ensign Satav glanced up from her position at Science One, overseeing internal communications. "Did you hear that?" she asked, looking anxiously at the Trill standing at the Admin console.

Lieutenant Sej ignored the question, having already tuned out all else while his hands secured docking clamps and powered the tractors. "Full lock-down in progress," he spoke into the still-open channel. He alerted whatever security forces were elsewhere to converge on the docking level. Only then did he glance up to acknowledge the young officer. "I heard it," he affirmed.

Still dazed, Sorehl heard the lock-down ordered. The tissue under his right eye began to discolor, swelling with dark green blood. He squinted briefly, trying to focus, but could not see his attacker.

K'Cavok hefted an Orion over his head, hurling him into another, as LaRoche kept up a withering barrage of covering fire. Dakla seized a pause, tapping her communicator. "**Jeweled Bird**, you are in violation of trade regulations. Stand down and prepare to be boarded. Resistance will be met with force." Suddenly, she smelled the overpowering odor of her former suitor. She spun, swinging. The Orion captain dodged and grabbed her firmly.

"I'm afraid I shall have to resist," he challenged, drawing closer. LaRoche adjusted the setting on his phaser to wide-angle. K'Cavok bared teeth, drawing his blade. The Orion brought his own blade up menacingly close to the Andorian's throat, "I wouldn't do anything rash." LaRoche paused, uncertain if a stun setting would be fast enough to prevent Dakla from being injured. K'Cavok weighed the d'k tagh in his hand, estimating the necessary throwing arc.

"Order them to let my ship go," he instructed. "Then the two of us will take a little walk..."

The Orion stopped mid-sentence, his head cocked to one side. A hand on his right shoulder drew tighter. Sorehl loosened his grip, letting the Orion captain fall limply to one side. The Vulcan neck pinch had claimed another victim. For his part, Sorehl managed to look non-triumphant. Dakla stepped clear, as more security officers filtered in. Gesturing, she directed teams to enter the Orion ship. K'Cavok sheathed his weapon.

TSara strode into the chamber behind the security teams. "Dak'la, chay?" she demanded, wondering how the skirmish began. LaRoche got to his feet, replacing his phaser, as Sorehl stood benignly among the fallen.

Dakla knelt over the Orion captain, pointing a thumb at Sorehl. "Leave it to the Vulcan to pick a fight." Sorehl raised an eyebrow.

TSara glared at the chief science officer. "Explanation, Lieutenant?"

"pIchpu' jIH'e'," he admitted, taking the blame. "It is quite possible I provoked them to violence."

TSara marveled. "Next time, Lieutenant, stick to just scans. Consider yourself on report."

[Commander Jennan Ayer, executive officer
and Lieutenant Dakla Pierson, security chief]

Dakla hadn't been sure it was the best way to deal with the Orion. After meeting in his cell, TSara had agreed to release him while they verified his story. He'd spun an elaborate tale of Cardassian buyers and fund transfers, all to finance the Maquis war effort. Privately, the HoD had assured Dakla that the Orion had a future date with a Federation penal colony. She sighed, thinking back to bringing him in. Her opinion of Sorehl was improving. He thought well on his feet and could do something beyond analysis. True, he wasn't a security officer, but he'd obviously learned something from those training sessions with K'Cavok..

Dakla picked up her PADD with satisfaction. She'd mapped out exactly where she thought the Maquis and the Cardassian buyer would meet up...the Tel Asteroid Belt, right on a corner of Cardassian space.

SoghHom K'Cavok walked into the office and nodded respectfully to her. She looked at him blankly for a moment, then remembered she had called him here. "Ohhhh," handing him the PADD. "Orions, Maquis, Cardassians...if they didn't look so different, I'd be very confused." The Klingon-Cardassian hybrid squinted at her. "We're going out to catch Maquis, Sogh..." K'Cavok grinned at the thought of a hunt.

After tracking down the Maquis cell involved in the slave trading, evidence surfaces of their prior contact with Commander Ayer.

[Lieutenant Ereiid Sej, chief of operations]

One last deep breath and Sej steps forward, toward the automated door. The young Trill calmly steps inside the landing bay. A quick nod from Ereiid, and the young duty officer signals the large doors on the

opposite side of the room to mechanically slide open, the bright blue glow of an atmospheric containment field signaling the vacuum beyond.

The small craft in the distance comes closer into view, now recognizable as a StarFleet Danube-class runabout. The ship gracefully glides in and settles with a soft thud on the duranium deckplating. The bright glow of the *Tiber's* engines start to dim as the resonant hum of the runabout also starts to tail off.

Another deep breath and Sej starts toward the starboard hatch, just now sliding open. Commander Ayer's taller figure steps down from the *Tiber* onto the deck. Ayer nods acknowledgment to Ereiid. "Is there a problem, Lieutenant?" His voice cool and calm. *Very joined*, Sej thought.

Sej hesitates slightly, still unsure of his orders. His pause does not go unnoticed by his superior. "Sir, I've been ordered by the Captain to take you into custody. You're to be confined to quarters for the time being."

Ereiid's noticeable discomfort slightly amuses Jennan. The statement itself prompts only an arched brow of inquiry. "May I ask why, Lieutenant?"

Still unable, perhaps unwilling to make eye-contact, Lieutenant Sej shakes his head in acquiescence. "I honestly have no idea, sir." A deeply overwhelming silence envelops the two. Only Sej's tired voice breaks it. "I'll need to confiscate your sidearm, sir."

Ayer catches the doorway into the corridor opening, two armed security guards stepping through. Calmly, Jennan reaches into his uniform and pulls out his small type-I phaser, handing it over to Ereiid. "I suppose TSara also ordered you to see to this personally?"

Looking up to meet Ayer's calmly unwavering gaze, Sej answers, "Actually, no sir. I felt it necessary to see to it personally." Another deep pause blankets the two. Ereiid turns away and starts toward the door, Ayer following in assigation. Sej steps through, into the corridor, followed by Ayer. The two security guards indescritly follow suit. The door shuts, leaving the bay filled only with the dying hum of the *Tiber*.

[Commander Jennan Ayer, executive officer]

TSara passes the guards outside Ayer's quarters and enters.

Ayer stands facing the viewport, his hands behind his back. "Thank you for coming, HoD."

TSara waits quietly, not in the mood for Terran small-talk.

Ayer continues. "I am not a Maquis. I am a Maquis sympathizer. Many of us on this station are, to some degree, or we wouldn't care what happens in the sector outside of military concerns. I knew Rian's father, and I chose to trust him when he asked for my help. His plan," he stops, tapping information on the PADD, "to sell slaves to the Cardassians in exchange for peace in the sector lacked the morality of his father's work." He pauses, and TSara decides to speak.

"Is it not StarFleet procedure to keep your superior officer informed of such things?"

"Aye," he replied, turning around. "I didn't have the luxury of time. I went with my instincts..."

"Which were wrong?"

Ayer brings his head down. "Yes, I guessed wrong."

"Do not do it again, or you will be replaced by someone more reliable." On that note, TSara spins and walks out, leaving a stunned Ayer standing open-mouthed. Equally taken aback by the obvious implications of being 'replaced,' and the fact that she did not demand his resignation, she seemed to be giving him another chance! He vowed not to let her down again.

One of the more mysterious discoveries regarding the Maquis includes an obliterated base in the DMZ.

[Lieutenant Sorehl, chief science officer]

Tucked away within the DMZ, the runabout *Allegheny* continued its lazy orbit above Divad II.

Onboard, Sorehl swiveled his chair toward Bentley, who manned the helm. "Please maintain our present distance from the Maquis vessel," the Vulcan instructed. "No need to threaten our joint mission of mercy."

Bentley glanced through the viewport. The medical frigate **Salvation** hung a mere two kilometers away. "Aye, sir," he answered officiously. Smiling, he added to himself, "If I had known I'd be piloting, I'd have brought my bomber jacket."

Though he heard the remark, Sorehl neglected to comment. Instead, he returned to sensors, intent on tracking the away team. Sej, Ramson, and Dr. Satav had beamed to the surface to survey the explosion site. The source of the destruction remained unclear. From the surface, it was hoped more accurate conclusions could be drawn.

He noted the position of the Maquis beaming to the surface. Their presence confirmed that Divad II had concealed one of their bases. Satav, as a doctor, had been able to convince them of the *Allegheny's* peaceful

intention. Maquis benevolence was subject to change, however. For this reason, he kept careful watch over the group. With a quick tap on his panel, a pre-programmed transporter sequence could recall them to safety.

Having scanned the medical frigate for armaments, Sorehl doubted they would take any provocative action. Even lightly armed, the runabout possessed greater firepower. Having Bentley at the helm, with his skill in small craft combat, was additional assurance. As Dr. Satav tended to whatever survivors were left, the away team should be secure enough to find the cause of desolation on Divad II. From his vantage in orbit, Sorehl would assist in that effort.

SECURITY REPORT

LIEUTENANT (J.G.) D'MYSUS RAMSON, REPORTING

I'm standing in what was a Maquis base. It looks like this cell was trying to develop a weapon using a polaric energy source. They didn't finish it.

Sej and Dr. Satav are finishing their observations, but like usual, security gets to clean up. And since Lieutenant Commander Dakla has put me over Maquis-related matters, I get the job of answering what all this means for Aegis and the sector.

Where did the Maquis get this equipment? Was the explosion the result of the normal dangers of polaric energy or something else? The Maquis have tried to stop Cardassians in the DMZ from developing biological weapons. Could this have been a Cardassian attempt to do stop the Maquis from their own developments? With polaric energy involved, it would be too easy to dismiss this as an accident. Odd that despite the truce we arranged with the Maquis to help the wounded, their ship left so quickly. Since polaric energy is so unstable, they may have kept something important away from the power source so not to disrupt it. Had they come for something else? There are far too many unanswered questions.

[Lieutenant Ereid Sej, chief of operations]

Satav leans forward to continue. "Dr. Selar and I figure we're going to be doing autopsies for a few more days, but so far we're not finding anything unexpected."

"How many dead?" TSara prompts.

"Four hundred eighty-two, sir. All located at the Maquis installation," Selar answers. "We're already running genome identifier sequences to identify them and notify next of kin. So far, we've confirmed some ex-StarFleet officers." Mild discomfort visibly passes through the conferenced officers.

"How did it happen?" TSara insists.

Lieutenant Commander Sorehl leans forward to hand the Captain another PADD. "As far as we can determine, they were working on a weapon utilizing a polaric tap."

Sej coolly adjusts himself in his seat and continues. "The Federation abandoned this line of weapons research in the mid-23rd century, partly because of its inherently unstable and dangerous power source, and partly because of the highly controversial nature of the project."

Sorehl picks up the discussion. "It uses a highly structured photonic energy matrix to initiate a cascade reaction among the nucleogenic particles of a planet's atmosphere, incinerating hundreds of thousands of square kilometers of a planet's surface." The Vulcan's gaze remains even and focused.

TSara lifts her eyes from the PADD briefly. "A weapon of mass destruction?"

She sees Sej's nod first as he continues. "They don't seem to have progressed very far with the technology, though. This little accident may have set them further back than when they started."

The Dominion Takes Interest

Although many officers on Aegis believe the Maquis to be the greatest threat to the region, an incident involving explosives on the station reveals far greater forces at work.

[Lieutenant Sorehl, chief science officer]

"...you may add that I am at a loss to explain how my prints came to be on the explosives, as I did not physically manipulate them during the disarming," Sorehl explained, setting down the PADD. "A most thorough analysis, Satav. I would normally disclose our findings to the security chief myself, but under the circumstances it is perhaps inappropriate." Satav glanced at her tray distractedly, clearly disturbed by the data which implicated her senior officer. Blair, also uneasy with the topic, pretended to be intent on his meal. "That is all I have for the moment," the Vulcan concluded.

"I'll get this to Dakla right away," Satav reported, tucking the PADD under one arm. She got up from her seat, taking her empty breakfast tray. As she stood, she noticed Ensign Pierre LaRoche approaching the table.

"I see zat your meeting has concluded," LaRoche began, addressing the Vulcan. "Lieutenant Sorehl, if you will come with me, sir."

The Vulcan raised an eyebrow. "What is this about, Ensign?"

"I need to discuss some unusual file purges you conducted just prior to ze bombing incidents."

Sorehl blinked. "I was not aware my activities were so exhaustively monitored. For what purpose?"

"There has been concern that zomeone has used high-level computer access to tamper with secured systems. We planted a number of files and kept zem under observation to alert us of possible sabotage. Your purges affected several of zem." Blair listened closely.

"Routine maintenance, I assure you," the chief science officer explained. "Engineering was kept fully apprised." He stood, pushing back his chair. "For the moment, however, I am due to relieve Lt. Sej at Admin. I'm afraid this shall have to wait..."

LaRoche nodded to another security officer, who stepped closer. "I'm afraid I must insist," he cautioned. "If you refuse, I will be forced to confine you to quarters for ze duration of my investigation."

Sorehl stiffened. "Then I shall comply as you direct," he spoke evenly. Despite the statement, Blair imagined a trace of defiance in the Vulcan's tone. Satav set down her tray, disbelieving.

"This is ridiculous," Blair blurted. "Mr. Sorehl has been supervising my computer diagnostics while I've been busy working on the cloak detection protocol. Purges are part of normal maintenance."

LaRoche shook his head. "I'd like to believe zat, but ze files he deleted were fictitious, supposedly important ones vital to station security. I need to see why zis was done."

Blair opened his mouth to protest, but Sorehl spoke first. "Of course, I shall endeavor to co-operate fully with your inquiry. Please lead the way." The Frenchman nodded, gesturing toward one exit. Blair and Satav watched as the security team escorted the Vulcan out.

"I don't believe it," Blair said indignantly. "There's got to be a logical explanation." He was incensed enough to miss the humor in his last statement.

"This isn't going to help," Satav noted, indicating the PADD. Blair met her glance. With resignation, she shrugged her shoulders and headed for the security office. *At the very least*, she hoped, *she might get close enough to overhear some of the explanation Blair was so sure of.*

Blair watched her go, leaving him alone at the breakfast table. He cycled through his options. He'd go over every update Sorehl had supervised. If the Vulcan didn't have enough sense to be insulted, Blair would have to feel enough outrage for both of them. He suspected it would be more than enough.

PERSONAL LOG
LIEUTENANT SOREHL, REPORTING

It appears that, so far as the captain is concerned, I am not under suspicion.

To restate, it seems unlikely that I will be formally charged with complicity to aid terrorist acts, sabotage, destruction of Federation property, or treason. Despite these serious allegations, a number of advocates have stepped forward in my defense. This is indeed curious, given the weight of evidence against me.

The incident, coupled with the unusual file purges, appears to be a clear attempt to implicate me; for what purpose remains a mystery. Commander Ayer leads effort to uncover how fingerprints could be placed with such precision, amino acids and all. Clones and allasomorphs have been considered, but discounted. I am at a loss to suggest possibilities beyond those he has considered.

Rather than continuing to assert my innocence, I am concentrating on the possible goals of this attack. From this, it may be possible to determine which party would gain greatest advantage. The captain has returned me to duty, but I suspect Mr. LaRoche will persist in keeping an eye on me. One cannot doubt the logic behind his enduring suspicion. I shall not fault him for it.

CAPTAIN'S LOG
HOD TSARA, COMMANDING

We are under siege by a Dominion shapeshifter, who has somehow managed to infiltrate the starbase. We have been fortunate to uncover him so soon; while the true culprit of these bombings remained undiscovered, the station was wrapped in a veil of suspicion, with the command staff plagued with accusations and uncertainty. This spy has convincingly impersonated several staff members; I believe the Founders' intent was to disrupt us, casting doubt among trusted officers and thus having us destroying ourselves by our own hand. However, since that plan seems to have failed, the changeling has taken to sabotaging key positions on the base. I fear we may find ourselves at the mercy of this petaQ if we fail to stop him; his intent now appears to destroy the station at any cost.

[Lieutenant Sorehl, chief science officer]

"No doubt about it," Lieutenant Eriied Sej announced. Spamey stood beside him, having stepped aside from the Admin console to allow the Trill to practice his specialty. The assembled senior staff listened to the report from their respective posts in the Command Center. "The changeling has moved out of the ducts."

Dakla nodded from her position at internal security. "Ramson reports it has moved out into the Promenade," she confirmed. "He says it looks like him now." The Andorian alerted her forces to deploy themselves throughout the station.

"It should be noted that we have no way of determining whether that last communication was in fact from the real Mr. Ramson," Sorehl advised, not looking up from his task with Satav. "I suggest we not implement any procedures without confirmed identification."

Sej nodded. From the Admin panel, he continued with the full station lockdown; docking clamps assured no ship would be fleeing StarBase Aegis.

"Containment fields?" TSara demanded, "Internal sensors?"

"There's still a number of them that aren't operational. Bridger hasn't reported back yet, but I suspect the Founder impaired them for his own escape," Sej explained.

"I'm instructing the armory to break out the modified phaser rifles," Dakla reported.

"No one should be without escort," Ayer commanded. TSara nodded.

"Captain," Sej interrupted, "I can't raise StarBase 211, DS9, or StarFleet Command..."

Lieutenant (j.g.) Blair approached the primary sensor station, leaning close to the other members of the science department. "Where did it come from?" he whispered. His first expectation was to hear a quick retort about the Gamma Quadrant.

Instead, Sorehl merely intoned, "According to report, the changeling was impersonating Mr. K'Cavok before it came to the Command Center."

Blair frowned. "So where's the real K'Cavok now?" he asked.

Sorehl glanced up as Satav shook her head, shrugging. "Unknown," he answered tersely.

"That means our K'Cavok is somewhere on the station..."

"Disabled or dead, most likely," the Vulcan completed. He thought briefly. With unusual swiftness, he straightened, stepping toward TSara. "Captain, respectfully request that I be permitted to conduct a team to locate SoghHom K'Cavok. I doubt my absence will affect our security sweeps."

TSara considered the chief science officer's assertion. Her trusted aide was probably dead, the first fatality of the shapeshifter. "I think you understate your value. We may not have time..."

Sorehl began to respond, but was cut short by his junior officer. "If we can find him," Blair argued, "he might be able to tell us what the changeling was up to. We can do sweeps while we look."

TSara snorted in skepticism. Amazingly, her tactical officer had managed to find allies among his scorned StarFleet companions. Ayer glanced at her uneasily. "HI'ja," she said at last, "but send another officer with Blair. I need you backing me up here, QeDpIn."

Sorehl nodded, turning back to his team. "Blair, last report placed Mr. K'Cavok at Jeffries junction 22-H."

Blair nodded, keying information into his tricorder. "Sorry about interjecting," he offered privately, not looking up, "I just wasn't sure she'd accept a merely logical reason."

"No matter," Sorehl yielded. "It would have proved more distasteful to admit I had not yet formulated one." With that, he stepped up to the Admin platform, to assist Sej.

Blair had little time to react to the admission before Lieutenant (j.g.) Pierre LaRoche interposed himself between him and the lift. "You'll need zis," the Frenchman cautioned, lifting his modified personal phaser. "But since I never let it out of my sight, I'll have to go with you." Given the nature of their plight, Blair could hardly argue. He shrugged his approval.

Moments later, the turbolift whisked them into the chaos.

Reflections

With the shapeshifter danger averted, the shuttlecraft Bernoulli investigates one of many anomalies along the Badlands. When the shuttle and its occupants unwittingly pass through one, what emerges is not entirely what went in.

[Lieutenant Commander Sorehl, chief science officer]

"Subspace pulse has reached resonance at 1.2 cochranes," Blair reported, tapping his controls.

Hunched over to confirm, Commander Jennan Ayer nodded. "Good work. That should anchor this end of the anomaly," he noted. He straightened, glancing around the cramped interior at his three science officers.

It had taken them less than two hours to surmise their plight. A survey of the Canar system had shown no Aegis and no colony. Coupled with the dense network of Cardassian transmissions, conclusions had been quick. "Sorehl, if this is a quantum fissure, why haven't we been able to pass through again?"

The Vulcan swiveled his chair to face the Trill, straightening his blue tunic. "Uncertain. It is possible we have suffered not a mere dislocation, but a diametric transposition as well."

Blair threw a sidelong glance at his superior. "In Standard, please?" he insisted.

"Interchanged, switched," Ayer restated. "Perhaps with an parallel counterpart."

From his seat behind them, Ensign Neal Michaels spoke. "You mean like James Kirk did on the original **Enterprise**," he offered. The account was still fresh from his Academy studies. "Alternate versions of us?"

Sorehl nodded. "A distinct possibility. If a material juxtaposition has occurred, we are essentially trapped here until conditions on both sides are duplicated."

"Wait a minute," Blair blurted, waving his hand. "If another set of us is back there, wouldn't they be trying the same things we are?"

"A logical question," the science chief admitted. "It is possible their crossover was intentional, or perhaps they did not survive the transit."

Ayer rubbed his chin. "Let's come up with something. If not, we may just have to wait to see if Aegis comes through." He paused, looking out into the asteroid field. "Or the anomaly collapses..."

[Commander Jennan Ayer, executive officer
and Lieutenant Commander Dakla Pierson, security chief]

Dakla studied Ayer, her expression cold, hard, untrusting. He looked deep in thought, and when he looked at her, his eyes held a sad, reverent look. This was not the Ayer she knew. Her lips still burned with the memory of his kiss; she had seen in his eyes that it had been the kiss of a passionate man. The Ayer she knew spent his time with his fighters or mixing with the political movements. This was not her Ayer.

Jennan Ayer remembered the Dakla from his universe, the dreamer, whose visions of a utopian universe fired his heart. Surely this Dakla was of the same stuff as his! Her hard eyes tried to convince him otherwise, but imagined seeing a glimmer of sympathy within them. She spoke, "Who are you?"

Ayer looked at her slightly in surprise, not knowing what full depth the question implied. "I am Jennan Ayer." How could even this Dakla of another universe not know him so?

Dakla did not relax her composure. "And how did you come to be here?"

Ayer's face filled with doubt. "A...shuttle accident. Investigating an anomaly in the Deloreas asteroids."

Dakla caught her breath in surprise at how parallel things were. Paradoxes frightened her. Were there were only one universe. She remembered the horror stories about other places. "Tell me, Ayer...is your world full of violence and greed and conquest?"

Ayer stared at the hooded eyes of his dreamer. "Is yours?"

[Lieutenant Ereid Sej, chief of operations]

"...finished analyzing the shuttle's telemetry and sensor logs. It was difficult sifting through all the polaron interference, but we were able to pick out the quantum fissure through the subspace noise." Sej leans in his seat, casually turning his head to steadily meet the gaze of each of his colleagues.

TSara continues her inquiry. "So what do we know about it then?"

Sej stands and strides across the debriefing room to the wall display, activating it. "It's highly coherent. However, there aren't any discrete subspace matrices anchoring it in place. If Sorehl were here... our Sorehl... he'd probably tell you that this thing isn't from our universe."

"Not from our universe?" K'Cavok frowned, folding his arms.

"At first we thought that it's strange electroweak flux emission was just a glitch. Then we referenced it against the ridiculously high top quark and Einstein-Bose condensate emission signatures. Apparently, this thing is some kind of protogalactic remnant from the Big Bang. Like a fleck of lint caught on a sweater."

Dr. Satav straightens to address the conference. "I've run thorough bioscans on all four of them. They're not our officers. I compared their readings to the most recent physicals on record; identical except for a some scar tissue and discrete differences in their neurosynaptic pathways, particularly those in the amygdala."

Having some knowledge of biology, Ramson nods, "The memory centers of the brain."

TSara leans forward to reassert direction. "So we've established that our crew has been replaced..."

Ereid's voice interrupts. "Not replaced, translocated. We think our *Bernoulli* is located wherever it is that these guys came from."

"So how do we get them back?" TSara turns to face the young Trill Lieutenant.

Sej's mouth opens, voicing only a brief silence before continuing. "We're not entirely sure yet."

Bridger leans forward to take some heat off of his colleague. "We've considered using an antimatter detonation to force another translocation, however we're not sure that it'd work."

Sej regains his composure. "We're also considering releasing a protogravitic source within a subspace tensor matrix. That may be enough to allow limited passage through. We'd just have to hope that our team is nearby on the other side."

Dakla queries. "What are your chances of success?"

At a noticeably lower volume, Bridger responds. "Right now, computer models project about 30% either way." At that instant, the eyes in the room turn to TSara. Uncharacteristically wordless, but with a sigh, communicating her own indecision.

[HoD TSara, commanding officer]

TSara scowled at those gathered around the conference table, all familiar faces. A sense of uneasiness came over her as she regarded them. These were not her officers.

Sej and Bridger explained the various options on sending them back. TSara tried to concentrate on her words, but her thoughts kept returning to the exchanged crew. She had read reports of Kirk and the more recent ones from DS9 regarding the same parallel universe. Her eyes narrowed as she continued to stare at the Vulcan, who seemed to shift nervously in his chair. A frown crossed her face as an annoying thought invaded her mind, one that demanded her immediate attention. *No*, she thought to herself, *going home was not the only thing on their agenda, she was sure of it, but what could they possibly want?*

[Lieutenant (j.g.) John Blair, sensor specialist]

A bright light flashes outside the shuttle, then dissipates. A wave of nausea comes over Neal Michaels as he looks outside at nothing but stars and empty space. *Just the way it should be*, he thought.

Sorehl moved forward towards Blair. "Have we returned to our proper dimension?"

Blair moved his hands over the sensors. Blair made a fist and pulled his arm down as if picking fruit from a tree. "Yes!" he exclaimed. He turned towards Sorehl. "According to these readings, the crossover was successful. We're back!" he reported to the Vulcan.

"Good," Sorehl said as he looked out the forward window. To Michaels, "Get us back home." He turned to Blair, "What information were you able to download from the starbase computers?"

Blair walked over to where the tricorder was laying and picked it up. "I think I got everything they had on past crossovers, including one we didn't know about. One involving a Benjamin Sisko from our own dimension." Blair handed the tricorder to the Vulcan.

"Interesting," Sorehl said as he received the device. He studied the information.

Blair admired the ruthless efficiency. *But Vulcans aren't perfect*, he recalled. *After all, wasn't it a Vulcan that started the collapse of the Human Empire?* With this information, maybe both races could do something about their damaged image.

Foundations and Family

As Aegis becomes a permanent fixture along the border, it offers foundation for clinging roots.

[Lieutenant Commander Sorehl, chief science officer]

"I thought I'd find you here," Blair announced, stopping next to the shuttlepod *Bernoulli*.

Sorehl, crouching beside the craft with his tricorder, continued his scans. "That is hardly revelatory, since you can access my location at any time via the computer."

Blair refused to disregard his triumph, plunging forward. "With Michaels moving to security, I guess that leaves you and me. The lone science men."

"Delightful," Sorehl responded, deadpan.

"What are you doing anyway?"

"I am using outer hull emissions from this shuttle and the *Poisson* as a baseline against those of our pod from the dimensional crossover. The transit may have left residuals."

Blair patted his blue tunic. "Dr. Satav said we were fine, right? There's nothing residual on us."

"So I'm told," the Vulcan answered, not looking up from his readings.

"I thought LaRoche had a team doing that work."

"He does, and I am assisting them."

Blair smiled. "You know," he admitted, "when I saw him working in engineering instead of security, I thought maybe we hadn't come back to the right place. I was looking for little things to be out of place, something that might..." Blair leaned forward, squinting. "Hey, you haven't shaved."

Sorehl stood, straightening his tunic. "It is within regulations for officers to wear a beard."

Blair squinted again, visualizing. "Very distinctive. You may start looking like your own evil twin. What's the occasion?"

"It is a custom of my clan to distinguish child-rearing males," he explained.

Blair blinked. "Huh?" he managed.

Sorehl elaborated, "Given the duration of my assignment, my family has chosen to take residence aboard the station. My wife and daughter will be arriving within the week." With that, he folded his tricorder, bound for the turbolift.

The doors began to close until the human placed his hand to hold them. "So, if my sister comes to visit, can I wear a pony-tail?" he teased. Blair smiled immensely, pleased with himself, as he took his hand away and let the doors swoosh shut.

Sorehl stood alone, reaching up to stroke his chin. Unknown to its owner, an eyebrow lifted.

*Responding to a distress call, an away team finds the USS **Asimov** under attack, not by Maquis, but by an intense ion storm. The risk of families becomes all too apparent to one member of the crew.*

AWAY TEAM LOG

LIEUTENANT COMMANDER SOREHL, REPORTING

We have commenced evacuation of the **Asimov**, whose entire crew has been incapacitated by the ion storm. Our armbands have been configured to emit a weak EM field, enough to prevent charge buildup in our nervous system. LaRoche has restored main power, while Mr. Bentley and I continue to locate and retrieve those onboard. At this time, the captain has decreed transport unsafe, but LaRoche is attempting to develop a countermeasure. I suspect, however, that our group may be too small to deal with all 48 crewmembers. Without more personnel, the situation appears most grave.

Lieutenant Commander Sorehl pressed forward, despite the weight of the two crewmen slung over his shoulders. His eyes efficiently swept the corridor, looking for others. His mind remained open, seeking out a familiar connection. Fifty years of rigid discipline drove him on, despite the overwhelming concerns brewing within him. Somewhere on the ship lay his wife and daughter, unconscious.

He could not let it distract him. Logic dictated all of the lives onboard were of equal value. He could favor no one person above another, regardless of his feelings.

He glanced ahead, seeing Bentley wave him toward the open hatch. The engineer was lowering crewmen down into the runabout. One of them was a Vulcan woman. Sorehl looked closely. He did not recognize her. The science officer slipped the two officers down onto the deck without a word. By the time Bentley turned back to report, the commander was gone.

What he could not see was that out of sight behind the curving corridor, the Vulcan had broken into a run.

With one family securely aboard, the Aegis home expands to include ever-larger circles.

[Lieutenant D'Mysus Ramson, Maquis specialist
and Sogh K'Cavok, security officer]

Ramson looked up from his work as the computer chirped, "You have an incoming message."

Gladly pushing the forms away, "On screen." The screen popped up a Cardassian symbol, then was replaced by a grinning face. "Barak! What are you doing on an official channel?" Ramson smiled at his old friend.

"Haven't you heard? We're a civilian government, for the moment. A little more tolerant to dissidents, like myself. Actually, I'm now part of the government."

"You? Seems only fair, you gave the old one enough grief." Ramson was all too aware of the situation his friend's government was in. "How are things?"

"You know how it is. You've got a front row seat. They're bad. I've been placed over a colony near the territory the Klingons took from us. If they decide to take this planet, they will get no resistance. The only thing keeping them back is the four cruisers in orbit."

A little surprised, "I'd say that would form a resistance."

"Dead hulks," Barak said plainly. "Either heavily damaged or frames we didn't have the resources to finish. All but one had to be towed into place." The despair on his face was obvious. "When the Klingons come, that will be it for all of us."

"When are you leaving?"

"I'm not. If we evacuate, we tip off the Klingons; we can't afford to lose this slice of space. Not just yet."

"Is Jeralla there? How is my goddaughter taking this? Is she safe?"

"She's safe and will be even more so with your help." Taking a deep breath, "She's on her way to Aegis."

Ramson paced as the transport unloaded its passengers. His goddaughter would be among them. Looking from one end of the crowd to the next, he hoped he would recognize her. She was sixteen now and probably a lot different from the last time he saw her. He then caught a sudden jolt of emotions. He turned to face Jeralla. Beaming a smile, he rushed over to greet her with a warm hug. "Jeralla, how are you?"

Burying herself in his arms, she looked up at him with tears in her eyes.

"Yes, the trip can be hard. Did you eat?" D'Mysus pulled her back slightly and picked up her travel case. She wiped the tears from her eyes and helped him with her luggage. "OK, there's a small place with some halfway palatable Cardassian food just down this way." He felt good having her here. She was like family, maybe even a little more than that.

As they headed out, Ramson froze. He was hoping to postpone this, but it wasn't going to happen.

K'Cavok scowled at the offloading passengers. Looking through the crowd, he saw a figure in StarFleet clothes that he recognized as one of his favorite adversaries. *Ramson always put up a good fight, he mused, even when it was hopeless.*

But something else caught his eye. A Cardassian, almost a child. He moved towards them.

Ramson felt K'Cavok's sights lock onto him and Jeralla. He saw the Klingon-Cardassian hybrid purposely move straight towards them. Jeralla looked up to see why Ramson stopped. As she did, she jerked back as she saw the Klingon looming behind D'Mysus.

K'Cavok scowled at the child's reaction. *Even Cardassian children have no spines, he thought.*

"Who is this?" the huge Klingon demanded. "What is a Cardassian doing on my station?"

"She's with me," Ramson answered, not hiding his defiance. "Jeralla is my goddaughter and I am taking care of her." Ramson eyed him, trying to sense any plan to harm her.

"You keep interesting company," K'Cavok answered.

Sciences discovers a rogue planet are the source of dangerous ion storms in the sector. During an away mission to survey this uncharted world, one officer reflects on friendships in the Aegis family.

[Lieutenant (j.g.) John Blair, sensor specialist]

The mission was a failure.

Blair couldn't comprehend what had happened. The *Allegheny* was buffeted around, its structural integrity field overloaded. With the hull strength gone, the craft was about to tear apart.

Why had he suggested K'Cavok fly the runabout into the atmosphere? That wasn't initially what he had planned to do. But the thought of seeing a life form that was five kilometers in diameter was overwhelming. When they had penetrated the outermost layers of atmosphere, Blair didn't say anything at all. He just kept scanning. Then the ion storm hit with a vengeance.

It came out of nowhere. LaRoche kept shouting about communicating with them, but there wasn't time. That was when Sorehl noticed the gases leaking in through a rupture in the inner hull. Getting back into orbit wasn't an option after that.

Blair remembered putting on his EVA suit, unable to think. Their only chance was if the runabout *Colorado* could get there in time. There was a yell from LaRoche about the hull, then Blair felt the deck part beneath him. He clutched at his seat, but it was too late. The *Allegheny* strained and tore into debris. Blair was blasted from his chair by a powerful gust and carried off into the surging currents.

Then things were calm. He found himself staring into a pale blue gaseous ocean, only vaguely feeling the tug of gravity that would draw him ever faster toward the dense core. Everything was quiet. *His life was over,* he realized. It already looked like heaven. There was a strange euphoria in that thought. His Aegis friends would join his eternal family.

Blair tumbled, wondering which way was up. It didn't matter. Soon everything would be over. In the distance, he could see the others in their suits. All were falling. It gave Blair a certain peace to know that they were going to be with him, as well.

Two of them shimmered and disappeared. Blair furrowed his brow slightly in confusion. That was odd. Perhaps they had completed their journey into the great beyond? It was difficult to know. Blair had never done this before.

And there! What's that? An angel perhaps? Coming to take him away, too? It certainly looked like an angel. It was huge! And very tall, with flowing, translucent wings. It moved below him in a graceful arc, surging up toward him and the remaining two with tremendous speed. One of the others reached out; pointing, it seemed. Just as suddenly, he shimmered and disappeared, too.

Coming to take us to our ultimate destination, Blair thought. *Did Vulcans and Klingons and humans all share the same heaven?* He saw the being again. It wasn't slowing, positioning itself below the two remaining officers.

Blair saw the translucent body coming up at him. He braced himself for the impact, but it never came. He felt a soft bounce as the skin billowed under him, then grew taut. He lay face down, at rest on the body of the atmospheric creatures. His breath fogged the inner surface of his helmet visor. Something crackled in his communicator, startling him.

"Mr. Blair, do you see it?" the familiar baritone of the Vulcan called.

Blair looked up. A similarly suited figure approached. He barely managed to speak, albeit slowly, "Yes, I...I see it."

Then he didn't. His surroundings shimmered and faded away, replaced with the interior of a runabout. Four officers were crowded into the cockpit, while Dr. Satav tended LaRoche, who was laid out on the deck below the two-man pad. Satav motioned him towards her.

Blair stared at the crowd, completely bewildered. He twisted off his EVA helmet and slowly walked towards Satav. He crouched beside her, not saying anything. Satav scanned him with a tricorder, then turned back to LaRoche. Blair didn't know what to make of anything that just happened.

A member of the powerful Metron race visits the station and offers Aegis a unique test of their "racial harmony."

[Lieutenant Commander Sorehl, chief science officer]

The science officer sat at the console quietly, rubbing his eyes. His headache was an indication of just how loudly fatigue and stress were shouting at him with voices he was unaccustomed to hearing. After all, Sorehl had never been human before.

He reminded himself to sit up and was startled to see Lieutenant Blair beside him. He had not heard his assistant approach.

"Commander," Blair spoke with even tones. His expression was unusually sober, with Vulcan features accenting his eyes and ears. "I have background data on the Metrons." Sorehl read the offered PADD:

A highly advanced life-form, apparently humanoid, of unknown origin, possessing great powers. The Metrons intervened in a conflict between the original Enterprise and a Gorn ship in 2267, following a territorial dispute over Cestus III. A Metron representative said they had not expected Kirk to show the advanced trait of mercy, saying they were so impressed they might wish to contact the Federation within a few thousand years.

"It seems they've accelerated their timetable." Sorehl let the PADD drop with a clatter. "This is not much to go on, but it will help." From his vantage point, he glanced across the Command Center. "At least things seem to have settled."

In the stoic manner forced upon him, Blair nodded assent. "Sej broke up K'Cavok, Renckly, and Kurok with sheer Gorn bulk, and duty seems to have soothed LaRoche. He stopped being so Klingon when he heard the distress call. He's been manning his post ever since."

"At least some of the officers haven't forgotten their obligations," Sorehl murmured.

Blair looked around. "Did they take Ramson out of here?" he inquired.

"Dr. Satav felt it best to move him to sickbay. You were able to sense his condition?"

Blair looked at him briefly. "When I touched him, I could feel emotions stirring within him. Almost panic. No sense of surrounding. No way to talk. Is that what you normally sense?"

"As touch telepaths, Vulcans avoid physical contact with other species. If not, we would need to filter and shield ourselves. It is difficult enough to master our own emotions."

"It seems the Metron didn't give me advanced training," Blair observed. He opened his mouth to say something, but stopped. "I...had something funny to say about that, but it doesn't seem relevant."

"Your humor seldom is," Sorehl retorted. "It seems the Metron did give you basic Vulcan discipline. How thoughtful," he added, folding his arms across his torso. He looked away, his face showing concern. He placed a hand on his chest. "I believe I am experiencing a muscle spasm."

"How regular is it?" Blair asked.

Sorehl kept his hand over the spot. "It seems to be getting faster," he reported.

Blair noticed the position. "I suspect you are feeling your new human heartbeat." He put a hand to his own chest. "Strange. I can't feel a thing. Blood pressure would be too low anyway."

Sorehl's forehead furrowed, then he raised an eyebrow. "What an odd placement."

"I forgot about the physiological differences. That would explain why it's so chilly in here."

Sorehl began to smirk, but caught himself. In a human body, the Command Center felt warmer than he'd ever felt it. "The others are undoubtedly feeling similar disorientation in their new bodies, some without the guidance of...a native. We must be sentient of this." He turned back to the console.

Blair reached a hand to his senior's shoulder and gave a reassuring squeeze. He was about to comment on the emotions he sensed when he noticed Sorehl cock his head to one side and slump forward onto the console. The PADD clattered noisily to the floor. Blair snatched his hand back. It would seem another, albeit unintentional, victim had fallen to the Vulcan neck pinch. He stared at his hand, then checked for witnesses. He didn't know his own strength.

[Lieutenant D'Mysus Ramson, Maquis specialist]

Laying on the biobed asleep, Ramson became more aware. He hadn't changed. Physically, he was Klingon, but that had little to do with anything. His skills were intact, even if the hardware was different. The shock of psionic "blindness" had been overwhelming, but it had passed.

During the link with Blair, grasping for telepathic contact, he became aware of much that had happened. The Metron had changed the race of everyone on the station. It troubled him. The hysteria was unexpected. It was as if more than just the others' bodies had changed but even their souls. Or did the new cover for their soul not conceal all the dark and hidden spots that the old kept out of sight?

As they became something different, madness followed. They began to act like that race, or rather, acting how they saw that race to be. The new Klingons were as brutish and harsh as any Klingon could be. Others were quick to claim weakness from the new self. The now-Betazoid captain was not indecisive, falling victim to her view of telepaths as inactive and passive. Ramson hoped TSara didn't see him that way.

What was a Klingon? What makes a Betazoid, Vulcan, or Human? More than a race, it was a culture. The physical difference between Vulcans and Romulans physically are minor, but the two have little in common. As he explored his new Klingon mind, this became more clear. Klingons were direct; it was true. But were the courtesies taught in childhood unable to fit within a new neural network? He doubted this was really true, which only deepened his sadness at the turn of events.

Ramson became unsure if they would pass the Metron's test. What price did failure hold? The one thing he did know was this: he was D'Mysus Ramson, Minarian by birth, culture, and creed, and a StarFleet Officer who had no excuse for acting like anything else.

Restored to their proper races, members of the crew ponder the uncommon experiences they have shared.

[Lieutenant Commander Ereiid Sej, chief of operations
and Lieutenant Commander Sorehl, chief science officer]

The turbolift doors open from Sej and Dakla to step in, where they join Sorehl, already inside. "Landing Bay 2," Sej orders the lift. "You know, it's been a whole day, and yet I'm still instinctively feeling myself for scales every hour on the hour?"

"You must have had a secret desire to be Gorn," Dakla observed. "I don't know why I keep checking to see I'm not Orion. I just noticed that I've been crossing my eyes every so often to make sure my nose isn't green." The Trill and the Andorian exchange a glance and quickly look away, stifling a chuckle.

Sorehl looks to the officers on either side of him briefly and coolly returns his gaze forward. "I admit I cannot sympathize with the experience of 'readjustment' the rest of the crew seems to be having. I find no dilemma in being returned to my original state."

Sej turns to cast incredulous eyes on his Vulcan friend. "You mean you've never wondered what it might be like to look into a mirror and see something other than pointed ears?"

Dakla relaxes her posture to more informally address her colleagues. "I don't know...as glad as I may be to have these back," she brushes a hand past her twin antennae, "I need to admit that there was some part of me that enjoyed the...freedom of expression." She collects herself and recasts her gaze forward, shifting in place

half-uncomfortably, half-sensuously. She turns to more directly assess Sorehl. "Come on, don't tell me there wasn't some part of you that was actually enjoying being human."

There is a short period of silence as the Vulcan looks back, somewhat confused. Sej tilts his head. "I don't think any of us will ever know that, Dakla. However, I'm reminded of an old Trill proverb..." Sej eyes become contemplative and wistful. "There's no place like home."

The turbolift closed, carrying Dakla and Sej away and leaving Sorehl alone. He mused on Dakla's jest.

Most of the experience had been subjective and emotional, granting him little framework for comparison. The physical transition was only mildly disorienting, like waking up in unfamiliar room while traveling. The physiological differences were nonetheless fascinating. The human eye seemed capable of greater contrast between light and dark. Vulcan vision had developed under the harsh, bright rays of Eridani 40. A nictating membrane had evolved to protect against excessive light, but night vision was clearly superior for humans. And the lower body temperature made the air feel warmer, too.

He had felt fear, wondering what effect such a permanent transition would have on his family. How could he train his daughter in mental disciplines he no longer held? Those same lost skills kept him from screening his impulses; filtering out unwise choices. His expression clearly showed his inner thoughts. He noticed a faster response time, but it was hardly worth the trade-off.

Humans seemed highly dependent on their emotional and sensory feedback, yet clearly unable to sort and filter salient input. How they managed to navigate such a chaotic mix was a mystery - one he was satisfied to leave in their hands rather than his own. All in all, he was content to be Vulcan.

Then again, he mused, it had been nice to have the station warm enough for a change...

Infestation

Facing unusual station-wide systems failures, StarBase Aegis finds itself overwhelmed by the threat of a vicious space-borne Swarm.

[Lieutenant D'Mysus Ramson, Maquis specialist, and
Lieutenant Commander Sorehl, chief science officer]

Ramson reached up for the lever that would unseal the lift doors. Assuming he was the lone person on the rungs of the turboshaft, Ramson was almost startled when an echoing voice called from above him, "Is someone down there?"

He looked up, squinting to make out another figure in the dim lighting. To get so close to him without being noticed earlier, it could only have been one other officer. "Commander Sorehl," he replied, "you coming down?" Ferengi, Breen, and Vulcans were always tough to sense telepathically.

"Yes, toward engineering," the science chief replied, stopping above him. "And you?"

"Just here at Deck 98," he answered, pulling the lever sharply. "I sent Crewman Kylosh down on routine patrol, but he hasn't checked back yet. With communications sporadic, I thought I should check on him." He thumbed a button alongside the portal.

The lift doors yielded as expected. The unlit corridor gave a surprising picture to the two officers. Ramson stepped onto the deck, barely seeing anything visible beyond a few feet. He looked back in the shaft at Sorehl, who looked questioningly back. "Computer," the Vulcan intoned, "re-engage illumination on this level." The command gained no response.

Ramson pulled open an emergency panel, "I knew the lifts were down, but I didn't hear about any power outages." He pulled out a palm beacon and tested it. Shining it down the corridor, it glinted off the walls.

Sorehl stepped off onto the deck, flipping open his tricorder. "Perhaps I should assist."

"Sir," Ramson pointed, "look there." His light showed the edge of a StarFleet boot, barely visible around the edge of the concentric corridor. He rushed forward, unable to sense a presence, and expected the worst. He gasped as a gleaming white skeleton came into view. Only the boot and tattered shreds clung to it.

Sorehl flipped open his tricorder. "The remains are Morean."

"Kylosh." Kneeling down, Ramson looked over the body. "No commbadge," he observed, standing. "Computer, locate Crewman Kylosh."

"Crewman Kylosh is on Deck 98, section 18."

There was a brief pause. "Odd," Sorehl noted aloud. He swept the area with his tricorder. "I have a fix on it, but...it is moving."

Ramson put his hand to the phaser at his waist. "Let's see who's got it."

Fleeing the first attack of the Swarm, the two officers sound an alert before plunging to safety down the open turboshaft. The insectoid collective emerges, attacking throughout the station. Separated from most other officers, K'Cavok defends civilians against the invading Swarm.

[Sogh K'Cavok, station security]

He had been on Deck 20 when the yellow alert sounded. The lifts hadn't responded, so he found the main gangway, knowing he must make his way up. Climbing toward the Command Center, K'Cavok had only made it to the civilian living areas when he heard the screams. Security training surged into his veins, forcing him to push off from the rungs, bolting toward the sounds of panic.

What he had found had stunned him at first. Swarms of insect-like creatures moved through the station, attacking people. He had saved the victims by setting his sidearm to wide-angle stun and firing into the mass. Now here he was, trying to sweep the corridors clear for civilians to escape. A small group huddled behind the protection of his weapon. He crouched low, blasting another wave of the parasites.

A hand tapped his arm. He looked back to see a Vulcan woman kneeling beside him, gripping her infant daughter. Once again he had come to the aid of Sorehl's family.

"This place is too vulnerable," he growled. "We cannot stay."

"There seem to be few safe options," T'Salik admitted. "We located the Cardassian girl, Jeralla, but the security guard you mentioned was unconscious. We have them both. That should be all on this deck."

K'Cavok squinted and fired again. "Gather them. It is not safe here," the Klingon-Cardassian hybrid ordered. The Vulcan nodded obediently, moving back toward the group. He'd heard nothing from Ops, so he had to assume the entire station was under attack. K'Cavok grit his teeth, slapping his arm. He smashed one of the cursed bugs with his palm. It fell onto the carpet, undamaged. "They must have duranium shells," he spat. These things were nearly invulnerable. He had to get these people out of here.

Escaping the ravenous Swarm, Aegis officers regroup and recover after the first onslaught.

[Lieutenant Commander Ereiid Sej, chief of operations]

The darkness of Sej's unconsciousness gives way to a hazy brightness as his eyelids slowly lift. He tilts his head back to free himself of the mask on his face. He lays motionless for several minutes, still collecting himself and searching for his weak, muted voice. "...sickbay...? I'm in sickbay?" His deeply wheezing breath is followed by a few coughs stifled by his lack of lung volume. Sej's pupils nimbly dart around the room as he scans his memory. "...the swarm in the CC... the turboshaft stopping.. Renckly bringing me here..."

A nurse enters the periphery of his vision. "Good. The treatments aren't causing degradation of your memory centers." She holsters her tricorder and looks to the wall display.

"I need to get to..." Ereiid tries reaching out to a countertop to support him as he stands, but his hand is met forcefully by the bluish glow of a containment field. He recoils in surprise.

Startled from her work, the nurse turns apologetically. "Oh, I'm sorry, sir. We had to put a quarantine field around you." She steps closer, but not approaching the delicate barrier. "We loaded you up with enough anaphylactic suppressers to stop a wild Klingon targ. To counteract your violent allergic reaction to the insect bites, we had to lower your immunogenicity to a dangerously low level. Any contact you have with the external environment could prove potentially lethal."

The young Trill shuts his eyes forcefully in uncharacteristic helpless frustration as he searches for the voice to ask another question. "Nurse Chopra, is there any word about Commander Ayer?"

She turns her eyes more pointedly, replying only very softly. "Please try and rest." She turns to head into the main sickbay ward, the subtext in her reply weighing like a stone upon Sej.

[Lieutenant Commander Sorehl, chief science officer]

Having made their hasty retreat from Deck 122, the four officers joined others in Main Engineering. Lieutenant Pierre LaRoche was standing at the master situation panel, with Ramson on the floor beside him, still unconscious and leaning against an unused station. Sorehl motioned Kurok to set Blair down beside the security officer. Blair grunted. Kurok moved to assist the chief engineer, while Renckly stood, phaser rifle in hand, guarding the perimeter.

The Frenchman turned, seeing their arrival. "Meester Sorehl, I thought your group was..."

"We were forced to relocate," the Vulcan responded. "Status report?"

"Commander Ayer went to join Meester Sej near Sickbay. Zhey just told me ze swarm iz beginning to behave differently."

The chief science officer nodded. "Mr. Blair theorized that gamma emissions were used as a medium for communication. Before his injury, he instigated a series of short gamma bursts which seem to have temporarily disrupted its collective nature."

"Zhey are still in control of parts of ze station," LaRoche pointed out. "Zhey dimmed the lights here and zhey still have ze shields up, transporters locked out, and external comms blocked."

From his nearby console, Kurok huffed in disapproval.

Sorehl theorized aloud. "The Command Center has a large swarm concentration. In addition, some drones seem to have independent instincts, even when split from the group. It would appear the effect has only granted us a brief reprieve."

The chief engineer nodded quickly. "Zhey won't be stunned for long. We have regained life support on most levels. Ze turbolifts are working and we can move freely on all decks, except Ops."

"All the swarms I saw were immobile or moving away," Renckly observed. Less vulnerable to attack, the ensign had been able to serve as reconnaissance for the group.

"We can be sure they will launch another assault," Kurok noted.

From the direction of the main gangway, K'Cavok stumbled into the room.

"Any word on the captain?" Sorehl inquired.

"I haven't seen her since this started," K'Cavok answered. *Probably dead*, he didn't add. He grit his teeth.

"We have got to reason with ze swarm," LaRoche insisted, "show them zhere are alternatives to making Aegis into some kind of hive."

"Excellent suggestion," Sorehl indicated, "Mr. Blair's linguistic search deciphered a number of collective commands - regroup, herd, mate. This would seem to be their agenda. If we can wrest more control from them and provide an option that meets their needs, the swarm might yield."

K'Cavok narrowed his eyes. "Too many words. Beat them, but give them a better way out."

"Succinctly put. I suggest we do just that." Almost in unison, heads gave a quick nod. If the swarm thought it was unopposed, it was clearly wrong. Another collective, the combined talents of StarBase Aegis, had stirred to meet the challenger.

*Having beaten back the Swarm, Aegis receives its first visit from the starship **Victory**.*

[Lieutenant Commander Sorehl, chief science officer]

"Well, **Victory** isn't in need of an extended layover," the man onscreen admitted, "but I can certainly delay our departure until your situation is secure."

"majQa', Captain Halloway," TSara acknowledged, "but there's no need to delay that long. I doubt this region will ever be secure. naDev thInganpu' tu'lu'."

The onscreen image paused, waiting for his translation to finish. "Well said. Klingons do spice up the mix a bit. Just as well. With as much time as we spent back at Earth after the Admiral Leighton fiasco, my crew is relieved to be doing real work. Dr. Hashbaz and my chief engineer are willing to help where they can. Let me know if we can do anything further. Halloway out."

"Accommodating," Sej noted from the Admin console. His skin still showed signs of his acute reaction to the Swarm attack.

"You expected otherwise?" TSara inquired, raising an eyebrow.

"Fast-track officer, veteran of the Cardassian front, Order of Tactics, Legion of Honor, StarFleet Crest," the chief of operations enumerated. "I expected more spit-and-polish, like Captain Jelicho of the **Cairo**."

"toH!" TSara exclaimed. "A military mindset in StarFleet? Imagine that."

Sej nodded. "He can't be more than forty. And this is the guy who almost beat out Jean-Luc Picard for the last **Enterprise**."

"...and who opposed the formation of the DMZ and may be a Maquis sympathizer," Commander Ayer added. "Imagine that."

TSara shot him an acrid look. Sej judiciously chose to watch his console.

Ayer merely shrugged. "Nobody's perfect."

STARBASE OPERATIONS LOG

LIEUTENANT COMMANDER EREIID SEJ, REPORTING

With the withdrawal of the alien intelligence now known as "The Swarm," Aegis busily repairs after our most recent encounter with "new life."

Repeated centimeter by centimeter scans of the station have revealed no sign of the alien insectoid collective, allowing some assurance that the worst has passed. Each system review has revealed far more

extensive damage than we had initially anticipated. Lieutenant LaRoche has his hands full, having to rebuild baseline code for a number of key systems. The help of the **Victory** is greatly appreciated.

With most of our available resources devoted to repairing and securing the station, I fear there isn't a great deal of time for us to be dealing with the more personal consequences of the last few days. Casualty reports indicate about two dozen station residents, crew and civilians, dead or missing, presumably victims to the Swarm's vicious hunger.

The aftermath of this crisis will be lingering for quite some time. I myself lost a good communications technician. In terms of sheer loss of life, this has been by far the worst crisis Aegis has yet to endure.

The Fury and the Silence

After an egocentric scientist's experiment goes awry, a buildup begins that will result in nova - blowing off the outermost shell of the Canar sun. Efforts to undo the damage are complicated by the flight of the scientist, leaving only his encrypted notes.

[Lieutenant Commander Ereid Sej, chief of operations]

"Try the Renaud Sequence again..." Sej remains hunched over the console, leaning in to view Lieutenant Blair's science display. Lines of coded decryption algorithms run across his view. The other various gathered officers crowd in to also get their own views, but try and squeeze in to allow the other Science officers, including Commander Sorehl, space to move and work within the usually spacious Science alcove on the upper tier of the Command Center.

His eyes still intently focused on the screen, Blair barely acknowledges the suggestion with a turn of his head. "I've run it through that coding algorithm six times already; nothing."

Lieutenant (j.g.) Dole, his hoverchair nearby makes his voice heard. "What about the Sheshech Key?"

Blair's head remains in position. His frustration is only evidenced by the barbed nature of his comments. "We've tried all eighteen variations. Dr. Angelus was 'witty' enough to include a subcoding that decrypted for the twelfth variation and entertained us by playing a little ditty."

"The Laughing Vulcan and His Dog." The dryness and the unison in Sej and Blair's voice would be comic in any other situation. In this case, only indicative of their shared stress levels.

With faultless irony, the computer beeping signals some sort of response. "Wait, I think I've got it... I see... maybe if I kick in one of the more advanced decoding mechanisms here..." Blair pauses in intense concentration. His silence becomes a taut rope upon which the others are focused precariously upon. "...there!" Rows of letters begin appearing onscreen, coalescing into discernible words, organizing themselves into coherent sentences and paragraphs.

Mesmerized, Sej calls out, "Sorehl! You better take a look at this."

The Vulcan crosses over to join his colleagues. "I presume you've made progress."

Blair nods as his eyes skim down the text of Dr. Angelus' introduction to his notes. "This is the intro and project summary. I don't think it'll be terribly difficult to break the rest."

Twisting slightly to improve his view of the compact text on the screen, Sej squints to better skim along. "Egocentric junk... egocentric junk... more egocentric junk... project overview! There." He contorts around again to more comfortably read aloud. "...should be possible to construct such a protouniverse with the use of a specially-designed graviton matrixing unit introduced to a viable stellar candidate."

Blair urges, "Keep going; he told us that much."

Continuing to skim, Sej paraphrases. "Angelus writes about accessing a thin layer of the chromosphere, driving it into a tertiary subspace domain and structuring its collapse to predetermine the structures of a protouniverse. Will someone please tell me what that means?" Ereid's head shakes in partial understanding.

Sorehl explains. "I believe it means he did not intend for his creation to affect us at all. It sounds as if he intended it to exist entirely separate from this universe."

"Then what went wrong?" Sej inquires.

The Vulcan pointed later in the test. "It seems he gravely underestimated the effect of subspace torsion within the chromosphere. This has caused what we are seeing, a buildup of helium on the stellar surface..."

"...which is going to go nova on us," Renckly finishes the sentence.

Unable to stop the buildup, the station positions itself in an attempt to shield the colony from the impending blast.

[Commander Sorehl, chief science officer]

Blair let out a hiss, lightly pounding his console. "This code isn't getting any simpler. A polyalphabetic system for some parts, but this looks like an RSA algorithm here. Know any good prime numbers?"

"Keep on it, Mr. Blair. I have faith in your ability," the Vulcan assured. He glanced over to see Ramson. "Commander," the security officer began, "Sej said I should run this by you. I was consulting the tactical database for shielding options and I stumbled onto this. It mentions a use of shield inverters that might help us here. You familiar with the Penthara IV incident?"

Sorehl shook his head, admitting ignorance. "Go on," he prompted.

"The **Enterprise-D** used its inverters to absorb some kind of atmospheric conflagration and discharge it into space with their navigational deflector. Do you think we could use that to shield ourselves and the planet from the wavefront? I mean, we're carrying the Federation's top-rated shields."

The chief science officer blinked, considering. "A viable option. I'm uncertain what thresholds we could endure. We should consult..." He paused, seeing the chief engineer hurry by. "Mr. LaRoche, a moment?" The Frenchman paused, interested. "Given the shield geometry needed to cover the colony, would inverters improve performance?" Sorehl nodded for Ramson to offer the PADD he carried.

LaRoche pursed his lips, thinking. "With a conic projection...yes, inverters could absorb even more of ze shock. We've less than an hour, but I zhink Dole can do it." He hurried for the engineering console at aft.

Ramson moved to follow when Sorehl touched his shoulder. "Lieutenant," the Vulcan spoke softly, "our shields may not be enough to protect those below. The colonists need to take cover; we should bring as many aboard as we can."

The security officer nodded. "That I can handle. I'm on it."

The outer surface of the Canar sun ignites in nova.

"Captain, nova is imminent," Commander Sorehl reported. "We'll have less than six minutes." As if the words had triggered it, Blair stood, shouting from the science console. "Star going nova!"

Commander Jennan Ayer climbed into his fighter craft, watching the entire squadron. "Renckly, you know what we're doing..." he reminded.

"Yes, sir. Providing extra shielding." The young engineer seemed self-assured.

Ayer gave him two thumbs-up, pulling his hatch closed. They all knew their jobs.

Ramson pointed, directing others. His badge chirped. "What's your status down there, D'Mysus?" came Sej's voice. In the background noise, he heard another report that the shielding was in place.

"My team's set up the extra generators," he answered. "They'll be on in two minutes."

"It's started. The wavefront will be here in less than five," Sej advised.

Training kicked in. He turned to Saraina Vonara, who stood beside him. "Evac is out, Doc. Get everyone to whatever cover there is!" He gestured wildly at those loading into the *Colorado* and *Tiber*. "Get those runabouts in the air!"

"You now have two minutes to reach emergency shelters," the computer intoned in its familiar masculine voice. *Odd that he never noticed how similar it sounded to Lieutenant Blair's,* Sej thought.

"Sej," TSara snapped, "turn that thing off." Lowering her voice, she added, "If I'm gonna die, I want to be surprised."

The chief of operations obediently muted the voice warnings. He clapped his hands loudly. "Okay, people," he shouted, "emergency positions!"

"One point five minutes until impact," Sorehl stated evenly. The Trill wondered if TSara would order the Vulcan muted, too.

"Alright," Ayer directed all three wings, "get ready, here it comes!" He modulated the fighter's screens to bolster the station's deflectors. It had been almost a year since the engineers at StarBase Operations assented to his demands to employ the Federation's highest-rated shields on Aegis. He had imagined them needed for much different threats, but they would serve just fine now. If any could hold against the fury of a nova, these would. He saw Renckly and the visiting Dr. Struan line up their fighters.

Dakla spoke into the open channel, "It's beautiful..."

The steady baritone of the Vulcan science officer cut in. "Thirty seconds."

"The matrix is expanding with the wavefront!" Blair shouted.

In the tenseness of the moment, Sej wasn't sure what Blair was shouting about. TSara furrowed her brow, echoing the sentiment.

If the Vulcan knew what it meant, he wasn't sharing. "Ten seconds," he cautioned.

"All hands brace for impact," came the unified voices of TSara, Sej, and Sorehl. *If the shields held together like her team was, the HoD reflected, they might just make it.*

The wavefront slammed into the shields.

Only their Klingon captain remained on her feet as people were tossed across the Command Center. Each fought to pull themselves up against the powerful thrumming. Turbulence thundered around them.

Sej let his fingers dance over his console from memory, the light too bright to see clearly. "Trying to maintain power!" he reported, straining over the noise.

"Shields... holding!" the Vulcan shouted somewhere beside him.

Ramson and Dr. Vonara dropped behind cover, huddled together. Ramson looked up, seeing the glow of the approaching firestorm. He squinted at the radiation flared against the shields. *It might be his last sight,* he realized. He glanced down, taking a deep breath, and kissed the young doctor long and hard.

Ayer watched his squadron blown apart by the wake. He couldn't afford to lose concentration now. It was so bright. He calibrated his deflectors, strengthening those areas threatening to buckle. He could only hope the others could do the same.

The noise was nearly deafening. The viewports flared brilliantly. "Clear in... forty seconds!" Sej shouted.

"Wavefront... in... peak... contact," Sorehl managed to bellow. Sparks rained down.

A support beam fell near the chief of operations, clattering loudly. "Twenty seconds!"

TSara wondered about the colony. She opened her mouth, but realized the Vulcan was already answering her. *Typical,* she thought. "Blast shunted around planet!" he confirmed. "Shields buckling!"

"Five, four, three, two..." Sej counted loudly.

"Shields collapsing!" Sorehl reported.

"One!"

Silence.

On the planet below, Saraina pulled away from the security officer, blinking as a smile crept across her lips. "That was one hell of a kiss!"

"We're through it," the Vulcan asserted, stating the obvious. He straightened his tunic and stroked his hair into place. Sej was quiet, trying to locate each fighter craft. TSara loosened her grip on the railing.

The glow faded. A single voice spoke up from the science console. Blair poured over his sensors. "Oh, no," he moaned softly. Eyes turned toward him. "You better have a look at this, Commander." Sorehl stepped through the debris, making his way to the console. "I don't think we're in Kansas anymore."

Caught in the interspatial backwash of the nova, both Aegis and Canar II phase into another dimension.

Arriving too late to help the ill-fated StarBase Aegis, the USS **Victory** surveyed the Canar system, bearing silent witness to the aftermath of an unexplained nova. It was the second visit the ship had made within a month, but seemed like the initial survey of a new system. The Galaxy-class starship had encountered the wavefront after a day of expansion, rendering it far less energetic than its earlier rampage. **Victory** had barely needed its shields.

Captain Thomas Holloway stared out the viewport of his ready room, narrowing his eyes at the empty space Aegis should be occupying. He rested his hand on the old-style wooden turnwheel that adorned his office. He turned and strode out onto the bridge. "Betile," he entreated, "give me something to go on."

His Bajoran second officer looked up from observing Ops. "Skipper," she summarized quickly, "there's no reason this star should have gone nova."

"And the starbase?"

The Trill operations manager answered. "The shockwave was much denser up close," she explained. "The innermost planet has always been a lifeless rock, but now it's a battered, charred, and lifeless rock on an eccentric orbit. As for Canar II, I might have expected its atmosphere torn off or some other global desolation, but it should still be here."

Additions

After a brief disappearance, Aegis and the colony are restored to their proper dimension. In the months that follow, the station becomes the host for a number of new arrivals.

[Ensign Gabriel "Buzz" Zorn, fighter pilot]

Ensign Zorn took a sip of dark lager as Sergeant Robert Muldoon finished off his pint of Guinness. Buzz had unpacked and wandered the station and wound up in a bar on the Promenade. That's where he found the Marine, who had stopped while walking Verbal, his terrier.

"Well," Buzz said, almost dejected. "I guess it's normal to feel a little homesick. I just didn't expect it so soon." He set down his mug. "Work is probably the best thing for it. You seen the fighter wing here yet?"

Muldoon looked over, taking a draw on his cigar. "I just came from there. Not as tough as the Raptors I used to fly, but they might be good for something." He blew a billow of smoke.

"I guess I should take a look at them myself," Buzz explained. "Thanks for the chat, sir." 'Doon gave him a 'no problem' shrug and tugged a little on the leash, leading Verbal out. Buzz slid his mug away and went out, too. The doctor who had greeted him on the way in was still standing there, watching him leave. Buzz looked for rank pins but didn't see any. "Don't worry. I'm feeling a lot better, Doc."

The newly-installed emergency holographic medical program considered pointing out that he was not capable of worry, but decided to move on to other patients.

MEDICAL LOG

EMERGENCY HOLOGRAPHIC MEDICAL ASSISTANT

Holographic imaging systems throughout Aegis online, operating at 99.6% efficiency. Activation 1. Program introduces itself to Chief Medical Officer, Lieutenant Satav Ozak, female. Medical records show Satav Ozak to be a mix of Vulcan and Rigellian. Medical scans showed her in perfect health, in depth information is not currently required.

Encountered Ensign Gabriel Zorn, Human-Deltan male, commonly referred to as "Buzz." Zorn reported injury of "wounded pride". Medical scans showed him in perfect health, except for high tension levels ...searching ..."wounded pride" ...Unknown ailment ...pride noun - A sense of personal dignity; a feeling of pleasure because of something achieved, done, or owned... Conclusion: Person must be suffering from an emotional disorder ...no physical ailment found on scan... Treatment: Recommend patient see the onboard counselor...If no counselor is available, activate the Emergency Holographic Counselor... ATTEMPTING TO ACTIVE HOLOGRAPHIC COUNSELOR... SEARCHING... HOLO-Counselor NOT FOUND!

Encountered Sergeant Robert Muldoon, Human male. Medical scans showed to be in perfect health...in-depth information not needed at current time.

Cardassian refugees flee battle-worn sectors as the Klingon Empire asserts its new position.

[K'Vorlag, Imperial Intelligence]

"DevvI, the fleet of refugees we spotted earlier is leaving occupied space," the attending Klingon reported to the minion of Imperial Intelligence.

"jISaHbe'," K'Vorlag answered dismissively. "It is no matter, so long as they are gone."

"Governor Krador doubts their ships will even make it to the DeMilitarized Zone."

"Do'Ha'," K'Vorlag huffed with false concern. "Their own government abandoned them and they are no concern of the Empire. Let us see if the Maquis greet them with open arms."

"Our data shows they will pass the Federation outpost first," the Klingon noted.

"Haw'pu' 'ar?" he asked, wondering if the cursed starbase could handle that many.

"jISovbe'," the attendant shrugged, "perhaps in the thousands."

"toH!" K'Vorlag exclaimed, letting a wicked smile pull back his lips. "Let Aegis deal with them. It may keep them from meddling in our affairs." For a change, it would be a good day to report to the Council.

CAPTAIN'S LOG

HOD TSARA, COMMANDING

Aegis finds itself overrun by Cardassian refugees escaping from Klingon tyranny. Caamar, their leader, is attempting to negotiate Federation assistance for his people. Resources are strained to their limits, and tempers aboard the station are growing short, including my own. Sej is fielding incoming communications from many sources, as the surrounding stellar communities learn of the presence of the refugees. Bajor has

already logged a formal complaint, and the word from the station's Maquis sources isn't pleasant. It's only a matter of time before the Klingons learn of this... I'm surprised they haven't acted already.

[Ensign Gabriel "Buzz" Zorn, fighter pilot]

Ensign Zorn stumbled into Cargo Bay Three. Hundreds of Cardassians were cramped inside.

Sergeant Robert Muldoon stood, directing some of them. He saw Buzz come in and report for duty.

Muldoon puffed on the cigar in his mouth. "We need to move these bloody Cardies along," the Marine explained.

Buzz looked around. "What's going on? Where'd they all come from?"

"Who knows? But if one breaks off and heads into the station, shoot him."

Nearby, Sogh K'Cavok prodded one with his disruptor rifle.

Buzz blinked in surprise, not understanding. "They're all prisoners?"

"We ought to make an example of one of them," K'Cavok muttered to 'Doon. He watch a refugee trip, and moved up to kick him hard in the gut. "Up!"

Muldoon glared at the half-Klingon, half-Cardassian. "I don't think that's necessary..."

Buzz felt indignation well up. He stomped over and shoved K'Cavok. "Hey, knock it off!"

K'Cavok whirled around and grabbed the ensign by the tunic, pulling him up. "That was stupid, StarFleet. Would you like to be my example?"

A trained security officer, Buzz wasn't about to flinch away from such bravado. He sneered. "Oh, the big bad warrior," he taunted, "kicks men when they're down. I'm so impressed."

K'Cavok tossed him into a crowd of Cardassians.

Muldoon stepped up. "K'Cavok, you make an example of anyone and I'll personally throw your hybrid butt into the brig!"

The Klingon-Cardassian grinned with menace. "Is that a threat?"

Muldoon moved for his sidearm.

Buzz looked over from helping the fallen Cardassian. "Hey," he interrupted, gesturing to 'Doon., "it's not a problem. I can handle myself, sir. We've got too much to do here to start locking each other up."

Muldoon looked to Zorn and eased back. He pointed at K'Cavok, "Next time..."

"Listen, Marine, if you wish to survive here, stay out of my way." K'Cavok strode off.

Muldoon shouted after him. "I'll stay outta your way, when you stay outta mine!!" He turned back to the ensign. "Zorn, keep 'em moving. I'm gonna check up on the ones already settled..."

Buzz acknowledge the order as the Marine moved away. He almost chuckled. Both officers had no love for these refugees (though Buzz had no idea why), but it was clear they disliked each other even more. He wondered if the Cardassians knew what a boilerpot they'd gotten themselves into.

Caamar, who led the Cardassian refugees in their escape from Klingon-occupied space, reveals himself to be the spy Gul Demeck. Learning the Klingons demand his return, he demands asylum. Instead, the captain chooses to have him confined to the brig.

[HoD TSara, commanding officer]

TSara paced her office angrily, colorful curses flowing fluently from her lips. Ayer sat calmly, watching the rant. The names Caamar and Demeck were occasionally distinguishable from the rest of her verbiage; he couldn't translate most of the words, but her meaning was clear enough. She cast a glare in his direction, and to his own surprise, he merely shrugged. "Guess I'm getting used to it," he thought wryly to himself. A harsh growl interrupted the thought.

"You don't seem terribly bothered by this Cardassian liar in our midst, Commander Ayer," she hissed, her eyes narrowing suspiciously. "I find that surprising, considering your feelings about the Maquis."

To his surprise, he bristled. "My personal feelings are not for your examination, HoD. I do my job here," he snapped back coldly. She laughed sarcastically at his response, wondering at his new-found hatred of her.

"Indeed! Well then, Mr. Expert-on-the-DMZ, what is your opinion of our current situation?" she insisted, spitting the words at him. She wasted no love on the likes of him either.

He smirked. "I think you have Gul Demeck right where he wants you to have him, HoD. A most unfortunate situation."

She looked surprised for a moment. "Explain."

"He's safe in the brig; you can't turn him over to the Klingons or you anger his government and threatening the security of the DMZ treaty. If you don't, your own people will look on you as a traitor, and likely start a war with the Federation, making Aegis the first battle ground. And," he took a deep breath, "if you release him to his own people, he'll likely rally them in an attack against the Klingons anyway. I haven't even touched

on how the Maquis will react." He looked her squarely in the eye. "Checkmate, TSara. You can't make a move. Frankly, I'm surprised at your decision to arrest him. You've placed us all in grave danger."

Aegis deploys its fighters to defend the neutrality of the base as Klingon and Cardassian ships prepare to clash.

[Ensign Gabriel "Buzz" Zorn, fighter pilot]

Buzz sighed, banking his fighter toward the gathering ships. He knew as far as the others were concerned, he was still the rookie. He doubted anyone knew he had any interests outside security. He sifted through his extensive education in history. There were so many parallels to what was happening here. Was Gul Demeck the forward observer for some kind of liberating fleet? He claimed he was a decoy. Buzz wondered if Demeck intended something like what the Allies did to break Fortress Europe - fool the Nazis into believing an invasion would happen somewhere other than Normandy.

A thought chilled him.

When the Germans had been faced with overcoming the great Maginot Line, the defensive fortifications which protected France, they had chosen to flank their enemy. They had marched through Belgium, a neutral country. Neutral. Just like StarBase Aegis.

After a fierce battle between Klingon and Cardassian fleets, forces withdraw for later encounters.

[K'Vorlag, Imperial Intelligence]

K'Vorlag eased into the chair within his private cabin aboard the **viDtaj** (Belligerent Blade). The K'Vorlag-class cruiser was on its return trip to the occupied territories. The Demeck threat had been contained. The battle near StarBase Aegis could even be considered a strategic victory for the Empire. There was little chance the Cardassians would trouble them along the border for months. With the exception of the cursed renegade Dukat, things would quiet here and shift to the borders between Klingon and Federation space. Soon enough.

His mind rested on the transmission of Chancellor Gowron ordering the withdrawal of StarFleet from an entire sector. Why Archanis? Why now? Did the Council know something he didn't? The wisdom was still unclear. Intelligence showed StarFleet was at its strongest since the Battle of Wolf 359, only six years ago. Since then, the Federation had been preparing to meet new and greater threats like the Borg and the Dominion. The cursed "escort" **Defiant** (cloaked by the Romulans, no less!) showed how far they were willing to adapt their pacifist philosophy. The Federation could strike back with fists named **Phoenix**, **Excalibur**, **Venture**, and soon enough, even another **Enterprise**. His comrades who thought them sheep were fools on a galactic scale. Beatable, yes, but without inviting invasion from the Gamma Quadrant? K'Vorlag pushed the doubts away from his mind. Surely Gowron had greater pawns in motion. Perhaps the Federation had already been compromised. The Dominion would have no trouble infiltrating such an open society. But why weaken both sides further by risking a military confrontation? K'Vorlag was already irritated at the losses of this most recent strike. He wondered if his leaders had examined the ramifications.

Such thoughts were disturbing. It was fatally unwise for an Intelligence officer to imply dissent with a Council edict. Even the Eyes of the Empire had eyes on them. Still, he could best perform his duties by learning the mind of the Council. He narrowed his eyes. The inquiries must be subtle.

[Commander Sorehl, chief science officer
and Sogh K'Cavok, security officer]

Sogh K'Cavok inspected the damage done to the B'Rel-class **naS SuS'a'**. *Battle scars*, he smiled. A chime sounded, warning him that someone had entered the bay where the Klingon ship was kept. K'Cavok sighed in irritation, flipping the switch that lowered the ingress ramp. Better to meet whatever StarFleet was looking for him at the door than have them roam around the bird of prey in search of him. He preferred not to let them trespass his own little piece of Qo'noS, his refuge from ghe' 'or.

As he descended the ramp, he first saw legs, then a blue tunic. Three pips on the collar were visible just before the calm visage of the Vulcan science officer came into view. Commander Sorehl stood, hands clasped behind him. "nuqDaH, vulqan?" K'Cavok demanded.

"A moment of your time, Sogh. I have a matter..."

"Tell Muldoon I do not need to go to sickbay," he interrupted. He turned dismissively.

"...that my wife requested I discuss with you," he finished.

K'Cavok narrowed his eyes and turned back. What would T'Salik need to tell him? The Vulcan woman had been his only confidant on the station, the only one he had told his family history. That meant he would listen to a message from her. "HIQoymoH," he instructed.

Sorehl took a breath. "T'Salik asked me to initiate an administrative process," he explained. "I have been informed it is now complete." K'Cavok eyed him skeptically as he drew a flat, metal tablet from behind his back. The science officer offered the plaque. K'Cavok took it, holding it up to the light. It was copper-alloy, with a stylized amalgam of Vulcan linguistic symbols. A caption beside it read in both men's native languages.

"It is the clan insignia of my wife's family," he continued. "She has formally requested your adoption as her kin-brother. While I am not sure what motivated her request, I do approve." Sorehl clasp his hands behind his back again. "You have protected my wife and daughter from harm on several occasions. I shall not forget that. If you choose to accept the honor," he emphasized the last word, "you need merely wear the emblem." He paused. "I shall leave you to your repairs." The Vulcan turned, walking away toward the turbolift. "And welcome to the family."

K'Cavok looked at the emblem, then at his sash. It was decorated with three emblems; the Order of the d'k tahg, the Order of the Bat'leth, and the Order of the taQ'cHal, placed in order of importance. K'Cavok moved his hand slowly, placing the new emblem above even his highest honor. Next time he was in the Empire, he would be in a lot of trouble, but he could handle that. Now he was a member of the Sorehl family. For one who no longer had one of his own, it was a higher honor than any he could think of.

Komek

Tensions with the Klingon Empire escalate to the threat of war, bringing dire possibilities for StarBase Aegis.

[Commander Sorehl, chief science officer]

"The Archanis situation," TSara prefaced, her voice growing serious.

"As you all know," Commander Ayer began, taking up the subject, "Chancellor Gowron has laid claim to that sector and demanded all Federation vessels and installations withdraw."

Sej sniffed. "The Federation isn't about to just appease him."

"I'm told the starship **Columbia** has been diverted," Dakla mentioned.

"Captain Loparin says his ship is headed that way, too," Sej added with interest.

"A number of vessels," Sorehl reported, "including **Phoenix**, **Excelsior**, and **Gorkon**, which is an ironic choice, given the historical..."

The first officer broke in. "The exact nature of the response force is still classified and should remain outside the field of idle speculation," Ayer chided.

"Command iz probably shoring up ze defenses before Gowron's deadline lapses," LaRoche tagged on.

"Which is what we will do," TSara announced. Eyes turned toward her. "Archanis is a long way from here, but Klingon attacks don't always limit themselves to a single front."

"This is almost the same conversation we had after the Klingon invasion last year," Sej noted, shaking his head. "StarBases 211 and 401 got weapons upgrades, but our tactical options are still limited by treaty with the Cardassians. Our hands are still tied, captain."

Ayer folded his arms, not sure he liked the tone of the objection. Without that treaty, StarFleet might not have been able to get Aegis here at all.

TSara decided it was time for her revelation. "I have opened dialogue with the Detapa Council."

All but Vulcan eyes widened around the table. Even with that one exception, an eyebrow raised.

"The Cardassian civilians?" Ayer asked, "Are you sure that's wise, considering..."

TSara grit her teeth. "They are the only legitimate government that's left! They may be paralyzed with inaction, but even they must realize a stronger Aegis shields them, as well. We will hear their response."

LaRoche leaned forward. "What iz ze plan if zhey say oui?"

"That's something for engineering to work out with operations, and our tactical officer."

Dr. Vonara leaned toward Dakla. "We have a tactical officer?" she whispered.

"If things go well," TSara smiled, overhearing, "we'll need one..."

CAPTAIN'S LOG
HOD TSARA, COMMANDING

Aegis has been very busy with defensive upgrades; weapons, shielding and expanded power systems have been imported from all over the Federation. Our crew has been working around the clock to ensure they are installed post haste, and ready for operation at a moments notice. Sej has lost some weight from too much work and too little sleep in the effort to coordinate the changes. LaRoche has chewed off his fingernails meeting deadlines imposed upon his department. Security has been spread thin engaging new codes and lockouts. Medical has expanded sickbay through the adjoining bulkhead to accommodate new equipment.

K'Cavok has been whistling Klingon battle songs while he settles into his new job as Tactical officer. And I'm sure I've been downright obnoxious, ever since Ayer's mysterious disappearance, oddly coinciding with the departure of a Bajoran transport. The only steadfast constant has been the Vulcan science chief, and even he has aged in the past weeks. We may kill ourselves before the war even starts.

Warfare erupts, but an uneasy cease fire follows when the Klingons discover they have been misled by a Dominion operative. Remaining vigilant to renewed hostility, Aegis is called upon to aid the effort against the Klingons.

[HoD TSara, commanding officer]

It was no small thing to wake the captain. Sej knew this better than anyone. The very fact that the Trill had roused her for the incoming message underscored its urgency. "Priority channel," the chief of operations had said, "code 41." Strictly captain's eyes only, voiceprint ID required, with no record of the transmission retained. TSara brought up the lights in her cabin and rubbed her eyes before activating the viewer.

"Captain," came the crisp voice of Fleet Admiral Alynna Nechayev. TSara looked on the woman who had played such an important role in giving her command of Aegis. "I have a matter of importance that requires your unique skills."

What Nechayev required, she often got, TSara reflected. "bIQIj," she responded tersely, "go on."

The Admiral had little use for platitudes, either. "Intelligence has made contact with HoD'a' Komek. The fleet captain is unhappy with the High Council's reluctance to give up what he considers ill-gotten territorial gains, since they came as the result of a Dominion infiltrator. We believe he is willing to divulge tactical information that may permit us to regain colonies lost during these recent months of fighting."

TSara huffed. "And where do I fit in to such a scheme?"

"Komek demands the honor of an escort by the great renegade TSara zantai T'ZaY," the Admiral added her characteristic smirk. "It seems he considers himself a kindred dissenter."

"The timing is terrible. We're still putting in most of the tactical upgrades."

"Timing is everything," Nechayev emphasized, shaking the captain from her curses. "Komek will be on your station by morning."

"How? This entire sector..."

"That is not your concern," the Fleet Admiral noted. "It will be your job to see he gets to StarBase 43 for full tactical debriefing. Given the tenuous state of our cease fire, this defection is a serious risk."

TSara huffed again. "Then I intend to do things my way."

Nechayev answered with what passed, for her, as a smile. "As I said, your unique skills are required. This is a classified operation, HoD. Full disclosure is limited to Lieutenant Commander rank and above until you are underway. StarFleet out."

The viewer background went dark, replaced by the UFP symbol. The blue hue bleached TSara's features as she propped her chin on a closed fist. If someone like K'Vorlag had wind of this defection, he could make the mission difficult. *How did that Devvl' gboqwl!*, she wondered, *always manage to get such good intelligence?* Going back to her bunk, she realized she would have to outmaneuver him. It was time to see if this Aegis crew could manage some teamwork.

[K'Vorlag, Imperial governor]

K'Vorlag sat on the bridge of his new flagship **mIntu'** (All-Seeing Eye). It had been good fortune during these last months of warfare with the Federation. He had opposed estranging their old ally, and now that the cease fire was in place, he had no problem reconciling even as he fortified the seized sectors. Conflicting aims had long been a specialty of Imperial Intelligence. It made him the perfect choice as Governor of the Occupied Territories. He could maintain peace (stalemate, at least) while marshaling these new Imperial resources for later campaigns against the Dominion. His only potential adversaries were an anemic Cardassia and a hesitant Federation.

It was almost too easy.

The "neutral" starbase along the DMZ actually worked in his favor, cutting off a preferred route for Cardassian attacks. Amazing that it survived all the warfare of the past weeks. Aegis was now his shield.

If only HoD'a' Komek didn't insist on patrolling so close to that nest of half-breeds. The DMZ was almost a relic - a barrier whose usefulness crumbled now that one side had eroded. Komek, however, stubbornly claimed the area remained important. K'Vorlag tugged at his whiskers. Did Komek have a hidden agenda? Had he gone forward with Commander Koval's work and held further talks with the Maquis? Eyes narrowed. Just what was Komek up to with all his skulking near Aegis? K'Vorlag wondered. He would not allow an

intelligence failure like the Gul Demeck incident under his leadership. As sure as he remained Eyes of the Empire, he would assess the risk. And act.

[Lieutenant D'Mysus Ramson, Maquis specialist]

"Course laid in. We should arrive in roughly two hours." Ramson looked over his shoulder at the Klingon, who seemed little concerned. Checking a side panel, he added, "Sir, if you would like to spend time in the back cabin, we have a number of Klingon operas on file." Komek grunted. Feigning a lack of interest, "As you wish, though I do believe we have Krolga of Forba, one of HoD TSara's favorites." Ramson didn't even know if she listened to the stuff, but it caught Komek's attention.

The Klingon stood, his armor making a clatter. After a slow stroll, in which he double checked every console, he made a bee-line for the back hatch and into the attaching cabin.

D'Mysus opened his arms, gesturing Dr. Saraina Vonara over. He held her in a comforting grasp. As she laid her head on his shoulder, the Ops panel gave a beep. Reading the display, "Update on our course. Minor course change to 12 mark 24. We'll pass through the Muetra system at full impulse, then continue on course 346 mark 325 once clear."

Sara looked up at Ramson with concern. "What do you think that's for?"

Shaking his head, "Possibly a Klingon patrol was spotted too close to our course. Or maybe just a safety maneuver to lose anyone following us." Both looked at each other for a second, then turned their gaze forward at the streaking stars.

Suffering the effects of a massive electromagnetic pulse, the entire convoy escorting HoD'a' Komek is forced to scatter, crash landing on the surface of Muetra II.

[HoD TSara, commanding officer]

TSara finally stirred, unnoticed by Varon as he continued repairs to the damaged **naS SuS'a'**. The holographic doctor, aided by her genetically engineered makeup, had pulled her through yet another brush with death. Her eyes opened; the damage to the ship was evident. She listened silently and evaluated what fell into her field of vision. She recognizing the noises she heard as the sound of one of her crew. She spied Varon as she lifted herself up onto her elbows and winced. Her head still throbbed from whatever had impacted with her skull. A sharp pain in her side made her catch her breath, and she became aware that she had suffered more than just a bump on the head.

"Varon," she hissed through clenched teeth as she struggled to her feet, "What in the name of qeylIS have you done to my ship?!" She straightened slowly as she took in more of the damage. It was worse than she had first assessed. She glared at Varon, knowing he wasn't responsible, but still angry to find herself alive in the midst of such chaos.

"So, HoD, you live," Varon replied from under the navigational console. "majQa."

Varon continued working. TSara momentarily pondered his response, then remembered what happened before she lost consciousness.

"Where are the rest of the ships? Where is the defector? Where are we?" She had more questions. She eased herself into her chair, finding herself somewhat strained from the effort. Varon continued working, answering what he could from under the console.

TSara frowned as she became enlightened. She began testing the systems from her chair, finding Varon had brought most of them to minimal operational status, with the exception of the weapons systems. They were fully charged. She smirked. "How typically Klingon of you, Varon," she thought to herself. Something told her she was fortunate he was...

[Sogh K'Cavok, tactical officer and
Ensign Gabriel "Buzz" Zorn, fighter pilot]

"K'Cavok, K'Cavok!" Ensign "Buzz" Zorn shouted, shaking the Klingon-Cardassian.

K'Cavok grabbed the ensign by the tunic, pulling him down toward his face. "Where are we?"

"We came down in some kind of desert, I think. Pretty big, too. You wanna let me go?"

K'Cavok released the StarFleet and sat up. He was lying on the sand. Rolling dunes were all he could see in any direction. There was a battered ejection pod and fragments next to him. "Came down?" he asked angrily. "What happened?"

"Boy, that EM pulse really did mess up your cybernetics," Zorn observed. "It hit the whole group and everybody fell out of orbit. You weren't answering my hails, so I followed you down. You were in a pretty wicked dive and weren't coming out, so I... well, I fired a shot at your fighter to trigger the autoeject."

K'Cavok got to his feet. "You shot my fighter? You might have killed me."

"Stop whining, you lived, didn't you? And your fighter flamed up just before it slammed into the dirt. These are just a few of the pieces. You might have been one of them."

K'Cavok checked himself over. He seemed uninjured. He looked at the ensign. The uniform was dusty, but there wasn't a scratch on him. "You came out in one piece."

Buzz shrugged. "I seem to be crashing these things a lot better lately. I came down about four clicks that way." He pointed toward the fading trail of footprints over one of the dunes. "Red Two took a beating and she's half buried in sand, but we might be able to get her working. You got any orders you want to give?"

[Commander Sorehl, chief science officer]

In a rain-drenched spot on the surface of Muetra II, something solid thumped against the beaten hull of the runabout *Tiber*. In the aft compartment, Lieutenant Commander Ereid Sej, still nursing the puncture wound in his abdomen, looked up. "Wha..? You think that's Varon and the holodoc?"

Lieutenant John Blair looked uncertainly from Sej to LaRoche. Something thumped on the outside again. "I'll take a look," Blair said. He pointed to LaRoche's phaser, "Can I borrow that? I don't want to go checking this out without some sort of protection."

The engineer tossed the weapon over. "Here it iz."

A muffled voice called from outside. "Come out now!"

Sej perked up from his uncomfortable position, flashing a glance around. "I definitely don't like that. It could be Klingons." He stretched vainly for his phaser.

Blair took his first step forward when the runabout shifted suddenly, tilting backward. He braced himself against the doorframe. Outside, mud gurgled under the weight of the craft. The floor shifted again and rainwater trickled toward aft. Blair lost his balance and fell, sliding along the floor.

Sej continued to feel around on the floor for his phaser.

LaRoche held himself up against a wall, looking back at the chief of operations, "Your decision, do we leave or stay?"

The Emergency Medical Holographic Program floated effortlessly through the dense underbrush, his holomatter forcefield conveniently turned off. He had left Ensign Varon to watch over HoD TSara, who was unconscious when he left the **naS SuS'a'**. The hologram and the probe that emitted him had managed to cover the two kilometer stretch in little time. The runabout *Tiber* was just ahead.

There was movement on the other side of the runabout. Had Sej disobeyed his instructions and gone outside? The Trill could suffer serious damage from his abdominal perforation if he didn't keep still. Floating closer, the hologram shouted to alert the officers of his approach. "Mr. Blair! Mr. LaRoche!"

Odd. No one answered. Nearing the runabout, he opted to phase inside first.

Blair was picking himself up off the floor when the doctor's image appeared in the compartment. Sej had made a decision. "The two of you. Go for help. Blow out the rear access hatch. I'll see if I can keep our friends up front occupied."

As if to punctuate the urgency, more banging sounded on the hull. "Come out," shouted the voice outside, "or you'll sink in this petaQ mud!"

The holodoc stepped toward Sej. "You're not doing anything..."

"Sir," Blair interrupted, trying to comply, "may I point out that the rear access is probably underwater?"

LaRoche quietly grabbed another phaser and moved toward the hatch.

"If it is a distraction you want," the doctor noted, "perhaps I can provide it."

"Look," Sej emphasized, "even with a distraction, I'm not going anywhere. If they are Klingons and I'm lucky, these pips'll do me some good. Go! Now!"

The doctor opened his mouth to protest, but LaRoche and Blair were already leaving. The time to debate a direct order had passed. A quick motion from the engineer blew the hatch off. Mud gushed in through the opening as both officers sloshed out..

[Lieutenant D'Mysus Ramson, Maquis specialist]

Slinking threw the underbrush, the lieutenant could sense the Klingons nearby. Coming to a stop, one was almost on top of him. He could see the tip of his sword shine from the light of the moons. As the warrior stood, viewing the dark tree line, Ramson coiled. Leaping, D'Mysus smashed the butt of his phaser rifle into the back of the Klingon's neck. With a grunt, he slumped to the ground. Crouching over him, Ramson was quick to take his weapon and communicator.

One down, Ramson moved for the other two. Unfortunately, they found him first. The disruptor blast splintered the tree a second after he ducked clear. The Klingons continued to fire into the night. Finding cover, D'Mysus returned fire. Going more on his telepathy than sight, he managed to drop both Klingons. *Obviously*, he thought, *they hadn't sent the cream of the crop*. Which meant all the experience was directed at the others. Now, how was he going to get to them? They weren't on this island, Ramson could tell. Looking at the Klingon's communicator, he knew of one way.

The Klingon transporter chief paid little attention as he beamed up the away team and their prisoner. He nodded to the two standing shoulder-to-shoulder on the pad. Before he could ask where the third member of the team was, the two fell to each side. Ramson still stood between them as they parted, smiling with his phaser raised. He fired. With a thump, he pulled the transporter chief's stunned body from off the console. The sensor readings showed the **naS SuS'a'** and the runabout *Tiber* near each other. Before Ramson could lock onto them, he heard the Klingon klaxon sound. With no time left, he set the transporter for the site and jumped onto the pad.

Shimmering back into existence, D'Mysus found himself drenched in rain. Sinking in the mud, he began to rethink this choice. It was too late now. The disruptor he had left behind on overload had done its job by now. He glanced at the Klingon that had still been on the pad when he beamed down. Covering himself from the rain with the Klingon's cloak, Ramson headed off to find the others.

Ministering the Interior

Amidst troubles with Klingons and Borg attacks elsewhere, the Aegis crew must adapt to its own changes.

[Lieutenant Commander Dakla Pierson, security chief]

The shuttlecraft traveled away from Aegis at a determined warp two. Dakla sat still in the pilot's seat, deep in thought. She had not even been disturbed by the shaking of the flimsy craft as it passed through dust storms, for where she was going was desolate. Later she would realize that she had not the stomach and courage to return to Aegis in the little tin can, even if she wanted to. But for now, she who got seasick on Galaxy-class starships felt nothing but elation and anticipation.

She was not traveling deeper into the DMZ to become a freedom fighter. Her lack of spirit could not be revived by a cause she did not believe in. But a merry band of traitors had offered her a job - intelligence advisor for the Nadia Cell of the Maquis. New faces, new title, new rules, same old work. She wished sadly that she could have told Jennan where she was going, that she was coming to protect the driven bandits. Everyone knew they needed advice and stability more than anyone else, and felt they had found it in the landlubber white Andorian.

Jennan would be proud, she thought. Like him, she was giving up her commission. That was the idea that she mulled over in her mind for the hours she traveled. Hoping that the one she loved wished her well...

In light of the resignation of Commander Ayer and the defection of Lieutenant Commander Dakla Pierson, Sorehl assumes the position of executive officer.

[Commander Sorehl, executive officer]

In the privacy of his cabin, Commander Sorehl shut off the computer display on his desk. The afterimage of the Federation Seal faded as his eyes took time to adjust to the darkness. Slowly, the soft muted light of Canar II spilled into the room through the viewport.

Lieutenant Commander Dakla Pierson was gone.

Absconding with a shuttle, she had plotted a course into the DMZ. It seemed clear the Andorian security chief had been the one leaking classified information, although this had yet to be confirmed. Muldoon and Renckly were continuing the discreet investigation he had ordered.

In the darkness, Sorehl walked around the desk and into the bedroom. The closet slid open, granting access to the clothes within. He selected his new crimson-colored dress uniform and laid it out on a nearby chair. He affixed his commbadge below the Distinguished Service Crescent that hung above the left breast. He had worn neither the uniform or the decoration in public before, but this was a unique occasion - the marriage of Lieutenant Commander D'Mysus Ramson and Dr. Saraina Vonara.

He glanced over at the bed where T'Salick, his own wife, lay. Removing his uniform, he sense of immediate duty slipped away. He pulled back the covers and slipped into the bunk, shifting the fine sand within the

mattress until he was comfortable. T'Salik rolled toward him. "Your tasks are complete?" she whispered to avoid waking their infant daughter.

"Sufficient to permit rest," he whispered in response. "Others I shall attend later."

She reached out, touching his face with two fingers. The gesture was a traditional one. "Your new position has more responsibilities," she comforted.

It was now official. The statement from StarFleet Command has been brief:

You are hereby requested and required to assume the position of executive officer, StarBase Aegis. You will continue service under command of HoD TSara zantai T'ZaY, charged with maintaining strict neutrality while observing Federation policy in all of your activities.

"Indeed. It is hardly the advisory position I was trained for."

"It is the logical result of your efforts," his wife countered. "I suspect command will offer you even greater advisory roles."

"Perhaps, but it is the leadership role I question. Emotional species often find it difficult to accept direction from one driven by logic."

"I have seen no indication of this. Both Blair and K'Cavok have shown loyalty to you. Are they not among the more emotional of species?"

Sorehl lay back, pondering. His meditation was ended by sounds of his daughter stirring in the next room. "My turn, I believe," he announced. He pulled back the covers and moved toward her crib. A few pats and calm words helped T'Kel drift back to sleep.

He stood over the crib, patting the eighteen-month old infant. *Command was not unlike fatherhood*, he reflected. True, Aegis was not comprised of children - although TSara often remarked as much - but the analogy seemed apt. He wondered how the starbase would react to a Vulcan parent.

[Lieutenant Commander Ereid Sej, chief of operations]

"I thought Torva said she wasn't interested?" Sej shakes his head incredulously, setting his steaming mug of Moka Java back on the circular replimat table.

Leaned back in his chair casually, his small demitasse of espresso in hand, LaRoche shakes his own head confidently and knowing. "You just don't know how to ask." A slight smug grin plays across the Frenchman's face, his wiles having proven themselves again. "Dabo girls just need that special wrist communication thing to make ze connection."

The Trill slumps his head down into his fist, shaking his head in confusion. "Wait, wait. Dabo girls. How'd we get on this subject? We don't even have a basic theme for the bachelor party yet."

"You already rejected the Betazoid betrothal eve idea." Blair rolls his eyes in an I-told-you-so smugness, his own nuptials pending.

"As well as the Vulcan plen'ej, Ereid. A perfectly viable alternative." Sorehl's steady gaze holds fast as the clear glass of Altair water meets his lips in a perfectly mannered sip.

Sej grunts in mild frustration. "We are not spending D'Mysus' last night of freedom naked in a holosauna or in deeply solemn meditation." He eyes down his friends in assertiveness. "Look, D'Mysus only said that he wasn't interested at all in the traditional Minaran bachelor party. He said he wanted something different; a surprise. Which quite frankly saves me the trouble of having to find out what Minarans do anyways"

"What about Bajoran?" Pierre pipes in, obviously digging for ideas. "I was talking to Ensign Vedra, and she mentioned something about two days of fasting followed by a night of free-flowing synthale?"

"Nausicaans feast for three days on dishes cooked from the third lung of the groom-to-be. I think there should be a happy medium between the two." Sej keeps at his dry frustration.

Blair leans back in his seat, his mind coming to something. "Maybe that's the ticket. Don't pick something singular; just throw a bunch of different things together." The others lean forward in interest. "D'Mysus said he didn't want something standard. So let's just make something up."

"Gentlemen," Sej again asserts his authority as best man. "I think we've got ourselves a winner. I'll leave it to all your ingenious devices as to what the final product actually turns out like. Which reminds me, first things first, we need a location..."

Pierre shakes his head. "I talked to Fermat. He wouldn't close ze bar for a bottle of my best Cabernet."

"How about quarters, then?" All eyes slowly turn to fall on Sorehl. The Vulcan sets down the tall glass of water. "Your quarters are the biggest on the station. My place is a sty. Blair's still dealing with Teka and things from home and LaRoche, well Pierre's place is just... no." The Vulcan returns the gaze, unresponsive. "Oh, come on," Sej implores. "T'Salik'll be at Saraina's bridal shower, and T'Kel could stay with D'Aquino; you know she'd love to have her."

A slight waver in the stony gaze indicates the beginning of assent. The Vulcan was clearly outlogicked. "Very well. I remind you, however, that my quarters are not Fermat's. Ours is an ordered and well-kept household; T'Salik and I both would expect it to remain as such."

Sej fails easily at concealing his smirking grin. "We wouldn't have it any other way. Okay, gentlemen; plans. How many Dabo girls did you talk to, Pierre?"

[Ensign Gideon Hart, station counselor]

She hadn't expected fanfare and parades at her arrival to StarBase Aegis, but she hadn't expected what she got - a first-hand experience at finding one's way around a starbase. Oh, sure, there was a petty officer here, a merchant there, that she might have asked for directions, after finding herself alone in the docking ring, but she was too proud.

She must greet her comrades with confidence, so that they would respect and trust her. A cracking voice, a tired dog, a duffel bag that was crushing her shoulder, asking "I'm the new Counselor...please help me find my quarters?" No one ever shared their life, their true identity, with someone they pitied. She could only help those who admired her in some fashion, for that made them confident of acceptance...

Torpedoed

Amidst renewed Maquis activity, Aegis finds itself the focus of another Dominion attempt to destabilize the region.

[Commander Sorehl, executive officer]

The Vulcan stopped, hands clasped behind his back. "I trust the conference on StarBase 211 was enlightening," he began.

T'Sara moved behind her desk, dropping unceremoniously into the chair. "lo'laHbe'," she grunted. "Speculation and conjecture. StarFleet isn't sure what the Maquis are up to."

"The Maquis are, by nature, a covert establishment. Logic dictates they would avoid broadcasting their intentions."

T'Sara eyed her first officer. "The Maquis have little use for logic, jupwI." She leaned forward, offering one of the PADDs. "The latest from your vaunted Intelligence people."

Sorehl took the offered item. He took scant seconds to glance through the salient points. An eyebrow cocked. "There are extremely disturbing elements to this report," he spoke aloud.

T'Sara managed a tight smile at the understatement. "You noticed."

"If I am not mistaken," Sorehl observed, "this is the same officer who was involved in the theft of a dozen industrial replicators last year. And he remains at large even after this new incident?"

She merely nodded. "Read further; they've deployed another ship to hunt him down."

The Vulcan did so. "The Cardassians will allow a starship into the DMZ?"

"One lucky starbase gets to hammer out the details. Care for an educated guess?" she mocked. "I'll deal with Gul Chirakis myself. Raise her on subspace. You have anything else to report?"

If possible, Sorehl took on a more officious posture. "Lieutenant Renckly undergoes repairs after his confrontation with the Rigellian criminals. Sciences is compiling the results of their orbital scan of Canar I. And I have extended the second officer position to Mr. Sej, as requested."

"maj," she replied, shifting back in her chair. "Alright, clear out while I talk with the Cardassian. I know how sensitive you are about the language I use."

With that, Sorehl bowed his head slightly and withdrew from the office.

*As the USS **Malinche** undergoes repairs from a Maquis attack led by Eddington, the station launches an unauthorized missile at the surface of Canar II, destroying a small community.*

[Lieutenant Commander Ereid Sej, chief of operations]

The animated murmur of the debriefing room quickly halts as T'Sara strides in, displeased with recent events. She swivels roughly into her center seat, with a brusqueness notable even by her standards. Her voice barks louder than usual. "Report!"

Sorehl speaks first. "At 1500 hours the photon torpedo launch system initialized. We were unable to avert the launching of a single photon torpedo at the surface of Canar II. Detonation was detected over Caldecott Grove, a small, outlying community on the colony."

Ramson pipes in, filling his new role as security chief. "We'd been looking into recent reports that Caldecott Grove is... had been... used as a staging area for Maquis activity; we didn't think the reports had merit at the time, but apparently someone knew better."

"What's left?"

Sej spoke up. "Nothing's left standing above ground. We found the underground Maquis installation that Ramson was talking about, but it was in pretty bad shape too."

"Survivors?"

Sarina's voice answers. "Twelve. All were from the underground installation. Massive radiation burns, heavy concussive traumas; all of them are either critical or getting there fast. I don't know how long it'll be before we can get answers out of them."

Tsara sighs uncharacteristically. "How many dead?"

A significant pause punctuates Sej's response. "Caldecott Grove was home to two-hundred thirty-seven people."

A noticeable indignation at the injustice crumples the Captain's brow ridges slightly. She bounced her fist off the table's surface. "How did this happen!? Who did this?"

"Visual inspection confirms we're missing exactly one photon torpedo from our inventory," LaRoche reported. "We definitely launched it."

Lieutenant (j.g.) Rocks, duty officer during the launch, speaks up. "Lieutenant Blair's cloak detection system didn't register anything and none of the ships in dock have photon torpedo launch capability.

Malinche has hers off-line."

LaRoche continues. "We've had a tough time trying to trace the launch command pathways. Whoever programmed the launch routed it through at least a dozen low priority, high-traffic systems; we're having to sort through thousands of files to just figure out what part of the station the authorization came from."

As the real cause of the torpedo launch is discovered, a new presence asserts itself in the Quadrant.

[Commander Sorehl, executive officer]

"No sign of the changeling aboard the **naS SuS'a'**," came Lieutenant Commander Ramson's voice over the open channel. "Still continuing our phaser sweeps."

Commander Sorehl listened to the report, hands clasp behind his back. He looked toward Lieutenant Commander Sej, who stood at the Admin console. Seeing the executive officer nod, the Trill responded by keying in the next message from the queue.

It was a report from security. "We found the captain in a status tube in her quarters," reported the voice, probably Ensign Spawn. "She's been taken to sickbay for revival."

Sej took a breath in relief. "Well, at least we know the Founder didn't kill her. I wonder how long she's been compromised?"

The Vulcan didn't speculate, instead asking, "All command codes have been changed, correct?"

"Of course," the operations chief answered. Sej remembered the last time a Founder had run around on the station. That one had gotten away, too. "You ought to see what Rocks and I found on those Maquis comm chips." Seeing another nod, Sej handed over the PADD.

Sorehl perused it. "This is the prefix used for all incoming Aegis communication," he stated.

"You noticed," Sej quipped. "It looks like someone down there was about to send that message to the station. There was a lot of damage from the torpedo, but I think you can figure out..."

"The Maquis believe Dominion agents have been scouting the DMZ?" One eyebrow jutted upward. "What purpose would such an exercise serve? I fail to see the logic in such paranoia."

"First take a look at the names spouting that paranoia," Sej suggested.

The eyebrow settled into place. "Calvin Hutchins. shVen Staso. Ro Laren," Sorehl read aloud. "These were all reputable StarFleet officers before their defection."

"Kinda makes you wonder, huh? I mean, if they believed it enough to break their cover, there could be something to it. And now a shapeshifter blows a hole in Canar II just before they send it. What could be going on?" Sej turned to address an incoming signal on his board.

Sorehl was silent for a moment. "It may be unwise to discount its merits. Perhaps we should contact StarFleet Intelligence."

"We may be too late," Sej interjected. He put the incoming news onscreen. An image of the Bajoran wormhole spun open on the viewer, a plague of Jem'Hadar vessels spilling out. Eyes turned to the image.

"There must be fifty of them," K'Cavok assessed from the tactical console. No one else commented.

An image of Captain Benjamin Sisko, commander of Deep Space Nine, replaced the image. "These Dominion ships arrived in the Bajoran system heralding the addition of their newest member, Cardassia. With this task force behind him, Gul Dukat has assumed military control of Cardassia Prime. He has already launched attacks to regain lost territory, against both Klingon-held sectors and Maquis sites. Adjoining sectors should remain on full alert until further notice."

Sej threw a wary glance around the command center, seeing mild shock on the faces of Rocks, LaRoche, and K'Cavok. Even the Vulcan looked apprehensive. Once again it seemed, the environment surrounding Aegis was about to change.

Annexation

With the annexation of Cardassian by the Dominion, a new, aggressive player enters the Aegis neighborhood.

[Commander Sorehl, executive officer]

The Strategic Conference on Oranis IV had done little to stir optimism among those who attended. Then again, Commander Sorehl would never allow himself the luxury of either enthusiasm or despair. External events could not be permitted to disturb one's emotional balance. Still, with Dominion warships permanently deployed along the Cardassian border, even a dispassionate observer would admit the situation was grave.

The Admiralty had offered its latest intelligence. Cardassian territories held by the Klingons had been liberated. The DMZ was now a political artifact. The Dominion had targetted Bajor to go up in a conflagration that would have wounded the Federation, as well. Aegis now seemed a logical point of conflict.

Tactical upgrades would be speedily introduced, but Sorehl had used the conference to urge further precautions. Surprisingly, Klingon advisors had won him support, having identified Canar as the prime location for a defensive stand. According to report, starships were being diverted to protect the Federation's tenuous foothold. *It would have to be enough*, Sorehl concluded.

Captain Thomas Halloway rested his chin on a closed fist, staring ahead at the viewscreen. The battle bridge of the Galaxy-class starship **Victory** was dark and cramped; it was just the right atmosphere for brooding. Powerful engines hurtled him closer to that region of space on which his career had been built - the Cardassian border. At one time, his name had been something of a deterrent. *But the neighborhood was changing*, he reflected, *and the new arrivals weren't as likely to be intimidated by mere reputation.*

Halloway flashed his trademark grin, sitting back. Secretly, he suspected the Admiralty didn't even care about irritating the Cardassians. Why else would he hear rumors that the starship **Phoenix** was on its way, as well? That single ship had given the Cardies one of their bloodiest nose, a testament to the power of StarFleet shots fired in anger.

The captain ran one hand through his dark hair. A handful of ships had been given the same orders - defend the Canar system. Against a Jem'Hadar strike, it seemed infeasible. *It would have to be enough*, Halloway concluded.

[Lieutenant Commander Ereid Sej, chief of operations]

TSara strides from the rear, from her office, down the steps to the central platform at Ops to address the gathering. "In addition to our own recent troubles with the Founders; I'm sure all of you are aware of the Cardassians' admission to the Dominion. I've ordered this meeting for all of us to be aware and start considering the impact of these events on this command post. Commander Sorehl?" She motions for her first officer to continue.

Sorehl pivots about, also standing on the central Admin platform, making cool and steady eye contact with each officer. "StarFleet Strategic Command has projected Canar as the most likely point of entry for a joint Dominion-Cardassian incursion into Federation territory. Should the Dominion occupy this position, they will be in easy striking distance of 14 key Federation sectors, and several dozen populated Federation worlds. This location provides not only access but existing fortification; StarFleet Command is operating from the presumption that the capture of Aegis is a primary objective."

Lieutenant Blair pans his head about the crowded room adding, "We've already detected patrols on the far side of the border; I guess the Jem'Hadar are already interested in what we're up to."

Sej's voice follows, "Bottom line, people: we're the front line. StarFleet has pooled most of our ships along the Bajoran Defense Perimeter. We have intelligence that the Klingons are retreating their forces to fortify their few remaining positions on the far side of the Betreka Nebula." Ereid starts pacing about the small circle of the platform. "That leaves us having to cover a very large swath of the border."

Sorehl picks up. "The Federation Council has reviewed the terms of the treaty that established Aegis, and believes that considering Cardassian militarization, it is in the best interests of peace that tactical restrictions on Aegis be eased." Sighs of relief escape pursed lips around the room.

LaRoche's voice makes itself heard from his perch by the large Engineering station. "Ze station designers left empty connect points in ze event that Aegis should receive tactical upgrades; zhat will make our job easier. Ze first of the new systems should be online by the end of the month. The rest of the new phaser banks and torpedo launchers should be completed within 4-6 months."

Jennan Ayer, in his new civilian status, adds to the briefing. "Seventeen ships have arrived from colonies in the DMZ. With the help of the Dominion, Cardassians are taking back worlds previously overrun by the Maquis or the Klingons over the past two years. We may be their next eviction."

[K'Vorlag, Imperial governor]

All gone.

The occupied territories, in one incredible strike after another, falling back into Cardassian hands. And he, K'Vorlag, was now merely the former governor of that realm. He opened a clenched fist, envisioning the systems slipping through his fingers.

He coughed. The bridge of his flagship **mIn'tu** was heavy with acrid smoke. Jem'Hadar ships had overwhelmed them, pounding even those in retreat, but the Vor'cha-class battlecruiser had still made it out.

"qumwl," Qrij'eq began, using the now inappropriate title, "The Cardassian-Dominion fleet has cut us off from our main force. We cannot withdraw to Bajoran space with the others."

K'Vorlag stroked his beard. They could not even seek a port among their friends in the Maquis. Those rebels too were feeling the sting of the Cardassian's new allies. *Those attacks would reach all the way to the Federation border and stop*, he imagined. Surely even the Dominion could not sustain a three-front war, could they? That left Federation space as a safe fall-back. But he would never be able to launch a counterstrike from that distance. He clenched his jaw. What he needed was a staging area where the Cardassians wouldn't strike, somewhere they could repair undisturbed...

A grin spread across K'Vorlag's features. "Once again, the shield turns to serve our purpose," he spoke cryptically. "Lay in a course for that cursed starbase, the one named Aegis. Let us see just how far Dukat's war will go."

*A Jem'Hadar task force attempts to secure Aegis, but is forced back by the timely arrival of several starships and the station's new support ship **Perseus**. Avoiding capture, the starbase suffers extensive damage and several casualties, including the captain and the first officer.*

[Ensign Gideon Hart, station counselor]

Gideon sat on the floor, leaning back against Lieutenant (j.g.) Rocks' biobed. Her hair was unkempt and stringy, her face was covered in soot and sweat, and her hands had blisters where she had fallen against the burning consoles. She watched Saraina listlessly treating minor injuries, knowing that she worried most about the Vulcan. Gid was hot, tired, and utterly unhappy.

The day had started out well enough. She had nabbed Spawn from the brig, to give him some exercise and chat with him a bit, and had met Varon in the process. Varon, for a Klingon, seemed a reasonable and level-headed guy. He had trusted her judgment on Spawn's behavior, and Spawn had cooperated. It was always good to have friends in the security department, because extremely disturbed or upset people often got themselves tossed into the brig. But she didn't see Spawn as a nut. He was a nice guy, and he had courage. He'd punched 1st Lieutenant Muldoon after all, not a task for the feint-hearted, and he'd risked his life and broken his leg working to put out fires in the Command Center.

She'd suggested Spawn go to the command center, for she was sure he could be useful. It was her first trip up to the top deck of the station and had been a sight to behold. Then the Jem'Hadar ships attacked. Within five minutes the whole place went up in flames. Not much for a counselor to do but try to protect people best she could. She was impressed by everyone's courage and teamwork. Aegis had dimensions she hadn't realized, and she had hope that the crew's interrelational problems could be smoothed in time. Aegis had burned, and the rest was history.

Gideon thought about how badly everyone had been hurt, and she was sad and afraid. The Vulcan XO was as good as dead, and Rocks, who had been the last to stop trying to put out the fire with his inadequate extinguisher, was barely holding on. The others, Spawn, Hack, T'Vlen, and Shodan had battle scars bravely earned in the face of the Dominion. But one had fared better than the rest. Gideon looked up from her place on the floor at the HoD, as if looking up at a general, or a queen. She wondered if TSara was the pinnacle of

all Klingons, to go down valiantly fighting. And yet, TSara was here at the bedside of a quiet, logical Vulcan, not hoping for his honorable death in battle but his sustained life and companionship. Gideon knew there was much to this woman, and wondered if she'd ever get the chance to know it all.

[Lieutenant Commander Ereid Sej, chief of operations]

Lieutenant Shodan pulls himself up the rungs of the computer pit and crosses around to lean against the forward edge of Sej's Admin console to report. "The primary computer trunks seem to be mostly there. I think it's mostly going to be a cosmetic job, replacing most of these control panel surfaces and some of the blown-out conduits."

Sej nods, the first good news about Aegis' situation that he'd heard. Ramson looks down from the tactical station on the upper level. "What about the structural damage?"

Shodan's head cranes slightly to the right to answer him. "The engineering readouts say the atmospheric containment fields are holding. Structural integrity reinforcement is helping out, but don't expect any productivity from Shuttlebays 3 or 4 or Cargo Bay 25."

Sej's eyebrow raises. "Why not?"

"They're gone." Sej and Ramson pivot their heads to glance at each other incredulously, a whistle of surprise escaping both their lips.

Ramson calls down. "Muldoon reported he'd gotten everyone evacuated from the rest of the Secondary Module just in case the containment fields fail."

His brow crinkled, Ereid's hands perch on his hips in consideration of a course of action. "Alright, I think we've got our work cut out for us. D'Mysus, for the time being, I'd like you to stay up here and see if anything can come back online without a major overhaul. Shodan, that leaves you managing the hull breach. I'll join Pierre down in Engineering; knowing the Captain, she'll probably wrestle her way out of Sickbay to join us down there. Report in one hour, gentlemen."

CHIEF ENGINEER'S LOG

LIEUTENANT COMMANDER PIERRE LAROCHE, REPORTING

This report is not ze good one. Bad reports are always troubling. During ze past few weeks, ze station has taken more damage than I have ever seen her take. It is a wonder we are still here. Ze Jem'Hadar ship that hit us took out a large portion of the Secondary Module. Unless we can swap it out, we must reconstruct ze superstructure of zhat whole section.

[Lieutenant Saraina Ramson, chief medical officer]

T'Salik entered the office. Dr. Isedh No expected her to be composed...well, he thought he did. He wasn't quite sure what he expected, or how to handle this. He would have to get through as best as possible.

"Please, sit down.." he motioned to the chair in front of the desk. After she did, he continued. "We need to discuss your husband's condition. It does not look good. Active brain functions are dropping off rapidly." Dr. No paused to let this sink in, then continued. "It could happen suddenly, within 48 hours if he continues to deteriorate at this pace."

He studied her face for a response. Nothing.

"If his brain functions cease, your husband will be brain-dead. What I need to know is if you want the doctor in charge to terminate life support at that point. Your wishes will be respected."

Isedh looked at her, his gaze gentle and sympathetic.

T'Salik glanced away thoughtfully. "My husband prepared a waiver of sustained assistance early in our marriage. It is quite specific, as you might expect." She paused. "I shall respect his wishes."

"Of course," the doctor assured her. T'Salik stood, turning away from the desk. "Mrs. Sorehl," Isedh added, "there is still hope."

She paused in the doorway. "Hope is illogical, Doctor." She paused reverently. "The link my husband and I have shared since our bonding is not active, but has not been severed. Until it is, I refuse to ignore the possibility of recovery, however remote." She met No's gaze. "He may yet prevail." She glided from the office, leaving the doctor to ponder her parting comments in silence.

The naS SuS'a' prepares to cross into Cardassian space to investigate the sudden appearance of a massive anomaly.

[Lieutenant Commander Ereid Sej, chief of operations]

Ramson hunches over the small communications console on the **naS SuS'a'** to hear more clearly a report from the Trill. "We'll be underway within the hour; how's the **Perseus** coming?"

A voice on the commline comes again, covered with static. "...got the fusion initiators coming online; we'll have impulse power back up soon." Curious as to the status of Aegis' new acquisition, LaRoche steps away from the engineering console at the rear of the **naS SuS'a'** bridge to listen to Sej's crackling voice. The many repairs on the station have kept him from even boarding the Oberth-class support ship. Sej continues, "Most of the EPS system is still shot, though. Half the plasma distributor couplings that weren't wrecked in the attack are fused open. We can't reinitialize the warp core without incinerating decks eight and nine."

LaRoche speaks into the console. "How long until you are tactically operative down zere?"

"Six to eight hours; just don't ask us to fire any weapons." Ramson and LaRoche exchange a wary look.

"Sej," Ramson responds, "if the Jem'Hadar spot us, the **Perseus** will be doing double-duty defending the station and coming to our rescue."

Ereid's harried voice comes again noisily from the console speakers. "I know, but it looks like we've done all we can. You've got all the engineers who aren't fixing the station. I've got to get back to Ops. Signal me when you're ready for departure. We need to find out how bad the subspace damage is across the border."

LaRoche eases into a broad smile. "I look forward to seeing ze **Perseus** up close az soon az we get back."

"I'll try and have a station from you to get back to. Be careful on this one. Sej out." The harsh beep of the Klingon-designed console closes the channel as Ramson and LaRoche shoot each other another glance, returning to their stations.

*The **naS SuS'a'** learns the catastrophic failure of an attempt to open a wormhole to the Gamma Quadrant has torn the fabric of reality. The ship must go inside to seal the damage. Trapped within, they receive aid from a former adversary.*

[HoD'a' K'Vorlag, fleet captain]

"Governor," the Trill onscreen greeted, still using the out-dated title, "I'm glad I could reach you. This is Lieutenant Commander Sej, chief of operations at StarBase Aegis."

"Yes, I know," K'Vorlag replied non-committally.

"Is HoD TSara still aboard?" Sej asked.

K'Vorlag nodded. "She is with us. We are enroute to you now."

"Sir, I'd like to ask you to consider changing course." Sej continued to explain, seeing the Klingon frown. "Our away team aboard the **naS SuS'a'** has encountered some incredible type of anomaly never seen before. Their last report suggested a Dominion attempt to construct a wormhole to the Gamma Quadrant."

The Klingon jumped to his feet. "What !?" The next words were harsh guttural commands to change course and engage cloak. He turned back to the screen. "We cannot allow that to happen. Tell your StarFleet friends the **mIn'tu** is on its way."

"I wish I could, Governor, but we've lost contact with them." The Trill paused. "There is some other information you may wish to relay to both the **naS SuS'a'** and the captain." Sej straightened, steeling himself for the statement. "Commander Sorehl is dead." Another pause. He considered whether to share the next report, then continued. "And Dr. Ramson has miscarried. Her husband will want to know."

Onscreen, the former governor, showed surprising signs of feeling. "I will pass that on. **mIn'tu** out."

*Freed from the bizarre anomaly, the **naS SuS'a'** returns to face grave realities.*

[Lieutenant Commander D'Mysus Ramson, security chief
and Commander Sorehl, executive officer]

The **naS SuS'a'** glided toward Aegis under tow of the Vor'cha-class **mIn'tu**. Most of the crew had gone over to K'Vorlag's ship, where the holodoc could tend them. Lieutenant Commander D'Mysus Ramson brooded from the center chair of the bird of prey.

They had emerged from the anomaly. It had collapsed behind them. The quadrant was safe. Ramson could let his mind return to the comm signal they had received hours earlier.

Varon had replayed the transmission twice, on Ramson's order. "Sorehl died about forty minutes ago," it repeated. "Sara...lost the twins."

Grief descended. He wasn't sure it was a station he wanted to return to.

Even before he stepped off the lift, he could feel anxiety from his wife. Ramson hurried into sickbay, ready to offer what comfort he could.

He was surprised to see Saraina not only off of a biobed, but scrambling around. "What are you doing up?" he insisted with concern.

The doctor smiled briefly on seeing him, but let her expression return to seriousness. "I'm so glad you made it in time. Sorehl's neural functions are starting to lose cohesion. I've already called T'Vlen. If the two of you are going to make this work, we've got to move."

Ramson stared. "Sorehl?" he managed. Something was wrong here. "Sej told us he was dead!"

The comment took Sara aback. "Why would he do that?"

"And you...," he stammered. It was now he realized he could still sense the growing minds in her womb. Unconsciously, his eyes watered.

The doctor grabbed his shoulder. "D'Mysus, what's wrong?"

His eyes blinked furiously. "Nothing," he answered softly, "nothing at all." Across the room, he saw Ensign T'Vlen enter sickbay. "Let's go save Sorehl."

Reports made their way up to the Command Center. Sorehl was alive. Dr. Ramson was alright. Somehow things were not what had been reported.

"I never sent any message like that," Sej objected, leaning on the Admin console. "We lost contact with both ships as they got near the maelstrom."

Listening from the group clustered around sciences, Rocks nodded. "We experienced a lot strange stuff in there. Reality itself seemed to shift."

Seated beside him, Blair mused, "Looks like it did one last time. In our favor."

The McAllister Nebula

After the Cardassians purge the DMZ of its enemies, the Maquis become less an enemy to be reckoned with and more a cause whose adherents need help to survive.

[Commander Sorehl, executive officer]

Commander Sorehl sat at the center of the bridge on the Oberth-class USS **Perseus**. He glanced toward the expansive nebula onscreen. It had been a report from Deep Space Nine that had brought Aegis' support ship out this close to Cardassian space. Sorehl glanced down at a PADD to review its contents:

To: Commanding Officers, SB211, StarBase Aegis, USS **Victory**, USS **Phoenix**, USS **Cairo**

From: Lieutenant Atticus Lochner, Judge Advocate General-at-large, DS9

You are undoubtedly aware that Captain Sisko of DS9 recently liberated a number of Maquis survivors from a hidden position in the Badlands. This was unexpected since reports indicated the Jem'Hadar purge of Maquis sites had been total. I am now of the opinion there may be additional survivors. As legal council to these citizens, I have been privy to information that suggests others may have escaped death. Attorney/client privilege hinders me from full disclosure, but I believe there may be as many as three additional "fall-back" positions that have not been compromised by the Dominion. While I do not know their location, I suspect officers with your experience on the border might. The Maquis have never truly been an enemy of the Federation. It is our former citizens who fill their ranks, many even from StarFleet itself. Let a court decide their fate, rather than Jem'Hadar slaughterers. I urge you to begin a search for other survivors.

The Vulcan wondered if Dakla was among the survivors. *The Maquis were such a divisive issue*, he reflected, *especially on Aegis*. Some of the crew had suffered losses at their hands; others heralded them as freedom fighters. He glanced toward Muldoon, then Spawn. As a command officer, Sorehl had been careful never to discuss his own position. If he was to prevent the crew from letting personal bias affect their performance on this mission, he must lead with equanimity. He returned to reading the PADD:

Addendum to Commanding Officer, StarBase Aegis

From: Thomas A. Halloway, commanding officer, USS **Victory**

Since reading Lochner's report, I've had **Victory** check out some possible sites, but nothing yet. Still, if I were the Maquis and wanted to hide a fall-back, I'd use the McAllister C-5 Nebula, which isn't too far from your position. It's only seven years inside the Cardassian border and almost impossible to scan inside. Plus, particle flux inside will degrade a starship hull over time, so most routes avoid it. No doubt that's why the Cardassians hid a fleet inside it when they planned to invade Minos Korva five years ago. Good thing Jelicho was on the ball then. Check it out. I think it's our best bet.

Sorehl set the PADD onto the arm of his chair and stood. Scans had located a Maquis ship and trace debris of Cardassian origin. He had ordered the Maquis corsair brought aboard; engineering was assessing it.

"Holding position relative to the border," Varon reported from the helm.

"Still no indication that Jem'Hadar patrols even know we're here," Ramson added from tactical.

Muldoon exhaled a puff of smoke. "Or maybe they just don't care," the Marine observed.

Sorehl surveyed the interior of the Defiant-style bridge. Blair continued his mostly inconclusive scans of the nebula. "LaRoche to bridge," came the voice of the chief engineer.

"This is Sorehl. Go ahead," the Vulcan responded.

"No doubt about it," the Frenchman began, "zhis corsair spent some time in ze nebula. Renckly sees definite zigns of hull degradation on ze craft. Rocks and Hack have been looking at ze nav computer and zhey should be able to get a flight record. Zhat should help us narrow down where a base might be."

"And the pilots?" Sorehl inquired.

"Both dead. An Andorian and a human. Dr. Ramson zaid asphyxiation from coolant vapors. Must have taken a hit from whatever ship zhey were fighting. Weapons damage looks Cardassian. Oh, and one more zhing...it's got a cloaking device."

An eyebrow raised. "A cloaking device."

"Klingon-made," LaRoche affirmed. "Type-4 for small craft. Probably part of the batch the Klingons said they armed the Maquis with. Still in working condition, but not enough power to keep running."

"I see," Sorehl remarked. "Excellent work. Bridge out." He swiveled his chair toward the tactical station. "Mr. Ramson, open a channel to Aegis."

Volunteers finished filtering out of the bridge. The runabout *Congo*, with a borrowed cloak, would slip across the border and into the nebula to search for probable Maquis survivors. Lieutenant (j.g.) Varon turned to Sorehl. "Sir, I will stay here. You may run into trouble."

"You will be needed," Sorehl responded, "I assure you." Varon returned to his seat at the helm.

Behind him, Ramson nodded. "I'll stay," the Minarian added.

The Vulcan stood, speaking to those remaining. "Our mission is more simple, but no less important." He turned to face the tactical station. "Is the Jem'Hadar ship still in sensor range?"

At front, Varon growled under his breath. Ramson nodded, "Aye, but it doesn't appear they notice us."

Sorehl turned back toward the center chair, "We shall make sure they do. We must divert their attention from the runabout." The Vulcan pressed a button on his chair, opening a secure channel. "Commander Sej, advise before entering cloak. We will get between you and the nearest patrol ship to avoid their notice." Varon moved the ship to comply.

The runabout cloaked, beginning its departure.

From his assumed position at Science One, Lieutenant (j.g.) Hack reported, "Commander, I believe the Jem'Hadar ship has changed course and is headed toward us."

"And picking up speed," Ramson noted.

Sorehl tilted his head, turning the chair to face the viewer. "Odd they would change course now." The runabout was already gone. "Move toward them, standard cruise," he ordered. Varon leaned forward, making the order a reality. The Vulcan's intended diversion was looking to become something more already.

[Lieutenant (j.g.) D. Spawn, security officer]

Just weeks ago, the Cardassians joined in an unholy alliance with the Dominion. This was the last time I heard from my sister, Elyssia. She was a member of the Maquis. Reports came in about the total destruction of the Maquis at the hands of this horrid superpower. The Maquis and its cause were presumed dead, its only remnants lying in prisons throughout the Federation and Cardassia. All this was shattered several days ago; the Maquis showed that they were still alive, and fighting Cardassians and the Jem'Hadar.

I am part of a mission to find more of these remaining individuals. I don't care what we find out there, as long as it includes information about Elyssia. When volunteers were asked for, I made sure I got on the runabout mission. I just remembered something she had said before I left for the Academy. She told me I'd never get past Ensign...when I see her again, I'll get to tell her how wrong she was.

[Commander Ereid Sej, chief of operations]

The violent shudder of the *Congo* flight deck almost throws LaRoche through the open door despite his steady grip against the wall. *They'd managed to enter the nebula without incident*, he lamented, *now what was happening?* "What was zat? What hit us?"

Sej's voice tries to shout out above the sounds of the injured runabout. "Damn gravitic mine! Probably Cardassian." He shakes his head as his fingers dance jittering across the Ops panel. "Damage report!"

LaRoche lunges for the systems pedestal immediately in front of the transporter pad, grabbing its corners for support. "Warp core is offline. The cloak is all but gone."

"Forget about weapons or shields." Muldoon jostles about, shouting from the tactical position.

"What about the helm?"

Right next to Sej, Ensign T'Vlen attempts to maintain his practiced Vulcan composure despite the situation. "Impulse maneuverability is falling well below safety tolerances."

Ereiid reprograms his console layout with the primary overrides. "I'll give you a hand; maybe together we can keep this thing from flying apart. Rocks! Anywhere we can land?"

Squinting and hunched over his console, the science officer responds. "These sensors are useless...wait! I think that's a planet coming into range; 128 mark 12. Can't tell if it's M-class planets."

"Sounds like our best bet; changing course now."

The cabin lights with an ethereal golden light as the desperate craft comes about towards the system hidden inside the dense nebular dust.

Meeting with a Jem'Hadar patrol ship on the border, Sorehl agrees to go aboard for a discussion with the Vorta agent, Semil.

[Commander Sorehl, executive officer]
"As a prisoner," Sorehl stated blankly, "I will be of little value to you." When the Dominion offered information about the missing USS **Tianenmen**, it had seemed logical to beam over to their ship and examine it alone, rather than risk the crew of the **Perseus**. Sorehl wondered about the certainty of his logic.

"You underestimate yourself, Commander," replied Semil, agent of the Dominion. The Vorta tilted his head and eyed him with curiosity. "You are no prisoner, but I assure you, your visit is of great value."

"Your efforts to obtain information from me will be unsuccessful," came the terse response.

"Ever dispassionate, confident in your celebrated Vulcan discipline," Semil smiled. "I promise my only interest is learning more about your venerated race. You have so much in common with the Vorta."

Sorehl cocked an eyebrow.

"Intellectual achievements. Telepathic prowess. Superior physical endurance," Semil listed. "We are both stewards for our governments and serve with singular dedication."

"Vulcans are citizens," the executive officer noted, "not subjects."

Semil frowned. "Hmmm, no longer 'well-known as the intellectual puppets of this Federation'? Well, good for you." The Vorta smiled, having made his point. "I'm sure the Klingons don't think of you that way anymore. I find your culture fascinating. Would you indulge me in a game of kal-toh?" He paused, thinking. "Oh, I forgot, it's your wife who plays that. Perhaps three-dimensional chess?"

Sorehl looked at him evenly. "We seem to be playing games already."

Semil blinked, taken aback. "I must say I'm disappointed. Well, I won't trouble you further. We should be reaching the wreckage of the **Tianenman** about now."

"Wreckage?" the Vulcan repeated.

"Yes," Semil replied. "We think it was destroyed by impact with a cloaked anti-matter mine." The Vorta gestured grandly at the viewer. Sorehl surveyed the image, purportedly remains of the **Tianenmen**. "It could have been left behind by the Klingons," the Dominion agent continued. "In their haste to retreat, they left quite a few such mines. Or perhaps your ship was laying its own. I hear they are quite volatile."

"I'm sure I don't know," Sorehl stated flatly.

"You cannot confirm or deny such facts?" Semil parroted. "Not surprising." Nodding to a nearby Jem'Hadar, Semil signaled a course change. Sorehl felt a subtle change in the vibration of the deckplates as they went into warp.

"And your reasons for showing this to me?" the Vulcan asked.

The Vorta tilted his head reassuringly. "Why, to assuage fear that we may have been involved."

The Vulcan folded his arms. "I have seen nothing to allay the suspicion you refer to, real or imagined. **Tianenmen** is not the first ship reported lost along this border."

"I had no idea," the Dominion agent expressed in shock. "What a tragedy."

"Yes," Sorehl answered dismissively

"There is one other matter I wish to discuss." The Vorta straightened. "It seems your station was permitted by the Cardassians to serve a purpose for which it is no longer needed. The DeMilitarized Zone no longer exists. The Maquis no longer exist. Therefore, on behalf of our Cardassian members, we formally invite you to withdraw."

Sorehl tugged on his tunic. "I shall note your invitation."

Semil smiled. "Ignore the warning if you choose, but the Dominion intends to secure all Cardassian-claimed territory," he cautioned. "Notice has been given. It would be another tragedy if we were compelled to make you leave the Canar system."

"Since it does not recognize the legitimacy of the Dukat regime," Sorehl objected, "StarFleet is unlikely to allow a Federation-built facility to fall into his hands. We will not abandon Aegis."

"For all the Founders care, you can blow your station up. Just get your people out."

"Your request is totally illogical," the Vulcan insisted. "There are colonists..."

"Who are welcome to remain if they wish to be subjects of the Dominion," Semil interrupted. "Extend them our invitation." The Vorta spun, exiting the room, leaving the ultimatum in the Vulcan's hands.

[Lieutenant (j.g.) D. Spawn, security officer]

After the crash landing, we walked along through the snow toward faint readings. Off in the distance we could see someone. We all ran over and found her. We decided she was suffering from hypothermia, and I did what I could to help, placing a coat around her.

We carried her back to the *Congo*. A lot was surging through my mind. I was certain she was a Maquis; which meant she might know about my sister. I had to make sure she survived, and I had to know. Muldoon talked to her for awhile, but she didn't admit anything. He told me to search our guest. I discovered a dagger; but when I turned around to tell him what I found, I saw he wasn't there.

That was the moment I chose to ask her if she knew my sister. She asked a few questions, like where we came from and so on. Answering the questions really wouldn't have done much harm, so I decided that I should. The girl told me she didn't know anything about my sister, but that she knew people who might.

Exodus

Congo returns from rescuing Maquis from a hidden base in the McAllister Nebula, and the Dominion "advises" StarFleet to withdraw from the Canar system. In response, Aegis begins unusual preparations.

[Lieutenant (j.g.) Corris Sprint, starship systems engineer]

Sipping his coffee, Sprint thought of the new chief engineer. He was enlisted! Chief Warrant Officer Malone had been given charge of officers who were his senior in rank. Sprint's reaction had been rude when he first found out; he made a note to apologize. Nonetheless, he couldn't help but chuckle at Lieutenant Shodan's reaction. *Surprise*, he thought. Apparently, the next few months would hold even more interest than Sprint had expected.

[Commander Sorehl, executive officer]

"You have something," the executive officer stated, taking his seat in the briefing room.

"Yes," replied Commander Ereid Sej, "I think we've found a way to speed up the structural loads analysis you asked for."

"Proceed," Sorehl directed.

The chief of operations looked over to the engineer beside him. "Lieutenant Renckly," Sej indicated, "why don't you start us off?"

The android nodded. "Ensign O'Connor was able to locate the structural integrity field generators and inertial dampeners used when Aegis was placed in orbit." He tapped a button on the table, bringing up a holographic image of Aegis. "Malone had us pull double shifts to restore a working SIF system." Steady yellow light indicated where apparatus had been installed; it blinked where work was in progress.

Lieutenant Commander John Blair took his cue, leaning forward. "Hack has put together a simulation that will show structural stress and strain on every deck. We can measure any changes in the load-bearing bulkheads when we do the propulsion test."

Sorehl raised an eyebrow. "Propulsion test?"

Sej sat up. "With your approval, we'll do a microburn of the stabilizing thrusters on Deck 22. We can extrapolate from the results."

Renckly folded his arms. "I don't think she can handle even an impulse tow. When we rebuilt that part of the secondary module, we didn't expect to be ready for warp stresses."

Despite Aegis' declared intention to tow the station out of the Canar system, a Jem'Hadar task force arrives to accelerate the departure.

[Lieutenant (j.g.) Corris Sprint, starship systems engineer]

Taking a ship in this condition into combat had to be the worst idea in the history of bad ideas...if saving a station and over two thousand lives weren't the objective. Sprint could only hope the fighter wings could

provide enough cover fire for Commander Sej and his makeshift flagship to coordinate the defense. The tug **Atlas** was needed to accelerate the station to warp. **Perseus** and the fighters were all that would stand between Aegis and the Jem'Hadar.

He called over a crewman. "We've got a real situation, here. I need you to cross-check the pulse phasers and plasma grid with every system you can. Then, divert every amp of power you can squeeze from this ship into the SIF."

The crewman nodded, "How much time do we have?"

Sprint frowned, "Let's see....30 seconds to undock, about a minute to intercept, and maybe 120 seconds of ship-to-ship negotiations... You've got less than five minutes. Scramble." The crewman hustled off. Sprint had never taken a ship with this kind of damage into combat. He only hoped he still had that knack for getting out in them.

[HoD'a' K'Vorlag, Klingon fleet captain]

K'Vorlag loved being part of a secret.

The B'Rel class **Qoj'wIH** (Ruthless Warmaker) was a small ship, but one well suited to this mission. It had been built as a deep-cover scout, such as the one that uncovered the Federation's secret Genesis Project decades ago. Only six similar ships had been chosen for this duty. For some reason, the Federation had not committed their only cloak-capable ship to the operation. **Defiant** remained at Deep Space Nine. Instead, Koval led a joint team on the rebuilt **Kij'Pah**, while TSara manned the **naS SuS'a'** with people from the Federation starbase she ran. Three other birds, like **Qoj'wIH**, held a dozen Klingon warriors apiece.

Under cloak, each was charged with slipping across the Cardassian border, intent on finding the place where a counterstrike would hurt the Dominion most. K'Vorlag rubbed a fist under his chin. They had evaded two Jem'Hadar patrols and a Galor-class sentry, but had found no suitable targets to report.

"joH," a bridge officer alerted. K'Vorlag swiveled his chair, listening. "A group of Jem'Hadar ships is massed along the Federation border, not far from our position."

"nuq? nuqDaq?" he demanded, getting to his feet. Were they near a Dominion shipyard? Or merely an attack in progress?

"Here, near the starbase called IyjIS," reported the warrior at sensors.

Of course it would be Aegis, K'Vorlag muttered inwardly. What had been a thorn in his side as an adversary was now becoming a handicap in alliance. The Federation had gone to great lengths to make moving the station appear to be an appeasement of Cardassian demands. Only a select few were aware of the real reason - Aegis was needed elsewhere. If it were seized by the Dominion, the entire operation could be jeopardized. And with TSara gone, that meant the Vulcan would command the defense. *They would need better odds than that*, he reasoned. "Degh," he ordered, "He chu' yIghoS! 'eyjo'waw' IyjIS."

"jIyaj," the helmsman affirmed. "Course set for Federation starbase."

"chu," K'Vorlag directed. The former Klingon Intelligence officer leaned back in the center chair. He stroked his cheek, feeling the fresh scar he had earned in his last encounter with the Vorta, Semil. Stealth had been his original intent, but it was time to give the Dominion new wounds...

Payback

Aegis enters the Decelea system, taking place as the anchor for Operation vISo'be.

[Commander Ereid Sej, chief of operations]

With the station having reached Decelea, and repairs continuing on both Aegis and the **Perseus**, our attention now shifts towards our upcoming mission objectives.

I was raised with the firm belief that a dedication to peace has always been a cornerstone of the Federation's strength. I am now unsure how I feel about having to fight for that peace.

I look at these officers around me, and the civilians on the station, and I can see in their faces that they know what is coming. No one has told them about any campaigns against the Dominion, much less the plans that are coming into focus around them, and still they know.

Perhaps what I am least looking forward to is not the battle; that's why it's called duty. I am wary of having to look these people in the face at week's end and tell them why we have been asking so much of them lately, and having to ask more of them. Having to tell them that we are going to be placing them at the front line, throwing them at their enemy. Telling them how probable it is that many of them won't survive to see next month.

I am unclear how to look D'Mysus and Saraina in the face and tell them why we will need them to separate from their infant children. I don't know how to tell Blair why he may never return to his wife and home.

If nothing else, StarFleet's plans for us have been going smoothly. Captain Halloway has taken firm control of the preparations for our campaign aboard the **Victory**. Only today, the **Al-Battani**, the **Oxford**, and the **Tecumseh** have arrived at Decelea. A significant Klingon contingent led by the **Maht-H'a** is due to arrive the day after tomorrow.

In the meantime, all we are left with is the imminence of an unavoidable war. I can only imagine this feeling being as old as conflict itself, the anticipation of the trials to come.

[Commander Sorehl, executive officer]

Captain Thomas Halloway stood before the viewscreen on the battle bridge of the starship **Victory**. He surveyed the tactical display and the placement of the forty-two starships, Federation and Klingon, assembled around StarBase Aegis.

"**Soujourner** and **Intrepid** have moved into trailing position," Lieutenant Commander Dela Minson announced from Ops. The Trill tapped her console to cycle the report buffer.

"Good show," the captain replied. "Have the Vor'cha's assumed the flanks?"

"**cha'DIch** is in place, but **quvtob** just cleared the station," Lieutenant Anyadolen answered from tactical. "From what I saw, probably too drunk to move any faster."

Halloway kept reviewing the display. "Chin up, Dolen. We're one big happy fleet. Almost."

Operation vISO required action across the entire Cardassian theater. Deep Space Nine had been ordered to proceed with plans to mine the entrance of the Bajoran wormhole. Scans of enemy space by the Argus Array confirmed the majority of Dominion ships had been committed to a fleet bound for that sector. A task force led by Captain Jelicho of the **Cairo** would soon make a feint into the McAllister Nebula to draw off remaining Jem'Hadar border patrols. The Galaxy-class **Venture**, her escort **Vigilant**, and other patrol ships would meet the armada led by **Victory** and exploit the open corridor to the Toras system shipyard.

"**Perseus** is underway," Minson updated. "**Kirishima** is mirroring the position of the **Phoenix**."

"And the admiral's shuttle is aboard," Anyadolen reported from aft.

"Good. Open a channel to the fleet," Halloway ordered.

Lieutenant Commander Betile Kallian made a cautious approach. "You're not greeting Admiral Saylek yourself, skipper?" she questioned, already knowing the answer. There was little love shown between the captain and Admiral Saylek. The fact that the admiral was Vulcan was one reason. The fact that Halloway had replaced him in command of this ship was another.

"I'm busy at the moment," he answered dismissively. "Besides, if he's going to assume command, let him come down here and do it."

"Channel open," Dolen reported, rousing Betile from her thoughts.

"This is Captain Halloway of the **Victory**. Let us break the silence. DIqab 'angmaj." He coughed, then nodded to close the frequency. "Bork, move us out."

[Ensign Nate Grey, medical officer]

Ensign Nate Grey sits quietly sitting across from a large window showing the empty space once occupied by a fleet of ships. The near empty halls are complemented by the vastness of unoccupied space. He looks at his surroundings once more before beginning his log entry:

"Each passing hour on this station I feel more out of place. Much to my shock I was stationed here despite requests to be placed elsewhere. Perhaps they already know what most of the brave souls who left earlier have already accepted - after the battle with the Cardassians, Aegis will be notably short of personnel. I find inadequate quarters, no proper welcome from any staff members, and a serious lack of security procedures. Perhaps in the wake of battle these things are overlooked...."

He is cut off from his entry by the passing of a group of officers conversing loudly. Grey sits up and looks out of the window one last time before heading to medical. He knows that a lot of preparation will be needed for the returning fleet...if there is one at all.

[Lieutenant (j.g.) Mike J. O'Connor, engineer]

"Computer, begin final launch system checks."

"Working...all system checks complete. Blue One is ready for launch."

Flipping the switches to lower the cockpit canopy, Mike pulled on his helmet, then his flight gloves.

"Computer, wait for positioning, orders, and final launch clearance."

"Confirmed. Blue One is now on active standby."

Mike waited. *It's time*, he thought. *He was like a brother to me, and they ripped him from my hands. He watched out for me in my Academy days, even when we were in elementary school. He was always there to pick me up when I fell down, to guide me when I was lost, to make me feel better when I got hurt. I still remember that day.*

"Cadet O'Connor, please report to my office."

Mike had been there for three full years already, and yet he had never heard the Admiral's voice shake like that. He wondered what could have possibly happened. He answered the summons, tugged on his uniform to straighten it, and stepped out onto the quiet green of the Academy grounds. Strolling slowly down the wide stone walkways, he arrived at the row of administrative offices. Choosing the office for the Dean of Student Affairs, Mike tapped the announcement pad, and receiving a response, stepped inside.

Admiral Carl Naples was a short man, slightly balding. He was a nice guy, always helping students who needed it, always giving an encouraging word. He was also very reserved, preferring to keep his emotions to himself. Even so, Mike could see the sadness in his eyes when he looked up.

"Welcome, Cadet. Please, sit down."

After taking a seat, Mike responded, "Thank you, sir, but if I may ask, why did you ask me here?"

"It's always the saddest duty of a commanding officer to break the news of the death of a crew member to that person's family. Since in this case, that isn't possible, it's been decided that I should tell you. I'm very sorry to inform you that the **Odyssey** has been destroyed in a battle with the Jem'Hadar. As far as we know, with all hands aboard."

Mike was slow to comprehend the news. "The **Odyssey**...Brian's ship."

The admiral nodded slowly in quiet confirmation. "I'm very sorry. The transporter chief is waiting for you. You've been excused from all your classes for the remainder of the week. An officer will accompany you home to tell your family. We also have a chaplain if you need to talk about anything you'd feel more comfortable addressing with him."

"Thank you, sir, but no. I think I'd just like to go home right now."

"I understand," the Admiral said, rising with Mike as he turned to leave, "and I'm sorry."

Mike nodded once, then turned to leave, his face tight, jaw set firmly. His eyes were alive with first remorse, then hatred. He walked out the door of that office, changed forever...

Mike shook himself out of his reverie, his path clear.

"Computer, begin pulse engine startup. Bring the warp core online, and warm up the weapons and shielding arrays."

"Working...warp core online. Independent power systems online. Disengaging umbilical connection. Pulse engines, maneuvering thrusters, impulse, active. Weapons array armed. Navigational and main shields engaged. Targetting sensors on active standby. Pilot heads-up display activated."

Mike watched as his visor slid down, then his tactical and systems readouts came online. Flipping it up, he activated the final switches to disengage the docking clamps.

"This is Lieutenant O'Connor to **Kirishima** launch control. Blue One is ready for launch."

"Understood, Lieutenant. Please await clearance."

"Confirmed, launch control. Computer, launch position, clearance Ocon-Epsilon-five-five-three."

"Final positioning clearance received. Initiating..."

Feeling the fighter warm up beneath him, Mike knew this was right. It *was* time.

"Blue Leader to Blue Wing...stay on me, boys. Time to show those Jem'Hadar what we're made of!"