

SUMMARY OF AEGIS HISTORY, VOLUME I

StarBase Aegis is a defensive outpost and starship support facility. At 133 decks, she is a small-scale version of the Spacedock "mushroom" design.

Aegis was placed in orbit above the Canar II colony in 2371 as a StarFleet sentry over the newly-formed DeMilitarized Zone (DMZ) between the United Federation of Planets and the Cardassian Union. The Klingon captain, HoD TSara, was placed in command to ensure neutrality over the region. During her two years in command, Aegis was forced to contend with being the target of Maquis raids and Cardassian intrigue, eventually becoming a battleground during the short Klingon-Cardassian war. The station survived a nova, invasion by a voracious insect swarm, and escalating tension from the Dominion. After enduring several Jem'Hadar attacks, StarFleet withdrew from the Canar system and placed Aegis as a hidden base in the Decelea asteroid field, elsewhere along the border. From this secret location, the station was the launching point for Operation vISo'be, the opening volley of the Dominion War in late 2373.

AEGIS HISTORY, VOLUME II 2373-2375

Transitions

At the cost of several ships, including those carrying HoD TSara and Aegis tactical officer K'Cavok, the Federation task force returns to Aegis after its pre-emptive strike on the Dominion shipyards of Toras II. The Dominion War begins.

[Commander Sorehl, executive officer]

"Coming into range now," Lieutenant (j.g.) T'Vlen reported. The Command Center of StarBase Aegis was nearly empty, with only he and Commander Sorehl present. Most of the crew had gone in support of the strike - the first official battle in what was now full-scale war.

The lights were dim as T'Vlen studied his science console, glancing to the other Vulcan. "Eight vessels total. All Federation registry. Scans show major damage to the **Gorkon**, **Oxford**, and **Republic**. Lesser damage to the **Adelphi**, **Hertzprung**, and **Sojourner**. **Perseus** and **Phoenix** appear to be in escort."

Sorehl wondered why there were no Klingon ships returning among them. "Understood," the executive officer responded. It was efficient working with a fellow Vulcan. No time was wasted in needless elucidation. "Maintain radio silence until they enter the system." Aegis would not betray its well-hidden position within the radiation rich environment of the Decelea asteroids.

"Commander," T'Vlen indicated. "We are being hailed. StarBase 211."

Sorehl permitted an eyebrow to drift up. "Onscreen," he ordered, stepping down to the Admin dais. The Command symbol appeared on the main viewer, replaced by the image of a human in the familiar garb of the Admiralty. "Admiral Ross," he addressed the flag officer evenly.

"Commander Sorehl, I've just received a tactical brief from Admiral Saylek about Operation vISo'be. The Dominion shipyard on Toras II has been completely destroyed. Word from Captain Sisko says the Bajoran wormhole has been successfully mined; there'll be no further Jem'Hadar reinforcements."

"The news is good."

"I wish it were our only news. Our losses," the admiral paused, shifting uneasily, "have not been minor. We've been forced to abandon Deep Space Nine. **Defiant** made it out and will meet up with Admiral Saylek's fleet. The more seriously damaged ships should be enroute to your station now."

"Confirmed," Sorehl acknowledged. "We have them on our sensors."

Ross paused again. "I regret to report we lost several Klingon ships over Toras II. Your... captain was on one of them." The admiral stared, almost expectantly. "I'm sorry for the loss."

The executive officer betrayed no trace of reaction.

Ross continued, "Repairing the fleet is your top priority. We expect the Dominion to hit back and hit hard. Your base is our best hope of getting those ships back in action." He waited again. "You're in command now, Captain Sorehl."

"Yes, sir," Sorehl blinked. "We shall see to it." He stood resolutely until the channel closed. He avoided the glance from T'Vlen and without a word, walked solemnly up the steps and into his darkened office.

In the aftermath of battle, the returning crew must adjust to the loss of their captain and the change in leadership. Others are faced with new responsibilities.

[Commander Ereiid Sej, executive officer]

The door to the office slid open as Lieutenant (j.g.) Corris Sprint walked in carrying a box. "Anywhere in particular you wanted this, Commander Sej?"

Ereiid turned from fiddling with the painting on his wall. "By the bookcase is fine." The Trill officer motioned brusquely. "Anywhere there. Thanks for the help, by the way." Corris waved off the acknowledgement as Sej lumbered past a potted plant to join him at bookcase.

As Ereiid reached down for a handful of books, standing to place them upon the shelf, Sprint knelt down by the box, surveying the titles. "*The Strength of Determination? The Neverending Sacrifice?*" Sprint reached in, picking up a random title. "*Of Joy and Failure?*"

Seated on the couch by the tall windows, Captain Sorehl remarked, "You were unaware of the Commander's love of Cardassian literature, Mr. Sprint?"

"Cardassian literature? I didn't even know he spoke it, sir." Sprint replaced the book as Sej's shelf filled with the volumes.

"It's not always evident when the universal translator does it for us." Sej started placing books on the second shelf. "Still, I figure it's a skill that'll come through in a pinch some day."

"Speaking of that particular colloquialism, did you not indicate that you would be spending most of today rechecking system integrity for the remote communications array?" Sorehl stared meditatively out the window.

"I was going to get started on it later this morning." Sej emptied the last book of one box onto the bookcase and reached over to pull from another box. "But I felt like this was something I needed to do before I could get to anything else."

"A tangible symbol of your new role?" the Vulcan posed.

A weak grin played across Ereiid's face. "I just meant that if I intend to accept this position, I'd best get myself accustomed to the fact." Sej placed a small, sleek vase upon the third shelf.

Sorehl turned from his interlude at the window to glance at his newly-selected first officer. "I would not have expected any added discomfort in assuming this post. Your earlier... unease toward certain command aspects seemed mastered during your time in Operations. I had thought such concerns were rectified."

Sprint stood gradually, wondering if he should be staying for this part of the conversation.

Sej held the book in his hand, pausing, looking at it, before he turned to meet the gaze of his superior officer. "Mostly. I was thinking that it was more because she was gone."

There was a brief silence. Sorehl turned back toward the window.

"Losing the HoD hasn't been easy for any of us," Sprint offered. He glanced over at the Vulcan who'd served faithfully as her first officer. If he'd been affected by the loss, he showed no outward sign of it. Considering his regard for the HoD, it was hard to believe his mourning could be so well guarded.

Sprint shook off the introspection. He smiled. "Still, if having such a nice office bothers you, I'd be happy to take it." He chuckled slightly.

Sej acknowledged the attempt to brighten the tone of the conversation with a strained smile.

Sorehl glanced down at the floor, his equivalent of a shrug. "It seemed logical," he began, "for me to remain in my present office, and for you to take TSara's. I did not consider emotional attachment as a factor in the decision."

"It's not that." Sej paused in thought, then shook his head. "Maybe it is. Look around us, I mean, she's everywhere in this room." Ereiid motioned to the clutter. His eyes lingered over the Kintiri bromeliads and the weapons mounted upon TSara's wall. Sej corrected himself. In the silence he remembered that it was now his wall. With a touch of finality, he lifted a blade from the wall and placed it into the empty box.

Falling Back

*The warfront advances closer toward Aegis' hidden location. Sent to investigate the reopening of a dangerously unstable wormhole along the border, the Oberth-class support ship **Perseus** disappears after a pitched battle with Jem'Hadar warships.*

[Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

The Bajoran female onscreen continued her report. "We've found debris from at least three Jem'Hadar ships. No trace of the **Perseus**, Captain."

Sorehl nodded. He faced the main viewer from his stance in the Aegis Command Center. "Understood," he spoke evenly, responding to the first officer of the Galaxy-class starship **Victory**. "I must caution you against remaining in your present location, Lieutenant Commander. You're well within enemy space."

Betile looked offscreen, then back at the Vulcan. "I've spent most of my life behind enemy lines. We'll leave when it's prudent. **Victory** out."

The Vulcan turned and looked up to Sprint, who manned the Admin console. It had been days since the disappearance of the starship and all those aboard. "Status, Mr. Sprint?"

Corris perused the console. "All wounded have been transferred to the **Oxford** and the ship is underway. The ships that arrived with **Victory** have been added to the repair queue. And Admiral Saylek..." The Bijanni male was cut off by the sound of the aft turbolift opening. The chief of Dominion Threat Assessment, a Vulcan, stepped into the Command Center. "...is on his way up," Sprint finished.

"Admiral," Sorehl greeted, climbing the steps.

"Captain," came the returned greeting. The etched features and slightly-greying hair betrayed the flag officer's age, adding an air of wisdom to the elder Vulcan. "The front has moved beyond the Decelea system. Make preparations to evacuate the station."

Sorehl reached the top of the stairs, pausing a moment to consider the order. "I remind the admiral that our location has been concealed from the enemy."

"It is imprudent to underestimate Dominion intelligence," the admiral countered. "It has cost us already. Much of your senior staff has been lost with your support ship; your position remains untenable. We will not waste lives and materiel defending an asteroid field with few assets. Once these ships are repaired, your mission here is concluded. It is time to fall back."

The captain took another tack. "We believe it is possible the **Perseus** survived its encounter with the Jem'Hadar. Their last known position was in a system where the Dominion made a catastrophic attempt to secure a second wormhole to the Gamma Quadrant. Even now, the starship **Victory** is there and continues..."

"You shall recall the **Victory** and begin transfer of your non-essential personnel. A ship of her size should be more than adequate. With regret, we must consider the **Perseus** a casualty of war. Advise your civilian contingent to be ready within 24 hours. See to it, captain." The elder Vulcan stood patiently.

The captain glanced across toward the Admin console. "You heard the admiral," he ordered Sprint. "Prepare to evacuate the station."

Per orders from Admiral Saylek, the evacuation of Aegis commences.

[Lieutenant Commander D'Mysus Ramson, security chief
Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

Ramson looked into the eyes of his goddaughter, Jeralla. He saw they were moist. It seemed like only yesterday she'd come aboard as a young Cardassian girl of sixteen. Now she was leaving with other civilians. It had been almost a week since the disappearance of the **Perseus**; a day since the admiral's order to evacuate non-essential personnel. They both stood in the gangway that led onto the starship **Victory**.

"The **Oxford** has already put in at StarBase 36," he smiled reassuringly. "You be able to join up with Saraina and the twins there."

The mute girl tapped her wrist keypad. "I don't feel safe leaving you here," it spoke for her.

His Minarian abilities could sense her despair. She had been forced to leave her own father, Barak, in the wake of the Klingon invasion. She had never seen him again. "The Dominion doesn't even know our position," Ramson reassured her. "As soon as these last six ships finish repairs, the rest of us will be gone, too."

Jeralla smiled thinly, accepting the comfort he offered. He could tell she didn't believe him.

Sorehl stood among several others at the egress point where Aegis connected to Deck 25 of the Galaxy-class vessel. Departing civilians filed past him, entering the ship. The captain waited for the last stragglers to pass, then turned to face his wife T'Salik. She held their young daughter T'Kel in one arm. Both would be leaving aboard the starship. A moment of silence passed between them. T'Salik stepped closer. Sorehl brought his hand up, touching her cheek with two fingers. He pressed other fingers against her temple and chin. T'Salik mirrored the gesture with her other arm. Sorehl stared back, speaking below the threshold of humanoid hearing. "Remember," he whispered.

"Remember," she repeated.

Watching from the entrance to his starship, Captain Thomas Halloway of the starship **Victory** turned away from the Vulcans. Still wearing a patch over one eye, it was easy to break contact discreetly. Only after he saw the woman and child pass did he look up. The commanding officer of the starbase returned his glance. "We'll take good care of them," Halloway assured. "I still owe the Jem'Hadar for this," he added, swinging the arm he held in a sling. "I intend to keep this ship in one piece until the next round. That is, if your Ferengi diplomat doesn't start selling parts off." He raised his good arm and flashed the trademark grin. "Live long, captain."

"...and prosper. I shall attempt to do both," Sorehl responded. Without further statement, he turned towards his duties on the starbase.

Ramson watched Jeralla pass Sorehl. She smiled as she stepped into the **Victory**, accepting a departing nod from the Vulcan. *The captain, D'Mysus mused, of a station about to be abandoned before an advancing Dominion front.* First Canar, then **Perseus**, now the starbase itself. Only weeks after the death of TSara, it now seemed certain Aegis was about to end its career not with a bang, but with a whimper. The security chief roused from his thoughts, seeing Sorehl approach.

"Mr. Ramson, walk with me," the Vulcan directed. D'Mysus fell into step beside the captain. "I find it my duty," Sorehl began, "to inform you of your reassignment." The nearest turbolift doors opened.

"Sir?" the lieutenant commander managed, stopping in his tracks. His surprise was evident.

Sorehl motioned him into the lift. "Command Center," he directed. The car stirred into motion. "We have little time and few personnel to repair the remaining starships and secure Aegis for shutdown. I find it necessary to press you into service as acting executive officer."

Ramson blinked. "Wherever you need me," he answered as the lift opened.

From the Admin console, Sprint saw the two of them enter. "Captain," he reported, "Varon's shuttle has left for the **Kij'Pah**, and repairs are complete on the **Gorkon**. Engineering is moving on to the **Tecumseh**, and **Victory** has just signalled for clearance."

"Clear them at once," Sorehl replied, "and revise the duty roster to reflect our new acting exec." The Vulcan gestured toward the former security chief, then offered his hand. "Welcome to the command staff, Mr. Ramson."

Aegis spends eight weeks tending repairs of the remaining six ships, as the Dominion gains ground on all fronts. With repairs nearly complete, the remnants of the crew prepare to abandon the station completely.

[Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

Lieutenant (j.g.) Corris Sprint assisted shipboard repairs, tending the engineering console and watching the work of another officer inside the Jeffries tube. The Epoch-class **Exodus** was the last ship in the repair queue. It might be even be the last ship Aegis ever hosted. Considering it was also their escape, he mused, it was appropriately named.

He reflected on the turn of events in the last eight weeks. The war with the Dominion was going badly for the Federation. The enemy was gaining ground on all fronts. In the two weeks after capturing DS9,

they had consolidated the Cardassian hold on territory in the DMZ that had previously been under Federation jurisdiction.

And they had not stopped there.

Jem'Hadar ships had swarmed into Minos Korva, ceding the prize Captain Jelicho had denied Cardassia five years earlier. Other colonies fell - Setlik III, Tagra IV, Torman V, Tohvon III - and finally, StarBase 211 itself. Strategic Command had fallen back as far as SB 375.

Aegis itself was almost a ghost town. Less than thirty officers remained to run the station and finish starship repairs. Sprint glanced over to see Ensign Sam Hartle approaching. "We're ready to test the EPS relays to the propulsion system," the arriving engineer announced.

A steady voice replied from inside the Jeffries tube, "Proceed."

Sprint nodded, tapping the appropriate buttons. "Initiating EPS tap to the nacelles... now." A soft hum rose slowly to audible levels. "Reading nominal output," he reported. "Hang on..." Sparks crackled inside the Jeffries tube, shooting little arcs of smoke into the room. Brilliant light flashed within. Sprint disengaged the power and turned, bolting to the open shaft. Hartle was right behind him. "Captain!" they shouted together.

Sorehl slid out, dropping to his feet. He brushed small bits of smoldering debris from his uniform. "I am uninjured," he assured them. "It has been too long since my engineering days aboard the **Excalibur**. I seem to have misaligned a duotronic component. It made quite a brilliant display before I was able to correct it. Status, Mr. Hartle?"

"Propulsion is functional, captain," the engineer answered, checking the status board. "We can leave at any time."

"Excellent," the Vulcan responded, "advise Captain Te'lent'h his ship is in order." He tapped his insignia, "Sorehl to Ramson."

"Ramson here," came the disembodied reply.

"What is the status of your operations?"

"The **Hertzprung** has been scuttled, as ordered. The Dominion won't get any use out of her," the acting exec indicated. "Dr. Grey offloaded all medical stores and I've preprogrammed all the necessary station lockdowns. You just need to turn the key."

"I shall join you momentarily. Announce all personnel have ninety minutes to leave Aegis and board the **Exodus**. Sorehl out." The captain turned to Sprint and Hartle. "Gentlemen, your work has been outstanding. With regret, once we are underway, I shall cease to be your commanding officer. Before that occurs, I address a needed duty." He opened one hand, revealing a single solid pip. He stepped forward, removing an open pip from the red collar of Sprint's tunic, then replaced it with the solid one. He then turned and affixed the open pip to Hartle's yellow tunic. "With this action, I hereby promote Corris Sprint to the rank of full Lieutenant and Samuel Hartle to Lieutenant, junior grade. Congratulations. It has been an honor to serve with you." He nodded sharply and walked away without another word.

Sprint blinked. It was a bittersweet moment to be promoted by a man losing his command. He held out hope they would not be gone from Aegis long. StarFleet was assembling yet another task force to drive the Dominion from Federation space. Surely the Seventh Fleet would do its damage...

The crew of StarBase Aegis is scattered, serving the war effort from many locations.

[Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

Captain Sorehl swivelled in the command chair of the starship **Excalibur**. It had been seven weeks since he had been forced to abandon StarBase Aegis behind the advancing enemy front. Since that time, StarFleet had fallen back further and further.

Now he sat in command of the very starship where his career had begun, giving orders to those he once served. Vixis, the real captain of this ship, had specifically requested him to fill her vacated seat while she completed a mission for Intelligence. Sorehl was not certain he agreed with the wisdom.

He had already lost a CO, a starship and its crew, and a command. His wife and daughter, though safe, were far from him. His few compatriots had been lost or scattered. TSara and K'Cavok had both been lost at Toras II. Sej and the **Perseus** had never returned from battle. As a captain, his record was not going too well. He meditated, adding this brief realization to the bridled mourning he was deferring until a more logical moment. *This was not a time to lose concentration, he resolved, not when the balance might soon shift.*

Fought to a stalemate, the Federation had secured some significant gains. The precious ketresel white, needed to control the Jem'Hadar, was growing scarce. The entrance to the Bajoran wormhole remained mined, denying the Dominion reinforcements. But would it hold? He sat back in silence, his expression once again masking the deep emotions beneath.

*Having been presumed lost for nearly three months, the starship **Perseus** emerges intact from the remnants of an unstable wormhole. Although no time has passed for them, they find much has changed in the region of space around them.*

[Commander Eriid Sej, executive officer]

Stars streaked slowly across the main viewer as **Perseus** limped its way into Federation space. "No response?" Sej's brow furrowed as he leaned on the armrest of the center chair.

At tactical, Major Robert Muldoon shook his head. "Coded channels six and seven are clear as daylight. I don't wanna try open channels, if anyone happens to be listening and follows us back. The comm beacons should be receiving us at this range, unless..."

Sej cut off the Major. "What about the Federation Timebase Beacon? Anything yet?"

Lieutenant (j.g.) Kyrios nodded. "Just now accessing the timebase... one second..." The fur on her neck raised. "According to the beacon, we lost..." She quietly gasped. "We've lost twelve weeks."

"Twelve weeks? We were trapped in the wormhole for that long?" Sej marvelled.

T'Vlen looked away from the science console and nodded. "The instability in the wormhole may have resulted in temporal translations. Time was going much slower for us in there."

Eriid grimaced, shutting his eyes and rubbing his forehead. "I'll trust the temporal physics of it." He contemplated for a second. "Twelve weeks is too long a time for us to proceed comfortably. For all we know, the station's been taken, or worse." His eyes focus hazily on the warp streaks rushing past on the viewscreen. "We'll proceed on the presumption that Decelea is no longer secure space. Major, if there's still no response from the station when we arrive, I want you to lead an Away Team and ascertain the security of Aegis. Nothing fancy, just report back with what you find."

Muldoon stepped forward to more directly address Sej. "Where you planning on hiding out?"

"If Decelea is no longer our little secret, **Perseus** is going to have to provide perimeter security. We'll keep transporter lock on you and grab you at the first sign of trouble. Anything suspicious, and you signal back. Got it?"

Muldoon nods. "Got it. Course, you're presuming there's a station left. This could be a trap."

Sej clenched his teeth, shaking his head. "It won't be the first time we've walked into one."

*Unbeknownst to the wounded **Perseus**, the starship **Excalibur** and Captain Sorehl draw near after completing a mission in the Canar system.*

[Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

Ionized gas swirled behind the starship **Excalibur** as it slipped its way through the edges of the McAllister Nebula. Although the Dominion had lost their subspace array for tracking the Federation fleet, Captain Sorehl deemed it prudent to assume a cautious route. Having heard word that the Second and Fifth Fleets had launched from SB375 to retake the Bajoran wormhole, Sorehl had opted to exploit the shift in enemy activity. With Jem'Hadar patrols displaced, now was the time to assess where the Dominion had entrenched itself.

Excalibur had made its vanguard across a swath of colonies lost earlier to the Dominion advance. From this, they had seen colonists from Canar II who were willing to reject their allegiance to the Federation. The Vorta administrator, Semil, had been cunning in securing their good will - lavishing its archeologists with technical support and keeping a light military presence. Somehow, according to scans, the Dominion had even corrected the orbit of Canar I, avoiding the cataclysm of a collision with the colony in the coming decades. Sorehl wondered, *was nothing beyond them?*

"We should clear the nebula any moment," Lieutenant Matt Boison reported from Ops, rousing the Vulcan from introspection.

"Steady as she goes," Sorehl responded. From the center chair, he pressed his fingers together in the double triangle of the ta'al position. Wrestling his aversion to military operations, he had chosen directness. Had she been there, TSara might have expressed perverse Klingon pride in him.

"What do we hope to attain, captain?" Ambassador Joseph Briel asked, as if reaching through the barriers which shielded the Vulcan's self-doubt.

"We must determine where the Dominion has laid roots," was the stoic response, "if we intend to deny them those footholds."

"And in places like Canar, how can we hope to erode their grip?" the El-Aurian ventured, as if to probe this new captain.

Sorehl swiveled his chair to face the ambassador. "We must play our strengths against their weaknesses - our diversity in infinite combination against their oppressive rule."

Briel kept his assessment hidden, giving only a cryptic nod.

"Clearing the nebula," Boisson reported. He adjusted his console. "Sir, I'm getting a distress call from the **Galahad**. They're under attack."

"Location?" the captain asked tersely.

Boisson updated his screen. "Near the Decelea asteroid field. They have fighter escort, but they're outmatched. Three Jem'Hadar ships."

Decelea, Sorehl repeated mentally. Where Aegis' empty shell lay concealed, a sleeping secret waiting to be roused. If **Galahad** was engaging the enemy there...

"Shall I lay in an intercept, captain?" Lieutenant (j.g.) Scott Perrell suggested.

"See to it," he confirmed, rising to his feet. It was time to meet the enemy on his own terms.

*After a pitched battle, the starships **Perseus** and **Excalibur** restore Aegis to Federation control.*

[Lieutenant Commander D'Mysus Ramson, tactical officer]

Ramson stepped quickly into the office, "Sir, we just returned from our scouting mission... where is the fleet?"

The admiral stood and walked to the planning chart. "They have embarked for DS9."

Ramson's eyes opened wide. "Green Squad will be ready to launch again in two minutes. We'll catch up with them at the battle."

"No, Commander," stopping D'Mysus. "Your fighters would arrive with no fuel for the fight. Have a seat." Ramson sat, looking as the admiral brought up another chart. "You and your squad have done an excellent job gathering intelligence for us over the last months," he praised. Turning toward the Minaran, he added, "But we're reassigning you."

"What?" D'Mysus started to rise from his seat.

"Sit down, Commander. You're needed elsewhere. Full weapon systems are being restored to your craft. While you've been working in Cardassian space your missing starship **Perseus** showed up. It and a team lead by Captain Sorehl on the **Excalibur** have secured Aegis."

A bright smile spread across Ramson's face. The Admiral nodded. "Green Squad is to return to the station, where you'll be assigned as head of tactical operations. Be ready to leave within the hour. You're going home, Commander."

The Ovetra

The crew celebrates their return with a Thanksgiving feast at Drankum's Bar. As one of its first duties after returning to operational status, the station prepares to host a diplomatic delegation..

[Ensign L'Hona Amnor, security officer]

Amnor stood in her new quarters, looking around. Lieutenant Sprint wasn't exaggerating when he said these quarters would seem too large for her. Were she still shipbound, she'd be sharing them with another ensign. It was made worse by the fact that she had next to nothing in personal belongings. She had already sent for some of her things from home, but she'd lost too many possessions aboard the **Explorer** when it had been destroyed along with most of the Seventh Fleet.

L'Hona stopped pacing, and stood in front of the mirror. She smiled at the image in front of her. The traces of her Klingon and Bajoran heritages stared back at her. Unbidden, her hands moved to smooth out the creases in her new uniform, and to make sure her phaser was secured. "Computer, begin recording personal log," she said, before lapsing into her native Bajoran tongue. "Personal log, Ensign L'Hona Amnor. The captain also informed me that my request for posting to Aegis security had been approved. I start my first duty shift in a few hours. My new superior, Major Muldoon, says there'll be a

diplomatic delegation aboard. The database doesn't say much about the Ovetra, just that a few of our skirmishes with the Dominion have strayed into their system. A lot of unknowns; we'll stay on our toes."

[Lieutenant (j.g.) Gideon Hart, station counselor]

Gideon was asleep in her office the morning after the Thanksgiving party in Drankum's. She'd left early, for her own reasons, but going to her quarters might have seemed like sulking to the rest of the crew. She hadn't been sulking, she had been thinking. Gideon lifted her head off of her desk and tried to remember what she had been thinking about.

A seashell fell off her cheek, bouncing on the shiny black surface. The shell left a ridged impression on her skin. She rubbed the lines idly and closed her eyes again. There had been drinking at the party, all in harmless fun, of course, and laughter, and friends. Even the captain had been convinced to dance with the good doctor. Gideon had not seen group euphoria in years. So few happy moments in such dire times. She hadn't realized what she'd been missing.

The redness on her cheek was already fading. She remembered the last party she had attended, thrown by her friend for graduation from Starfleet Academy. Then, too, she had not been to a party in years. Her days in San Francisco had been spent trying to maintain control.

One party, among friends she'd studied with, learned with, grown with, had put her in sickbay for three days. Her mentor had been despairing. She'd leaned over the edge of the biobed that hummed with its little glowing lights, and whispered, "Nothing casual exists in your life, Gideon."

Last night, perhaps she had been too cautious. Still, her mind was foggy, she'd slept too long and too lightly. She clicked on her terminal. Various messages assailed her. The captain had advised her of the arrival of a cultural exchange team from the Ovetra system. She'd have to study up on them. *Best to get started now*, she counseled herself.

She stood up, brushed herself off, and walked toward the Medical suites to begin a new day. She wondered what short term effects the feast at Drankum's had on the rest of the crew... and whether they would be more amusing... or painful.

CAPTAIN'S LOG

With the station barely back in our hands, a delegation from Ovetra II has arrived at Aegis. Their stated purpose: to express concern over war-time incursions into their space. They intend to assess both Federation and Dominion representatives in the form of a complex ritual. I am assembling a cultural contact team for this purpose. The Ovetra bring with them the Vorta, Semil, who reveals to us that the Dominion is aware of our position in the Decelea asteroid field. As such, the station will be able to operate without the need for continued concealment.

Sorehl thumbed the control on his desk, ending the log. Not only would the team he selected be assessed by the Ovetra, they would be compared with their Dominion counterparts. He had no idea what rituals the process might involve. Logic dictated he choose a broad cross-section. Mr. Blair was already beginning a comprehensive background check on Ovetra II, but little was known about the planet.

He passed through the Command Center. It was unfortunate his family's return to the station had been delayed by matters on Vulcan. His wife's training in diplomacy was usually helpful.

Sorehl stepped into the lift. In the privacy it offered, he steeled himself for the encounter with Semil.

The Ovetra involve both Federation and Dominion representatives in a lengthy ritual, culminating with each receiving a stylized and unique tattoo. After their departure, the captain considers the impacts of the cultural exchange.

[Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

"Computer, enlarge and enhance image, lower right quadrant."

In the privacy of his cabin, Captain Sorehl studied the symbol now indelibly marked on his lower back. He had used the optical processor on his desktop to scan in the image, rather than strain his neck.

A blue, open circle dominated the pattern, not much larger than his thumb. Offset along the diagonal was a wide parabolic arc, not unlike the rings of Aglaia or Saturn. At lower right lay an arrowhead resembling the StarFleet insignia, pointing outward.

He had no idea what it was meant to represent. The Ovetra had given no interpretation of its meaning. *Odd that the tattoo should be placed out of sight*, he reflected. The power of most symbols was their repeated visibility. Perhaps memory of the ritual itself was the purpose.

As Vulcan and a StarFleet officer, he was no stranger to symbolism or ritual. He smoothed the modest undergarments he always wore, a constant reminder of his heritage and adherence to the discipline of logic. They served the added function of keeping him warm in an environment always colder than that of his homeworld. He slipped on the crimson tunic of his uniform, pulled it tight, and lined up the rank pin on the collar. He stroked his clean-shaven chin. With the return of his wife and daughter in a few weeks, he would let his beard grow back, a custom in his clan for distinguishing child-rearing males. Such were the many symbols that underscored his personal commitments.

Lowering his hand toward the screen, he brushed against a copper emblem on the desk. It was a stylized amalgam of Vulcan linguistic symbols, a replica of the insignia that had joined K'Cavok to his family. *Symbols often join disparate people*, he considered. Blair had once mentioned that some humans wore a metal band on one finger to indicate a link to their spouses.

He wondered if the Ovetra had intended for Dominion and Federation teams to be somehow linked through their shared experience. He paused momentarily, wondering if the Vorta, Semil, could be bound to anything beyond the Founders.

Sorehl finished putting on his uniform, zipping the front of his "captain's vest." He was due to address a demand from Federation citizens wanting to return to the Dominion-occupied colony on Canar. And there was the new Klingon consulate to visit. It would be the start of a long day. Such was his bond to Aegis itself.

[Major Robert Muldoon, security chief]

Muldoon paced around his office. The Ovetra delegation had left Aegis: Good. Some of the Dominion representatives were still on board: Bad. Semil was one of them: Worse. The major felt queasy. This was his department. Security. Having an enemy, especially one who had bested them before, on the station didn't help. Muldoon sloshed some scotch into a glass.

There was a war going on, cease fire or not. Lots of latitude. He could tap their comm traffic, bug their rooms, train sensors on their quarters... everything. His people could tail them wherever they went. The whole shabang. He could find out what they ate. What time they went to bed and what they kept on their nightstand. He could even... see to it that Semil suffered a little "accident."

"Yeah," he found himself smiling. A convenient accident wouldn't be too difficult to stage. Semil would go on one of his visits to the Promenade. There were four dedicated lifts inside the Promenade; they only went between those three decks. They were glass-lined, too... art deco or something. Clear views, easy to put in your cross hairs. Or maybe a shaped charge under the lift. Or over it. Or both. Blow him to Kingdom come. Something small. Limit damage to the promenade. Or just shoot him. One marksman. Catch him on one of the catwalks connecting the upper tiers. Shooter on the catwalk one floor up and further down the Promenade. Maybe another man up close. In a storefront. He could clip him. There were easier ways... poison. There were bolder ways... Captain Sorehl could lure him into a meeting. Shoot him in the face. Make a statement.

It was a war right? All was fair. If not, they could locate a patsy... someone liking the idea of retribution. Stage a scene at Drankum's with some spiel about how the war wasn't being handled right. Set him up in the Aegis Marriott. After it went down, they could plant the linking evidence there. Crazy diaries, defaced photos of Jaresh-Inu. Didn't matter. They could give him the weapon. Let him toy around with it. Get his prints on it.

Muldoon took a swig of his scotch and shook his head out of the fantasy. Too much thinking. What he needed to do was catch Semil doing something undiplomatic. Something they could nail him for. Maybe something would happen while he resisted arrest... He set down his glass and imagined two disruptor blasts hammering the Vorta's chest.

[Lieutenant (j.g.) Gideon Hart, station counselor]

Gideon and her dog jogged through the corridor. Gideon sweated; Saragossa panted. They were up a deck from their usual morning run, a change of scenery had been called for. At least the numbers on the doors had changed. This deck was narrower; they'd have to run an extra lap. Saragossa, his usual few yards ahead of her, suddenly stopped trotting and sat down. Gideon caught up quickly to the greyhound and leaned on her knees, gasping for air.

"Wha?" she managed. Energy rushed to her head and made her hair itch. She swooned. Saragossa barked softly at the closed door, as Gideon studied the markings. "Lieutenant Corris Sprint," the label read. So? She glanced down at the dog as she glanced up at her. A blush crept down her neck, and it was not from the adrenaline.

He'd confessed to spying on her at the ceremony of the Ovetra, and then stopped talking. What was up with that? Sprint was a friend, a genuinely nice guy, one of those she could rely on to keep his cool. Her therapist back at the Academy would credit her tastes, getting over the tough Muldoon image she had been drawn to during her first days at the station...

Saragossa stood up, walked in a circle around Gideon, and whined. Gideon strolled down the corridor, leaving Corris Sprint's homestead behind, but she suddenly gulped, realizing the feeling that came over her standing outside the room that something had gone terribly wrong.

Apologies

Two members of the Dominion delegation aboard Aegis are killed during a staged confrontation with Muldoon and visiting strategic officer, Major John Proctor. In the ensuing aftermath, diplomacy places the station in an unenviable position.

[Major Robert Muldoon, security chief]

"Don't worry, Vogel," Muldoon sat back and took a sip of scotch. "It'll all blow over. The Dominion isn't going to care about two dead Jem'Hadar. We both know they're just disposable warriors." He put his feet up on his desk. "It's just a shame that Vorta wasn't..."

A comm signal from the Command Center cut off his comment. It was Sprint, trying to sound officious. "Major Muldoon, you are hereby relieved of duty until further notice. Please notify your deputy of this change in status, so they can take lead of the security department."

Muldoon stopped breathing. His face contorted as it got redder. His breathing resumed with great heaves. Vogel and Shoemaker both saw that crazy glint come to his eye.

After a long pause, Sprint's voice resumed. "Are you there, Major?"

"Ill..." Muldoon stammered. He cleared his throat. The words weren't coming out. "I'll be right up..." He stood up, didn't look at either of the other two officers at the table, spun around and stormed out. He strode across the Promenade, shoving one or two people aside as he went. The turbolift was waiting. "Command Center!" he shouted, priming his vocal cords. The doors shut. The lift moved. He could feel the heat pulsing through his neck veins. The lift doors opened and he squeezed past, making a beeline across the CC to Sprint.

Sprint heard the stomp of footprints and turned. A commbadge bounced off his chest and clattered onto the Admin console. "Guess I won't be needing this for while," Muldoon growled. Sprint blinked, staring back without reaction. "Just who do you expect to run security without me?" he shouted his question. "One of those green recruits? There's a war going on. You need me!" Muldoon jabbed at the younger man with his index finger.

The chief of operations started to open his mouth, but Muldoon cut him off. He lowered his voice, his words sharp. "You just have to play command. You little lap dog," the major taunted, "you pathetic, little, stupid..."

"Mr. Muldoon," came the firm voice behind him. The security chief turned. Captain Sorehl stood outside his office door. "You will not address any of my officers in that manner." He wasn't shouting, but his tone silenced the Marine from across the deck.

Muldoon felt himself exhale raggedly. He turned, taking careful strides toward the captain. He was whisper quiet, looking calmer. "You can't let him do this," he spat out.

"He is following my order," Sorehl responded. "I am in command of this station, Major. You'd do well to remember that the next time your homicidal instincts emerge. Now get off this deck before I have security escort you out."

Muldoon began to turn red again. "You messed with the wrong Marine!" He lunged at the captain but was quickly caught by two of his own security officers. Two cigars fell from his pocket. Muldoon shook off the two officers. Sorehl remained where he stood. Averting the captain's eyes, he bent down, grabbed his cigars, and walked toward the lift, defeated.

After a formal protest from the Dominion stalls peace talks, Captain Sorehl is asked to provide a diplomatic resolution.

[Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

Sorehl shifted in the center chair of the starship **Perseus**, rubbing his back. He controlled the annoyance that often rose when discipline failed to keep mild discomfort from intruding into his thoughts. He could not let trivialities distract him from the task at hand.

The unauthorized activities of Muldoon and Proctor were the undercurrent of his thoughts. Bad enough that their maverick operation had killed members of the Cardassian diplomatic team. Worse still, the two had been obeying orders of parties not on the station. Despite that, he was about to be held accountable for their actions.

Tensions remained high between the Federation and Dominion governments, with both sides open to exercising their military options. Despite recent gains, however, StarFleet could not sustain unrelenting hostilities. A cease fire, even temporary, could do much to shore up defenses along the border. Official talks had resumed, only to be stalled by the attack of the diplomats visiting Aegis. As such, Sorehl had been ordered to present a formal apology before the Cardassians. He had been instructed to "express regret for the incident at Aegis and offer assurance that such occurrences would not mar future exchanges."

As commanding officer of the "offending" facility, he was the logical choice to present a formal apology to the Cardassians. Such an order would not offend his Vulcan heritage, while others might consider it demeaning. The crystal clarity of logic permitted him the freedom to fulfill this needed role.

He shifted again in the chair, bringing his hand to his temple, rubbing at a mild headache. It was unfortunate he could not share his clarity of vision with the crew. No doubt their emotional sensitivities might deem this an unworthy mission, as insulting as it was distasteful. He would not fault them for it. Even now, he could hear the coming taunts from his Vorta counterpart. He closed his eyes, bundling the fading laughter into the tightly-wrapped package of his inner self, the dark box of Vulcan emotion.

After a rendezvous with Cardassian ships near the border, Captain Sorehl is taken aboard to convey his apologies at the Dominion command post.

[Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

Having left the **Perseus** behind with two Galor-class warships to guard it, the Cardassian vessel sped closer to the Dominion command post. As a guest aboard that vessel, Sorehl found himself subject to the cultural tradition that he be "entertained" by its commanding officer. Entertainment had proven to be an invitation to the Gul's personal dining room.

Gul Darst snapped his head back, slurping down the innards of his boiled taspar egg. He hissed with approval, reaching out for his goblet of Gamzain wine. "You've barely touched your food, Captain."

Sorehl glanced down at the meaty cuisine heaped on his plate. "While it has no doubt been finely prepared," he observed, "strict custom prevents me from partaking."

Darst gave a low chortle, looking to the elder Cardassian seated near him. "He's just upset that we left his food taster behind."

"Lieutenant Chekov was my duly assigned escort," Sorehl corrected. "In that regard, I wish to assert that it was inappropriate for you to forcibly dictate the composition of my diplomatic party."

"With the way your people treated our last diplomats, you're lucky we didn't beam him back into space," the Gul laughed, pleased with himself. "Although after my other ships are done with yours, he may wish we had!"

"Your attempt at levity is both superfluous and ill-advised," Sorehl stated flatly. The remark was his best attempt to cover his sudden concern for the **Perseus**.

"Such arrogance, Captain Sorehl," spoke the older Cardassian. "I'm beginning to think it's a requirement of every StarFleet captain. Hardly befitting your background as a scientist."

Sorehl took interest in the other guest, who appeared to be of similar rank to Darst. "You have me at a disadvantage, sir," he confessed.

"I am a scientist, much like yourself, compelled to work in a more disciplined environment," he replied. "I suspect we shall come to know each other well in the coming days."

Darst drank his wine. "I don't think this one will be interesting at all."

Sorehl merely raised an eyebrow.

"But he comes to us," the elder answered, "on a mission of apology. I am sure he can further assist my studies."

Darst slid his plate away. "You'll make certain he's sorry, won't you, Madred?" He looked across the table at the Vulcan, "Very sorry, I'm sure."

New Masters

With Captain Sorehl in the hands of the Dominion, StarFleet selects a new master for Aegis.

[Captain Thomas Halloway, commanding officer]

Captain Thomas Halloway had commandeered the main conference room of StarBase Aegis for his private communication with Command. In his few short hours aboard the station, he had showered, shaved, and was now arrayed in a fresh, clean uniform - the epitome of command charisma. At the moment, he was not using it to his advantage.

Eyes narrowed, he glared into the viewer at the image of Fleet Admiral Necheyev. "I don't know what you think you're pulling." He pushed clenched fists against his hips.

"I'm not certain what you're referring to," the admiral responded.

"This," he answered angrily, lifting a PADD from the table. He stopped waving it long enough to read aloud, "You are hereby requested and required..." He trailed off, slamming the tablet down on the conference table. It bounced half a meter before it clattered noisily to a stop.

If she was impressed, Necheyev didn't show it. "The starbase needs a captain."

Halloway leveled a finger at the screen. "I did your little clandestine work. When I let go of **Victory**, you gave certain assurances. Promises!"

"This is war, Tom," Necheyev grew firm. "You serve where we need you."

"I'm not a bureaucrat," he objected, "and I'm certainly not a diplomat." He let his voice go mild, "You know where my talents are. I'm a starship captain, Alynna."

The admiral gave a conciliatory look. "I have no intention of putting your talents to waste, but there are no ships to give you. This is the thinnest the fleet has ever been stretched. If we can't get our starbases in order, we won't have new ships to put out there." She paused. "I intend to keep my commitments, but for the moment, Admiral Zane's order stands."

The order to assume command of Aegis, he repeated mentally. "Aye aye," he responded. Moments later, the viewer went blank.

He stood alone, feeling somehow naked. What was it Jean-Luc Picard had said, during his fervor to get command of the newest **Enterprise**? A word of advice he'd claimed to have gotten straight from James Kirk. Don't let them do anything to get you off the bridge of your ship...

Halloway frowned, folding his arms. *To hell with Kirk*, he ventured. He'd fight hard to get another, but even without a starship, somehow Thomas Halloway would make a difference.

[Drankum, Ferengi diplomat and bartender]

In the backroom of his establishment, Drankum sat with feet up, counting the latinum on hand. The new commanding officer of the starbases might be a very plunderable person. Captain Halloway had already requested a special shipment of something called coffee on a weekly basis. Given Aegis' distance from a good source of the stuff, it would prove to be a profitable venture. In addition, sales were going back up.

The Klingon bar down the Promenade seems to have had problems. Drankum shrugged. In any event, there were still pressing issues. The old trade route through the Canar Sector was still out there, laying dormant. Now, with a new humon captain, maybe Drankum could finally get the profits he'd been waiting for.

[Captain Thomas Halloway, commanding officer]

The office was dark. Dark and hot. Thomas Halloway felt dry air surge into his lungs. He let out a muted cough and tugged at the crimson collar of his tunic. "Lights," he spoke.

A soft copper hue illuminated the office of Captain Sorehl of Vulcan.

There was the distinct feeling he was trespassing. *Normal*, he reasoned. He'd left his own sanctum behind on the starship **Victory**, his prior command. He absently wondered if Betile was feeding his fish.

He locked his gaze on the open deskchair and strode toward it, resolute in his destination. He took a seat, rotating the viewer toward him. "Computer, recognize Halloway, Thomas A."

"Identity recognized," the male voice responded.

"Initiate security access code refresh," he began, leaning back. He let the chair turn lazily, surveying the interior of the room, and the laborious process began...

"Confirmed. Command authorization pathways have been updated."

Halloway let out a long breath and ran a hand through his dark hair. Computer parameters were now set to match his preferences. The measure was critical to maintain security, but somehow, the change seemed impolite, a violation. Like moving into someone else's office.

He found himself staring at the pattern of the sandshifter panel mounted behind the desk. Even a Vulcan could leave traces of personality. Halloway leaned toward the shelf, reading the titles. *Ethics, Sophistry, and the Alternate Universe. The State* from Iloja of Prim. "Know thy enemy," Halloway quoted. *Risk Is Our Business*. Halloway let out a muted chuckle. He wondered if a Vulcan could fully appreciate Kirk's autobiography. Beside the selections sat a model of the USS **Excalibur** and an unopened bottle of Vulcan port, circa 2313. Halloway recognized a tinghamut, undoubtedly the possession of a Vulcan toddler. He felt the twinge of intrusion again.

He turned the chair and stood, looking out the expansive viewports at the gentle drift of the Decelea asteroid field. He squinted, testing his astrogation skills against the stars beyond. The view was of the Cardassian border - straight at Canar.

Nice office, he granted, *almost twice the size of my ready room*. But he had no intention of using it. He would have Sej set up the main conference room for his 0800 meeting with Muldoon and Proctor. He hoped they wouldn't mind his cigar smoke. He needed something to relax with all this tactical planning.

He started out, brushing a slip of paper off the desk. He stooped, picking it up. The note was handwritten, from the desk of a Lieutenant Commander John Blair. It read simply, "Remember, it could be worse. It could involve Shodan."

Halloway cocked his head in puzzlement and set the item back. There were some things about Aegis he might never understand. He carried that realization with him as he withdrew from the office.

[Lieutenant Michael O'Connor, engineer]

Mike settled into the chair, the smooth leather-like coating forming to his body. Moving it forward slightly toward he modified console in his quarters, he brought up specs for the Epoch-class escort **Apocalypse**. He scanned through them. She was a fine ship. Aegis as a construction facility... it seemed oddly out of place. True, the hull construction and interior design had been completed at other starbases, ones closer to the interior of Federation space. But Aegis would conduct the final systems integration and declare the ship spaceworthy. Given the demands of war, she would be pressed into service without a proper shakedown. The resources of starbase would be seriously strained keeping up with the pace. Not to mention the damage they'd suffered during the move from Decelea. "That would explain why we're always fixing everything," he grumbled.

Mike knew the history of the starbase well. She'd started as a distant outpost on the rim of Cardassian space, evolving into a defensive outpost from the Dominion advance, then a clandestine base deep in the Decelea asteroid field. Now... a starship construction facility. He grinned slightly. Who would've ever thought a smaller-than-average base like Aegis could even handle the power constraints. The Fleet engineers had done a lot of jury-rigging to make it work.

The Dominion had been quiet for the past few weeks, giving Mike time to keep the new circuits from wreaking too much havoc. However much they preached peace, though, the Dominion were bent on domination. Mike hope Starfleet Command realized that a construction facility would be a Vorta's dream conquest. Mike's grin turned slightly vengeful, as he thought of all they had put him through. His eyes refocused on the screen and he ran through some of the Epoch-class simulations that Utopia Planitia had provided. She would be one hell of a fighter. "Let's just hope the Dominion doesn't see her coming 'till it's too late."

[Captain Thomas Halloway, commanding officer]

The champagne bottle impacted without a sound, showering its bubbly contents over the forward hull of the Epoch-class vessel.

Spontaneous applause broke forth in the crowded staging area of the Aegis docking complex. "Ladies and gentlemen," Thomas Halloway announced, "I present you the starship **Apocalypse**." He patted Captain Jansen, the man beside him, on the back.

Jansen looked nervous. The fourth pip on his collar was still shinier than the rest. Halloway had done the promotion honors himself less than an hour earlier. It was only an eight-week shakedown cruise and the Epoch-class didn't require such a rank to command it, but StarFleet had opted to reward Jansen for his successes. He was its newest captain, about to assume its freshest-built ship. *Lucky bastard*, Halloway begrudged.

The elder captain turned to his chief engineer, who had launched the commissioning bottle. "Mr. Renckly," he directed, "please give Captain Jansen any assistance he needs in getting his ship underway. The starship **Birthingright** will be here within the next 24 hours. We'll need this berth."

The android nodded, sending looks across the room to summon his engineering staff.

[Major Robert Muldoon, security chief
Major John Proctor, strategic advisor]

It was 0800. Both Marines took a seat at the conference table in the Main Briefing Room. Captain Thomas Halloway pushed aside his coffee mug and tapped buttons on the tabletop. He took a breath. "I understand you're both coming off an... extended leave." He'd chosen a diplomatic way to reference their recent punishment.

Proctor looked to Muldoon as he answered, "I suppose you could call it that..."

Continued tapping brought up maps of the adjoining sectors on the back display. Halloway continued, "I assume you're ready to get back to work."

Both men looked over the maps as they came up, recognizing the Cardassian border. Muldoon answered for them, "I wouldn't mind."

"Before I begin, I have one issue and one question." He eyed both. "The issue: Loyalty. I expect it and I return it. That brings the question: Will you be working for me on this station or for someone else?"

Muldoon rubbed his chin. "You," he answered, pausing. "Of course."

Halloway measured his response. "I know how it is. I'm no stranger to clandestine agendas." He leaned forward, his face growing serious. "But if there are other orders at work, I expect to know they exist... if not to know what they are. You get my point?"

Both men nodded.

"There are other orders at work, Captain," Proctor offered. "But nothing to compromise the safety of the station, I assure you."

"You'll forgive my concern," Halloway continued, "but I'm only here because your last CO is off paying the consequence of those orders. I have no intention of ending up the same."

Muldoon actually seemed to wince a little.

"Of course," Proctor responded. "You'll have our cooperation."

"Alright, then. I think we understand each other. I don't intend to dwell on it."

Muldoon asked the more direct question. "Will we be returning to our old posts?"

Halloway leaned back with a smirk. "Not... yet. I have something special for you. What you have before you is a summary from Lieutenant Commander Ramson's recent insertion behind enemy lines, at the planet Canar II."

Proctor looked up from reading the PADD. "The same planet this station used to orbit?"

Muldoon nodded.

"The Dominion is up to something there and frankly, I'm not sure what," Halloway explained.

Muldoon leaned toward Proctor. "And we're supposed to find out what."

The captain shook his head. "No. No more covert action. It's time for directness."

The two Marines looked at each other.

"Bout time," Muldoon agreed.

Proctor raised an eyebrow. "Guess I got too used to living under a Vulcan," he mused.

"I've asked Mr. Ramson to join us later for a more complete discussion, but before he does, I wanted to pick your brains. My problem is, gentlemen, I'm a starship captain without a starship. What options are open to us if we wish to change the Canar situation?"

Muldoon smiled, liking this change in policy. It was refreshing.

"How many ships can the fleet spare?" Proctor queried.

The captain shrugged. "As many as I can convince. **Ulysses** is in the area. Captain Entebe and I... well, I think I can talk her into it." He leaned forward again. "What about the Klingons? Would their liason, Varon, assist us?"

"Depends on how much bloodwine we can afford," Proctor retorted.

"Varon will want to get into this fight, if that's what you're asking," Muldoon added.

"He'll help," Proctor summarized. "We just have to get the Empire to take a stake in this. Or, rather, he has to."

Halloway nodded. "I'm glad you think that. I've asked Varon to join us. Ramson will provide us with the most recent assessment of Canar. He seems concerned about recent excavations there. Frankly, if we should decide to take the planet, it can be done. But holding it?" He let them consider the question.

"It depends on how much the Dominion values the place," Proctor suggested.

"Or how bad we anger them in taking it back," Muldoon offered.

Halloway rest a fist under his chin. "Why do they value it? Before the war, it was a key pass between the DMZ and the Badlands. But now?"

"The DMZ is a farce since the outbreak of this war," Proctor muttered. "Died with the Maquis."

Halloway poured coffee into the two empty mugs, offering it to both Majors. "Gentlemen, you see the problem. If we wish to retake Canar, we must be able to keep it."

As the mission to retake Canar is about to commence, Captain Halloway must work to earn the trust of Varon, the Klingon liason stationed at Aegis.

[Captain Thomas Halloway, commanding officer]

Indignant, Captain Thomas Halloway sat bare-chested on the biobed. He winced a little as Nurse Chopra tended the muscles below his ribs.

"Only bruises," she reported. "But I wouldn't go swimming for the next few days."

Halloway groaned. Swimming was the most relaxing part of his daily regimen.

"From the looks of it," the nurse continued, handing him his tunic, "a solid kidney punch. May I ask how you got this?"

"I was never a very good diplomat," he replied, evasively.

The nurse passed a sensor over the knuckles of his right hand, the one he had drilled into Varon's chin less than an hour ago. The Klingon could be most stubborn.

He hoped his little display in the liason's office would have the intended effect. As he understood Klingon culture, he'd made the correct gesture to assert his authority - demonstrating strength of will and adeptness at physical combat. He hoped Varon would appreciate the gesture, being treated as he'd demanded, as a Klingon. *I don't intend to take any more kidney punches, he reasoned, and I don't take people into battle that I don't trust.*

He looked at two figures lying on biobeds across from him - one Caitan, one humanoid. "Who're your overnight patients?" he ventured, pulling the uniform jacket on over his tunic.

"Lieutenants Chekov and Kyrrios," Chopra answered, putting away the sensor. "We think they may be suffering some averse effect from the Ovetra cultural exchange. They were both on that team."

Halloway frowned. "What about the rest of the team members?"

The nurse looked back, "None of the others have reported in with any symptoms."

The captain hopped to his feet. "We better have a look at all of them."

The crew wrestles with aftereffects of their cultural exchange with the Ovetra.

[Lieutenant (j.g.) Logan Chekov, medic
Lieutenant (j.g.) L'Hona Amnor, security officer
Lieutenant Christopher Rocks, chief science]

Sickbay was an unusual place for a standoff.

Amnor looked at Rocks down the length of her phaser, still hoping to reason with him. "Lieutenant, let her go. You need help. You're sick. Please, let her go. Let's get you both well." Rocks responded by wrapping his elbow more firmly around Kyrrios' neck. His knuckles were white as his fingers flexed. Amnor aimed carefully, "Let her go, and back off!"

Kyrrios felt the arm relax. She pulled away and found no resistance. Rocks had let her go. He backed away slowly. "Good," Amnor said, relieved, "Sit down, please." Kyrrios took a deep breath and rubbed

her throat, stepping away from the science officer. Amnor stepped closer to the Caitian. "You okay?" Kyrios nodded, still rubbing her throat. Rocks was still standing there, staring at Amnor, then at Chekov. Chekov glared back angrily.

"Let's not try to further provoke people," Amnor cautioned the medic. She moved to stand between the two officers.

Rocks snatched a laser scalpel from a nearby instrument tray, waving it menacingly. Amnor stayed where she was. Her phaser was still up. "Move back, Lieutenant. I am not going to tell you again."

Rocks grinned strangely and swooped the scalpel back.

Amnor didn't wait for him to complete the action. She fired. Rocks tensed, arching his back, and fell to the ground.

"Dr. Who, please see to restraining Mr. Rocks," Amnor requested, "He needs treatment right away." She looked back at Kyrios, being tended by Chekov. "Are you alright?"

Kyrios shook her head slowly, as she raised it. "No, not so good."

Chekov looked at the Caitian, "What doesn't feel right?" He ran a medical sensor over her.

"Not surrre," Kyrios told him. "Just kind of shaky. Does not feel rrrright."

"Something is affecting all of those who were with the Ovetra. But what?" Chekov wondered aloud. "I've been cross-checking for days. The Vorta and I were the only ones to drink anything. And I checked the ink used in the tattoos. Nothing harmful." He helped Kyrios up to the nearest biobed. "Kyrios has the mildest symptoms, but then she's racially the most different."

Rocks roused, groaning softly. Amnor saw that he was securely restrained. The science officer strained against the field, writhing vainly. He growled loudly. Dr. Saddis Who stepped up to administer a mild sedative, then summoned Chekov, "Take a look at these readings."

The medic moved over swiftly. "What is it?"

"His immune system is reacting like it would for a bacterial infection," the doctor noted. "Look, there's an elevated number of *ergotia indelibia* in his bloodstream."

Chekov consulted the hypertext. "Ergotia is harmless. And it can't survive the pH levels of most humanoid blood."

"Usually harmless," Who corrected, "precisely because it can't reproduce in our hostile bodies. But if you offer it a food source rich in specific alkali nutrients..."

"Like the ink in the Ovetra tattoos!" Chekov shouted. "I've been analyzing the breakdown for days. But there was nothing harmful in it, so I moved on. All we need is a specialized antibiotic to halt the growth."

Dr. Who was already consulting his pharmacological database. He keyed the sequencer and flipped the hypo in one hand, inserting the selected vial. He pressed the hypo against Rock's neck, watching the readings.

"It's working," Chekov noted. "The bacterial advance is being halted."

"We need to select the appropriate treatment according to species," Who observed.

Amnor nodded, coming closer. "We've got to get the others treated. Get this to Dr. Ramson, Lt. Sprint, and Counselor Gideon as soon as possible." She checked names off her mental list. That was the whole cultural team who'd been exposed to the Ovetra ritual - all except Captain Sorehl and the Vorta, Semil. She took a deep breath, wondering what effect it was having on either of them...

Having found reason for the Ovetra's effect on the cultural team, a cure is implemented.

[Lieutenant Gideon Hart, station counselor
Captain Thomas Halloway, commanding officer]

Rounding the concentric corridor near the counselor's quarters, Dr. Saddis Who saw Captain Halloway and security officer Mort'va, standing watch. "Captain," Who reported, holding up a hypospray. "I have a treatment for Counselor Hart. We found a bacterial agent thriving on the ink the Ovetra used in their tattooing. It's been causing these psychotropic effects."

Halloway looked at the hypo, then Mort'va. He pointed a thumb at the doors. "Let's get it to her."

Invoking a security override to enter, they had found her on the floor, tracing her finger along the carpet. Halloway had hoisted her to her feet, directing Who to give the injection.

As the medication hissed into her arm, she pulled against the captain's grasp. "You have no right!" she shouted.

Halloway spun her toward him, grabbing Gideon by both shoulders. "I have every right!" he blurted back. "Can't you see I need you!"

Gideon stopped, looking right up at him.

Mort'va shot a curious glance at Dr. Who.

Halloway blinked, working to ignore the way Gideon's dark hair fell across her soft eyes. "I need... all... my officers, especially you," he added, loosening his grip on her. "We're on the verge of our campaign against Canar. I need your experience with these people. I'm about to lead them into danger, and I need your help." He stepped back, dropping his arms to his side.

Gideon pursed her lips, then let her head nod, barely perceptible.

Captain Halloway turned to leave. "I want you to supervise her recovery," he directed Dr. Who. Letting out a ragged breath, he strode out with new purpose.

[Captain Halloway, commanding officer]

Halloway continued to towel dry his hair even as he stepped out of the turbolift into the Command Center. His XO had sounded urgent enough to cut short an early morning holodeck swim on Pacifica. Besides, his muscles still ached from his last meeting with the Klingon liaison. "What do you have for me, Sej?" he ventured, hanging the towel over a seat near the engineering console.

The Trill looked up from the Admin console. "Varon just relayed a report from the incoming Klingon group. They were ambushed enroute, despite being under cloak. Here's the figures." The XO offered up a PADD.

Halloway ran a hand through his dark hair, looking grimly at the report.

"One other thing," Sej continued, "the destroyer **Birthright** is stalled about eight light years from here. An EPS surge shorted out the automation relays."

The captain shook his head, betraying concern. "Better get **Perseus** out there and lend them a hand. They're a sitting duck. If the Dominion notices..."

"Understood," Sej replied, bounding up the steps toward the aft turbolift.

Halloway watched him go. This station was getting more short-handed by the minute. Ramson had gone to consult with Tactical Operations. His operations manager, chief science officer, counselor, and chief medical officer had all been affected by this Ovetra ritual - whatever it was. Half of his senior security officers were, too.

He leaned against the engineering console, grabbing the towel. He looked around, nostalgic for a "Big Chair" to sit in. "Lieutenant Renckly, please report to the bridge..." he paused, correcting himself, "the Command Center. We have some work to do."

[Lieutenant Michael O'Connor, engineer]

Mike slid into his well-worn chair in Main Engineering, muttering quietly to himself. "Computer, open log." After waiting for the customary response from the computer, he began. "Finishing touches on the **Birthright** are going a lot faster than they did on the first Epoch-class. Mr. Renckly resequenced some of the diagnostics and that helps. I can hardly believe it, but status on getting the station ready to move is also good. The structural integrity field is a web of anomalies, but most of them are being taken care of. We've done this before. I can't wait until we take Canar back from those Dominion bastards. They don't deserve that planet or any planet in the Alpha Quadrant. I hope I get a chance to take them on. We've got worse problems, though... like the ones who should be helping us but aren't." Mike muttered something about Varon and his Klingon mercenaries, then continued, "Anyway, I just hope those Dominion scum watch out... we aren't the pushovers they seem to think we are. End log."

*The starship **Perseus** leads an assault to liberate Canar from Dominion occupation.*

[Lieutenant (j.g.) Tivok T'Vlen, science officer]

In those quiet, tense moments before combat, T'Vlen sought his inner calm and went through the list of flight procedures. This part of a mission was the most nerve wracking for the more emotional members of the crew. Even in his own mind, he sensed the impending moments when irrevocable decisions were going to be made in hairsbreadths of instants, those moment that forced you to obey your training and wait in slowness as the last few minutes ticked away. The stress could eat a crew's confidence like acid.

He firmly organized the stress into a tight corner, giving every doubt that occurred the answer that his training had provided. He powered the resolve of his Vulcan training. After all he'd been through, that at

least had never left him. The end result was to concentrate his will into the finely sharpened point, the Kop'pru of the Kohlinar. He existed in logic, floating in a shell surrounding him and filtering away all excess complications, so that only the pure problem remained to be dealt with. He was ready.

Then it was time for action.

[Lieutenant Michael O'Connor, engineer]

Mike sat in the cockpit of his fighter, nervously clenching and unclenching his gloved fists. The ship was on autopilot, locked on to the caravan it was following and protecting. Tapping the side of his helmet to open the comm channel, Mike spoke to his wing, "Blue Wing, prepare for warp. Finish diagnostic sweeps, and lock subspace coordinates." Tapping the channel closed, Mike spoke to the computer, "Computer, status of primary diagnostic sweeps."

The computer hummed for a moment while processing, then curtly responded, "All sweeps complete. Systems nominal."

Mike nodded, then commanded, "Terminate all sweeps. Power warp engines. Increase navigational shields to full power. Put deflector and weapon systems on standby. Acquire coordinates from the **Perseus** and prepare for warp." The computer warbled acknowledgement, then quickly ran through the stream of commands.

Glancing at his chronometer, Mike saw that there were less than five minutes before they would enter warp. "Just enough time left," he said with a smile. "Computer, open log." Mike paused, then began to speak, "The time has come. The Dominion is about to see that the Federation isn't a set of Rak'tajino sipping, tongo playing, holo-gaming pushovers. It's time for them to pack up and get out of our Quadrant!" A few seconds after he closed the log, Mike's console lit up as the ready signal went through to the task force. Watching the display tick down backwards, Mike locked in his speed and confirmed his coordinates, then nervously clenched the handle to go to warp. As the display hit zero and turned red, Mike pressed the handle forward. Watching the starlines expand around him, Mike silently uttered a quick prayer and launched himself into battle.

[Lieutenant T'Vlen Tivok, science officer]

The commands flowed smoothly from Captain Halloway to the crew of the **Perseus** and into the ship. **Perseus** danced among its enemies like a fencer, touching them with the edge of its rapier, killing with the caress of its blade. Their enemies tried in vain to land a blow, but the crew kept fended them off with skill. T'Vlen felt alive.

A jarring explosion broke his center, and T'Vlen was forced to try and filter out the emotion laden impressions his senses were conveying.

The bridge was filled with a layer of blue smoke, and Halloway hung limply in his chair. It was as if someone had thrown sand in the eyes of the ship; **Perseus** still moved, but it lumbered, momentarily blinded. The crew looked at each other uncertainly for a millennial moment. There were things going undone that needed to be done.

T'Vlen left his sensors, meeting Gideon by the captain's side. Hartle and the others kept the ship fighting. Halloway was breathing. T'Vlen opened his medkit and readied the hypo. He looked about uncertainly, seeking a more competent medical opinion.

"The battleship is tearing through the Klingon formation!" Hartle shouted.

This might not be the best time for pharmacy roulette, but it'd have to do. T'Vlen applied the hypo. In a testament to his constitution, Halloway's eyelids flew open. Suddenly conscious, he bolted upright in his chair. Tivok was glad that the combination of drugs had been the right ones.

The captain leapt to his feet, taking quick assessment of the situation.

Needs a good description of the battle. K'Mecka's sacrifice, Varon's ruse with the star, our troops left.

Facing superior firepower, the Federation and Klingon task force is forced into retreat.

[Captain Thomas Halloway, commanding officer]

He hated the secrecy.

He knew other officers who reveled in knowing more than those who served under them. Captain Thomas Halloway was not such a man.

He squeezed his fist, realizing that many of the crew believed they had just suffered a loss. From what they'd been led to believe, the recapture had failed. They expected to witness the destruction of the

Canar system and the men they'd left behind. *If that was what the Dominion was supposed to believe, Halloway reminded himself, then the crew would have to believe it for a little bit longer, too.*

He looked forward to telling them the truth.

The first wave of Operation Homeland had been a success. They had reduced the enemy fighter support and verified the position of all ground defenses. And though the Dominion battleship had not been destroyed, K'Mecka's sacrifice had crippled it beyond tactical use.

Varon's team had done their job. Halloway had made enough comments over the open channels to make the Dominion believe the sun would go nova within hours. And if Blair's re-creation of the Angelus probe had its intended effect, the surface of the Canar star would appear to be building for just such an explosion.

The Marines and officers he'd left behind on both planets had been given the vantage to see if the Dominion bolted. The teams, led by Muldoon and Proctor, would know how to seize that opportunity if it came.

Even now, three Epoch-class starships **Apocalypse**, **Birthright**, and **Covenant** were secretly speeding to join **Perseus** and the starbase-in-tow. Other ships sat poised in the Badlands to strike any enemy reinforcements that would come.

Halloway glanced from Gideon to T'Vlen to Hartle. He tightened a fist. He wanted to tell them now. But he couldn't. Not yet.

He swiveled the chair toward aft and stood, heading for the lift. "T'Vlen, you have the bridge," he instructed without turning around. "Alert me in two hours."

He heard the "aye" just before the lift doors closed. Facing away, he placed both hands on the turbolift rails, let his shoulders slump, and exhaled loudly.

"That's not exactly the confident face of command," a voice spoke behind him.

Halloway started, unaware that Gideon had followed him into the lift. He straightened, turning around. "And what face is it, counselor?" he joked.

She eyed him skeptically. "You look like a man who wants to share something."

He blinked in surprise at the insight. *If only he could share something with her*, he mused. "When the time comes to lay things bare," he answered, "no one will be more pleased than me."

Gideon eyed him again, saying nothing. In the silence, the turbolift passed on.

Aboard the flagship of the Dominion fleet above Canar

"Cruisers 011-38 and 014-55 have powered up and are underway. Fighter wings 81/12 through 85/09 are in formation." The Jem'Hadar First reported without looking up. Loyal and true to the Founders, he knew his place on the bridge of the Dominion flagship.

Semil stood motionless at the center of the bridge, his arms folded across his chest, his eye glowing in the reddish light of the eyepiece of his headset. "Move the fleet to flank speed. Enter warp once we've cleared the system."

The Jem'Hadar Second responded quickly to the beeping on his console. "There is an incoming communication from Cardassia Prime. Signal identifier has been verified; it is Weyoun."

"Open." Semil pivoted about to face the wall display behind him as the status report in Dominionese clicked off to reveal a similarly pale face on the channel. "Report."

Semil flipped up his eyepiece. "The StarFleet invasion force has been successfully repelled. However, they have placed a device in the sun of this star system; it threatens to go nova shortly. I am withdrawing to Position 081-03."

"And the status of our operations on Canar II?"

"All Dominion personnel have been evacuated to their ships. Assuming the nova doesn't completely obliterate the system, I am leaving behind several wings to monitor the event and resecure the system once it is over."

"I needn't tell you how disappointed I am; the mineral deposits on Canar II..."

Semil stood resolutely. "I'm aware of their value, Weyoun. As I recall, I did issue that report on the potential use of weapons of mass destruction by the Federation..."

"...which I read and duly noted. Keep us apprised of your progress. Contact me once you've reached Position 081-03." The channel closed with as much perfunctory efficiency as it opened.

Semil turned and strode towards the door leading off the bridge. "Alert me once we've entered warp." The corridor was particularly abuzz as the fleet hastened from Canar. Despite the activity, a clear path

opened down each path that Semil turned as the Jem'Hadar crushed themselves to one side as they strode along on their own forceful ways.

He walked past a door. Only briefly did he consider stepping through to again assess the figure inside, encircled by a force field, seated with his head slumped to one side in what must be a disgraceful weakness.

Instead, the Vorta continued on to the unoccupied guest quarters, stepping inside to enjoy the quiet and solace. He stepped over to the largish window and stared out, watching the Canar sun retreat in the distance. He contemplated how simplistically binary the Federation's concept of "victory" and "defeat" were.

[Lieutenant Gideon, station counselor]

Admist war... two people drawn together... the smoldering kisses and burning touches made her forget that he would leave soon... made her forget that he had never not existed. No voices nagged at her, even with all the death and despair and fear, she was not worried. A warm body exhaled and inhaled with soft breaths, whispering confidence and patience. He tasted like victory. The hand at the small of her back gently blocked out anything else that existed in the universe.

His fingers traced the line of her shoulder blade. In the release of their sharing, he felt no pretense. He spoke openly. "Flawless," Halloway mused in a whisper, "Your skin is so smooth. Not a freckle... not a blemish..."

"Like a newborn's..." She murmured sleepily. She did not want to think about it. Few had seen the burn of the Ovetra. No one had seen her without it. She rolled over and looked into his face, and understood that it had been as difficult and tortuous a road for him.

She gave him a wry smile. "Its refreshing...to be in a place without fear."

He gave a mock scoff as her head settled onto his chest. "Fear of what?"

"Loneliness," she whispered and closed her eyes.

[Captain Thomas Halloway, commanding officer]

Thomas Halloway resumed his chair at the center of the **Perseus**.

"Captain," T'Vlen reported, swiveling his chair, "sensors show three Federation starships converging on our position." He tapped his console to show the arriving ships onscreen.

"Right on time," Halloway smiled confidently. "Open a interfleet channel."

T'Vlen complied.

"This is the flagship," the command officer began. "We're not finished with this mission to Canar. What we've just fallen back from was merely the first wave. We are about to embark on the second. By now, the Dominion position has weakened, having disbursed to escape the nova they expect to occur." He laughed quietly.

"And they may think it has as hard as we're about to strike them. This time, we intend to secure both the colony and the Dominion installation on the inner planet. Our troops are already in position. This is the real thing. There will be no falling back. Halloway out."

T'Vlen and Hartle both looked up from their posts at him. At aft, he heard the turbolift open as the counselor rejoined the bridge. Halloway flashed his trademark grin at those with him. "Bring us about, Mr. Hartle. We're going back in."

PERSONAL LOG

Lieutenant T'Vlen Tivok, science officer

I was as surprised as the rest of the crew to hear Captain Halloway tell us to turn around. We weren't abandoning Canar. A part of me sensed it was wrong to let the Dominion win yet again.

The adage of combat is very true: one develops a worms-eye view of the battle. Although keenly aware of my actions, and those of my crew and our ship, I cannot adequately describe what any other ship did during the battle. Mr. Hartle mentioned other ships in relation to our own status, but I was otherwise concentrated on the matter at hand.

The battle started out slow. We made our first returning strike on several Dominion fighters near the system perimeter. They appeared to be waiting out the "nova" they assumed was imminent. Those first fighters barely knew what hit them. They had, however, alerted their brethren. The fighters swarmed at us, swirling chaotically. We'd been joined by other ships during our retreat, but most importantly, Aegis

was slowly making her way closer. Even from long range, her powerful phasers cut us a clear path. Eventually, the Jem'Hadar craft fell back out of range of the looming behemoth.

Perseus took moderate damage as we managed to reach orbit of Canar II, but the ship towing Aegis took a serious hit, weakening its tractor beam. Inertia began to carry Aegis to a fiery death in the planet's atmosphere. Our ships pulled away from the fighting to slow the station's descent. Scraping the upper fringes of atmosphere, Aegis' fore shields began to glow bright red.

The few Dominion forces that hadn't fled the system redoubled their efforts to destroy the station. Halloway shouted out orders left and right, trying every trick he knew to get the station to slow. Our own hull groaned and shook with the effort; Hartle did a masterful job shunting what little power we had to the help the others.

Once the station was safely in a stable orbit, our ships broke free and chased the remaining fighters from the system. I was impressed the actions of my comrades. We have proven our resolve against a stronger enemy. Despite the violence, I find some measure of pride in our triumph. I have no explanation for this, other than it must be the result of some recessive gene. Still, I no longer dread the thought of future engagements.

Having regained control of the Canar system, Aegis officers release prisoners found at the Dominion base on the innermost planet.

[Lieutenant (j.g.) L'Hona Amnor, security officer]

Amnor looked at the figure before her. She had confirmed his identity; he was indeed HoD'a' K'Vorlag, a former Klingon governor. But his identity didn't answer her questions. Had he really been a prisoner of the Dominion? His appearance told her that more than likely he was. The defeated look was hard to fake. The next question was what to do with him.

She wondered if she should remain with him or pass him off to a junior officer, maybe a medic. She was eager to assist securing the base. K'Vorlag didn't look in any condition to come with her.

At least the captain had left the surface. He'd done a quick survey, asked a few questions, and sensibly gone back to **Perseus**, bound for Aegis. One less security issue to worry about.

Amnor looked at K'Vorlag, trying to assess him, recalling the haunted look in his eyes. Shame. Somehow, he had betrayed them. She knew that. She knew that look.

"I must help secure this base," she informed him. "I can bring you along."

The Klingon did not look at her. "You have no need of me."

"What can I do for you?"

"I am bound for Gre'thor," he spat. "You cannot offer Mauk-to'Vor; you can do nothing."

[HoD'a' K'Vorlag, former Klingon governor
Lieutenant (j.g.) L'Hona Amnor, security officer]

Dr. Sabin headed through the doors into the isolation ward of sickbay. The patient sat, unspeaking. "How are you feeling?" she asked him.

"It is of no consequence."

Cara sighed. "Do you need anything? I'm sure we can find something to interest you. Aegis has a wide range of shops on the Promenade."

"This is StarBase IyjiS?" he asked, suddenly looking up. The doctor nodded. A spark of interest crossed his previously lifeless eyes. "I must speak with your security at once."

"Major Muldoon?" She asked, not sure what was going on. She sensed it was important.

"No, the woman. The half breed."

Dr. Sabin nodded understanding. He must feel more comfortable with someone of his own race. "You mean Amnor. I can call her for you." Sensing some urgency, she stepped into the hall to make the summons.

Minutes later, Amnor entered through the isolation doors. K'Vorlag paced the area. "nuqneH?" she said in Klingon. *<What do you want?>*

"I have information about your captain. The Vulcan."

"I'm listening." She slipped comfortably into interrogation mode.

"He was here. The Vorta took him from the installation during the evacuation." The Klingon went on. He told her about methods that the Dominion had been employing to gain information. He described how they had subsumed Sorehl into a mental illusion he could not possibly tell from reality.

"How do you know this?" she demanded.

"This is what they did to me," he answered. "Your Captain has been compromised. He is alive, but no one can withstand what they have done."

"Where is he now? Do you know where they took him?"

"ghobe'. pa' jIHpu'be'," he told her. <No. I wasn't there.>

"What else can you tell me?"

"Beware the Vorta... there is something different. Something else that moves his actions," he replied, cryptically. She asked him what he meant, but he couldn't explain..

"Thank you. You have done me a great service."

"It changes nothing. It serves, but it does not restore honor."

"If it is true what they have done to you, then they are the ones without honor. How can you fight an enemy in your mind? One that you do not even know is there? They will pay for what they have done. Our vengeance will be served cold. yaj'a'?" <Understand?>

K'Vorlag stared at her for several moments. He thought to offer some poignant Klingon idiom in response. But his lips were no longer worthy to offer Klingon wisdom. "jlyaj," he said quietly. "naDev vo' ylgHoS." <I understand. Go away.>

She looked at him for another moment, before she nodded, and turned, headed for the Command Center.

[Captain Thomas Halloway, commanding officer]

Thomas Halloway gazed out the expansive viewports of the Aegis conference room. Points of light marked formations of fighter craft patrolling adjoining space. Federation space. Closer to the station, floodlights illuminated the Epoch-class destroyer **Birthingright** as it slid gracefully into drydock.

He raised a hand to blot out the sun and squinted to make out the bright disc of the innermost planet. Major Proctor and his men had seized an intact Dominion base on the otherwise barren world. The enemy's plan to establish a major construction facility had been frustrated. It was quite a prize.

And there had been prisoners freed. Amnor had taken charge of a high-ranking Klingon officer, presumed dead since the Battle of Toras II. Halloway remembered HoD'a' K'Vorlag as commanding the Vorchha-class **mln'tu**. A *political figure*, he recalled. The Klingons were very interested in hearing Amnor's report.

With the spin of the station, the horizon of Canar II appeared, slowly sweeping to fill the view. Thanks to Muldoon and his teams, the colony was once again under Federation control. Judicious phaser fire from orbit had been directed against the remaining Jem'Hadar positions; it had been no surprise they had been unwilling to surrender. The threat from disgruntled settlers was considered minimal. The destruction of archeological work by Dominion mining operations in recent months had angered the scientific community. And their failure to evacuate the colonists from the perceived nova threat had turned remaining public opinion. Halloway sighed. Just like Bajor, there would be the messy matter of collaborators to deal with. He was grateful at the arrival of Ambassador Briel to consult with.

Immediate enemy retaliation was not anticipated. Captain Entebe of the **Ulysses** had told him of her triumph near the Moriya system. For some reason, the enemy had completely underestimated the disposition of Federation forces along the Badlands. A Cardassian-Dominion force had been repelled by starships hidden within the Terikof Belt. That success would buy time to shore up defenses at Canar.

Halloway turned from the window and picked up his coffee mug. These people weren't even his crew, but they had given more than he had asked. His thanks was written on the PADD that sat on the conference table. He had promoted some, and there would be a round of commendations and medals, as well as the "round" he owed at Drankum's. He had already drafted formal gratitude for the Ferengi assistance for skirting their neutrality to defend "trade rights." And he had other thanks to impart to the counselor...

Somehow, his success had softened the blow at learning Captain Jansen had been given command of the **Victory**.

He had let them take him off the bridge of his ship. But still, in spite of Kirk's admonition, he had been able to make a difference. He had restored everything that StarBase Aegis had lost. He allowed himself

a smile and took a sip of his coffee. *Maybe I can even find a nice place for a swim down there*, he thought. Ramson could probably recommend an isolated place where he could get out of the pressures of the office.

He frowned, remembering there was an office next door missing an occupant. Not everything had been restored.

Aegis is symbol-less, he thought, setting down the mug. His job was not done. It was time to plan the next liberation.

Captivity

During the months of Captain Thomas Halloway's command of StarBase Aegis, Captain Sorehl remained a prisoner in the hands of the Dominion. While these events of his captivity did not take place aboard the station, they represent a significant development that took place in parallel with events of the preceding section. They are presented here as additional depth and explanation for later developments.

Unbeknownst to him, Captain Sorehl is placed into an elaborate mental illusion by the Vorta Semil.

[Captain Sorehl, prisoner of the Dominion]

They had walked the entire length of the Imperial Plaza. The large, open square boasted some of the grandest examples of Cardassian architecture. The genius of the exiled Tevor Kell was evident in the bold, hook-like horns so prominent on the surrounding structures. By comparison, the freshly-erected monument to Gul Dukat was a garish anachronism.

As an alien on the Cardassian homeworld, he was aware of the eyes that studied him. No doubt many of them had never seen a Vulcan. Not that he was the first of his race to pass here. Ambassador Sarek had walked this very path almost a decade ago, an agent of peace.

But he was not Ambassador Sarek. He would not even be addressing Cardassians. Indeed, Captain Sorehl had been summoned to extend his message to the senior Dominion advisor on Cardassia Prime, a Vorta named Weyoun. As he entered the spacious hall, he faintly heard the laughter of another Vorta.

"Apology accepted, Captain," Weyoun assured, with open arms. "We're just as eager as you are to put this sordid episode behind us."

Sorehl had not expected so many Jem'Hadar soldiers present. Nor had he expected to see the large number of Dominion warships in orbit. Intelligence had speculated that the scarcity of ketresel white had forced them to place most of their genetically-engineered soldiers into stasis. It was hard to believe the wary Cardassians would allow a foreign army on their homeworld, particularly when control of them was fleeting. *Unless they have acquired additional stockpiles of the chemical*, Sorehl reasoned.

"Our interest is to end these hostilities," Weyoun went on. "Previous efforts have sadly, fallen short."

Sorehl recalled the machinations the Dominion had gone through to gain the Kabrel system. He remained silent. He had delivered his message already. He tried to ignore the returning laughter.

Weyoun looked down. "I admit the problem may be personal. Captain Sisko has been most unwilling to accept compromise. I am told yours is a species of discipline. Certainly a man of your background can appreciate the order we seek."

Each sentence increased the volume of the taunting laughter. "If my behavioral patterns were genetically predetermined, like your own, perhaps I would." He felt the mild spasm under his right eye. "However, I fail to see the logic in compromise with a regime lead by xenophobic zeal and racial supremacy." He grit his teeth, fighting the building rage, the deafening taunts...

"What is it?" the Cardassian asked, squinting at the subject strapped to the vertical slab.

"Compensating." The Vorta Semil adjusted the instrumented probe leading to the Vulcan's head. The neurosensory feed from his mesofrontal cortex was drifting again. There was no point in putting Sorehl through this ruse if they couldn't read his responses. He calibrated the feed to a new setting. "That's twice now."

"And he is completely unaware of the illusion," Madred observed, his voice betraying admiration.

"Other trials have been very effective," Semil assured. "The Dominion is all too happy to share this alternative for extracting information." Madred seemed to frown at the statement.

The analyst Borath had given the Vorta community a full report on his success with the crew of the **Defiant** several years earlier. His work had provided the Founders with the insight to strengthen the Bajoran wormhole from collapse. With it, they had gained their foothold into the Alpha Quadrant.

A grin worked its way across Semil's pale features. There was no telling what insight this subject would have.

[Semil, Vorta agent of the Dominion]

The Vorta Semil drew close to the subject of his experiment. Captain Sorehl remained strapped to the vertical slab, unconscious. The Vulcan's only sense of reality came from the neurosensory feeds strapped to his skull, planting images into his brain.

Over many days, the Vorta had controlled every element of the illusion, according to design. He had guided Sorehl on a trip to Cardassia Prime, allowing him to witness images of a mighty Dominion presence. Semil had taken him to Canar, where he could see scientists, thrilled at the archeological discoveries made under Dominion sponsorship. He had even been allowed to freely return to his precious Aegis, where he resumed his routine as commanding officer.

In that role, Sorehl had used, and thus revealed, command codes that could never have been tortured out of him. The real ones, of course, had already been changed, but the ease of getting them made Semil marvel. From the captain, the Vorta had learned Aegis' tactical limitations, plans for deploying a new class of destroyer, and most importantly, the disposition of StarFleet forces along the border.

The Federation was making a classic mistake - protecting star systems that had been sites of historical clashes with the Cardassians. They failed to realize the Dominion would not limit itself to the traditional territorial interests of their short-sighted allies. The Founders had greater vision. A vast swath beyond the Badlands lay open to an immediate advance. Semil had eagerly passed on such treasures of information to Weyoun, his superior at Cardassia Prime.

But his interest in tactical information was over.

Semil remained close to the Vulcan, narrowing his weak eyes to admire the delicate points of the Vulcan ears. They truly were a venerable race. He had once commented to the captain on the many similarities between the Vorta and the Vulcans. Intellectual achievements. Telepathic prowess. Superior physical endurance. And the Vulcans had done so without the aid of the Founders' genetic guidance. Truly amazing.

But this was his opportunity to study them as never before.

There had been other Vulcan prisoners available previously; in fact, the chief medical officer of the **Cortez** was only three cells down. But here was one whose discipline he had witnessed. One who had stood against him; one he had precisely studied. One now in his complete control.

The Jem'Hadar soldier entered the cell. He saw the Vorta, slowly pacing, circling his quarry. "A patrol reports Klingon activity - possible relocation of troops. We believe cloaked transports with escort."

Semil glanced over, tilting his head. "I suppose it is time to ask our friend next door to share more information with us. Alert Gul Madred. I'll meet him there in a minute."

The soldier gestured compliance, then withdrew. The Vorta was not yet impressed with the new strain cloned here in the Alpha Quadrant, but this one was efficient enough. Still, their reduced need for ketresel white would stretch the dangerously limited supply.

Absentmindedly, Semil touched a spot on the small of his back. Before leaving, he looked back at the captain. The experiment was no longer just to extract tactical information. In fact, he was uncertain of the fascination that motivated him.

He was not done with Captain Sorehl.

He decided it was time to see just what would make a Vulcan break.

In an illusory reality, Sorehl is forced to watch the destruction of Aegis.

[Captain Sorehl, prisoner of the Dominion]

The destruction of StarBase Aegis had been swift and complete.

Despite the heightened alertness prompted by the war, the attack itself came with unexpected finality.

Sorehl had been in his office. He had spent much time alone, learning to control the strong emotions that had appeared during his mission to the Cardassians. Self-discipline and the help of Dr. Ramson and

Counselor Hart had kept the crew from seeing his weakness. Sprint's alarmed report had roused him from the midst of such meditation.

Scores of Jem'Hadar warships surged into the Decelea asteroid field, too many to number. The starbase responded, blasting one after another into debris. But they did not relent. Overwhelmed, the station's mighty shields, once rated the finest in StarFleet, failed. Unbowed, Ramson had taken lead of the fighter wing, sacrificing it and himself to defend those ordered to abandon Aegis.

As boarding commenced, the battle grew more personal, more ferocious. Sorehl remembered those last moments in the Command Center, fire raging around them. Muldoon and Varon had died there, holding back the Jem'Hadar soldiers. It had given them precious moments to engage the autodestruct, to prevent Aegis from falling into enemy hands. Wounded himself, Sej had bled out his life at the Admin console giving the final codes. Sorehl had thought to die there, as well, invoking the captain's privilege.

But it was not to be.

The transporter effect asserted itself, and he found himself lifted to his feet by Lieutenant Renckly, aboard the **Perseus**. Fleeing, Aegis erupted behind them, blossoming outward, sweeping the asteroid field clear in its wake. Blair later told him it had been a gut-wrenching sight, like watching someone's heart break.

Oddly enough, Sorehl understood the meaning.

Gul Madred could see the drama unfold only as a series of sensory feedbacks and synaptic patterns. The Vulcan stood against the slab, not moving. Occasionally, the captain would speak aloud to a member of his illusory crew, only hinting at the events he witnessed.

The Cardassian looked to Semil, who manipulated the neurotransmitter controls. "His thoughts aren't nearly as orderly as I might have expected," he observed.

The Vorta contained his irritation. The calibration of the connection to the mesofrontal cortex continued to elude him, but he would never admit this to the Cardassian. "Yes," he answered with measure, "our captain is full of surprises."

"I should very much like to employ my own methods on him; demonstrate just how effective they can be," Madred offered.

"I intend to give you that chance, I promise you," Semil assured. "But first, we must take everything from him. Break his foundation, mock his existence, erode his strength. You've seen what wonders it has done for our Klingon friend?" He tilted his head toward the next cell.

"Yes," Madred agreed. "He was quite willing to tell us how to defeat their cloaked transports." The Cardassian eyed Semil. "You believe you can do the same to the Vulcan? I should very much like to see that."

The Vorta returned to his work. It was time to strip away the arrogance of his subject's vaunted discipline. Adjusting the illusion, he wondered: What suffering would be enough to own Captain Sorehl?

[Semil, Vorta agent of the Dominion]

There was no night at the Dominion installation. Diurnal biorhythms were a superfluous manifestation of humanoid life that was wholly inappropriate for the near genetic perfection of the Jem'Hadar and the Vorta. However, the Cardassians being flawed solids, instilled a certain sense of quiet about the base as many of them slept.

His compatriot, Gul Madred, having long disappeared to retire for the night, Semil paced the stark room with slow, deliberate steps. Members of hundreds of other races had noticed his particular ability to keep his eyes transfixed, focused on a single subject for hours at a time. Semil had never taken the time, nor spent the vanity realizing the cold pierce of his icy blue eyes.

He watched the chest of the subject on his table rise and fall rhythmically, the gold and silver comm badge tilting up and to the side before coming back down. He thought how easy, and how simple, how elegantly efficient it would be to simply reach across and throttle the neck stretched out before him. It would be more appropriate to simply key in the commands to the neuroinputs to inhibit the geniculate nuclei in the myelencephalon that kept Sorehl breathing.

However, Semil wondered what it would feel like, to feel Sorehl's skin, the cartilagenous ridges of his trachea beneath his hands. He wondered how it would feel to press down, what kind of strength it would take to collapse the Vulcan's windpipe. He imagined Sorehl's face slowly bluing to the lack of oxygen, his mouth reflexively gasping for air.

Without realizing it, Semil was actually experiencing malice for the first time. The genetic enhancements of the Vorta precluded such a visceral response. For all his conniving, all his subterfuge and manipulation, it was always a job, a way of life for Semil. He had never hated those he crushed, not even for their inability to recognize the supremacy of the Founders.

He had always been the parent guardian, guiding these poor mistaken unfortunates towards the path they were meant for, the will of the Founders. He was wholly unfamiliar with any actual dislike of them, distrust, yes. But dislike, he had always trusted that their misguided ways would simply fall away as they came to accept the Founders, either in subservience or in death.

He looked down at Sorehl and wondered just what it was about this one, this single flawed humanoid that made him feel so. As if some bond had been forced upon them. Semil had admitted a grudging kinship with the Vulcans; he recognized in them a parallel in the role they played in the childlike innocent naivete of the Federation.

Semil bent down, bringing his face within centimeters of the Vulcan. He glared into Sorehl's shut eyelids, watching intently the jittering dance beneath them, knowing exactly where the Captain would be in the illusory reality he was experiencing.

A blind man experiencing red for the first time, Semil wondered if Sorehl was likewise actually feeling an emotion at this time. He wondered if perhaps the Vulcan, too, was envisioning Semil's throat crushing beneath Vulcan hands.

Somewhere inside the tortured mind of Captain Sorehl, somewhere within Dominion territory.

[Captain Sorehl, prisoner of the Dominion]

Despair.

The raw emotion surged forward, spilling through the porous cage of his carefully constructed logic. Though he knew his discipline was slipping, Sorehl clung to the belief that no Vulcan could face the trauma of recent weeks and turn away, unfeeling.

He had felt it first after the destruction of Andor.

Failing to extort an unconditional surrender from the Federation, the Dominion had obliterated the planet, making a graveyard for billions of unsuspecting citizens.

As they had done to Vulcan. The despair had been deeper, knowing that the center of his civilization was gone - the Gol'shiVar Arcology, where he was born; the T'Karath Sanctuary, where Surak had been slain; the Hall of Ancient Thought - all gone. His culture and his heritage had been left a wasteland. Logic had sustained him, arguing that he not mourn for intangible things. His wife and daughter had been spared, able to flee the destruction on one of many evacuating transports.

Only to perish at Earth.

Even the newest races of the united worlds had felt the weight of that blow. The Dominion had prosecuted their campaign with merciless logic. The fall of three founding members of the Federation, including its capital, had been calculated to inspire the very despair he felt now. He had wept openly upon hearing the news, the deaths both personal and the billions unknown. Each bitter tear only emphasized how the order of his mind was slipping away.

Counselor Hart had submitted her diagnosis that the captain suffered from the early stages of Bendii Syndrome. Though the affliction was generally confined to Vulcans of much greater age, Sorehl seemed to confirm a prevailing theory that close contact with emotional species triggered the disease. He would have been a good test case, he reasoned, had there been a Vulcan Science Academy left to study him.

He slid back into the center chair of the starship **Valiant**. He had inherited the Defiant-class escort from the late-Commander LaPlace, after the pitched battle which had claimed both **Perseus** and the **Excalibur**. The few survivors had gathered on this battered little ship, under the leadership of Admiral a'Vrok. The Andorian flag officer had promised a response to the Dominion.

And they were on their way to deliver it...

[Semil, Vorta agent of the Dominion]

The Vorta had not left the side of his subject for days. He had slowly twisted the illusory dagger he had driven into the Vulcan's mind.

But the Vulcan had not been shattered.

The implosion had been eminent. His malice aflame, Semil had seen the anguish. He had even watched the tears stream down the impassive face. Tears! But the ultimate break, heralded by such cracks, had not come. After each new loss, Sorehl had regained some measure of composure. His mind was not in good order, but he had not collapsed.

Semil adjusted the mesocortical lead again. *Damn these drifting calibrations*, he thought with uncharacteristic anger. He was startled to look up and see a soldier had entered the cell.

"The Klingon wishes to speak with you," the Jem'Hadar spoke tersely.

"I left orders not to be interrupted," Semil replied, forcing a smirk. "K'Vorlag is mine to summon, not the other way around. I don't care how anxious he is to spill his secrets. He answers my bidding. Leave."

"Glory to the Founders," the soldier replied, backing out.

Semil absentmindedly rubbed an irritated spot on his back. He turned to his work, a task which had little, if anything, to do with the Founders at all.

Inside the Vulcan mind...

[Captain Sorehl, prisoner of the Dominion
Semil, Vorta agent of the Dominion]

The flat composite key felt deathly cold between his fingers. It was a crude security device, strangely appropriate for the abhorrent force it would loose. Captain Sorehl looked across the bridge of the starship **Valiant**. The Andorian admiral held the other key firmly in the tactical console.

"Computer, this is Admiral Thelev a'Trok," the flag officer spoke aloud, "invoking application of General Order 24, subparagraph four, strategic option. The use of special ordinance has been authorized for this action."

Sorehl listened to the dialogue; in the finest tradition of his own late race, there was no emotion or urgency behind it. In position behind enemy lines, they had not been detected. Freed from the renounced Treaty of Algeron, the phase-cloak installed aboard this Defiant-class vessel had let them quietly slip past the sentries. From here, with the destructive payload they carried, they could lay waste to a dozen targets.

"Authorization requires the sanction of a second officer of command rank," the computer intoned. a'Trok looked across the bridge at the Vulcan.

Sorehl opened his mouth.

"Before the captain responds," the admiral began, looking at the worn, intense faces around him, "I want to state formally, for whatever record remains, that we understand the grave consequences of what we undertake. We abhor the necessity." He paused, letting the silence consume the room. "But whatever qualm we face - no race, no power can be allowed to delight in the spoils of genocide. We have been entrusted to deliver a harsh message to those who would ally themselves with holocaust: we will not be exterminated alone. The Cardassians have shared glory in their allegiance to the Dominion. So must they be joint heirs in the punishment. Perhaps," he paused to keep his voice from faltering, "when they feel the wounds we inflict, they shall pause in their slaughter. We may yet preserve those that remain."

Sorehl ached for the discipline to sweep aside the discord. Fierce resolve clashed with naked horror. "This is Captain Sorehl," he managed. "I confirm the invocation of General Order 24... and hereby sanction the special provision of subparagraph four." He nodded to the admiral, and they turned both keys. Alert displays changed across the bridge as deployment began.

Despite his blinking, a drop slid its way down his face. Even the shame at such an outward display could not overcome the torture of his ideals. "I am become death, destroyer of worlds," he spoke quietly, and soon the console was slick with the tears he shed...

Semil pounded his fists against the console, not caring for restraint. The Vorta turned toward his subject, advancing toward him and reaching up for his face. He pulled his hand away, staring at it. With a frustrated fling, he cast the tears off his fingers. He looked at the exposed neck, so vulnerable to a tightened grasp. The Vulcan could not exist, it seemed, without tormenting him. He had not been broken!

Instead of making him brittle, ready to collapse, each new rift seemed to vent the pressure, easing it. Captain Sorehl had, in fact, actually shown signs of exerting his will within the illusion! Semil had watched the emerging brain pattern, synapses slowly diverted from the mesiofrontal cortex. In the flowchart of their brains, Vulcans had developed that region, an extra evaluative step over their instincts

and emotion. And Sorehl had grown less dependent on it. He fought for self-determination in a illusory world of predestination.

Indeed, from it, the Vorta had learned even more secrets from his captive. The captain seemed to believe the Federation would resist even in defeat. Not only did they possess weapons of mass destruction, but they would use them! Had he been interested in gathering intelligence, Semil would have quickly passed this to his superior. But such was not his interest.

He grit his teeth as he yanked the cortical probes from Sorehl's head. The Vulcan jerked and spasmed violently before slumping against the restraint. Semil touched the signal that would summon Gul Madred to the cell. It was time to let the Cardassian interrogator expose the captain to a dose of reality, he mused. He fixed his icy blue stare on the subject and waited for the Gul to bring his own skills to bear.

In an underground installation on Canar I, the innermost planet...

[Captain Sorehl, prisoner of the Dominion
HoD'a' K'Vorlag, former Klingon governor]

Not again.

"I'm not finished with him yet," Madred insisted. The Gul pounded a fist on the solid tabletop, nearly spilling his leftover breakfast. "You promised me more time to prove my techniques work." Why did they always rob him of his best subjects near the moment of triumph?

Irritated, the Vorta didn't bother to look at the Cardassian. "And you promised to break the good captain," Semil spoke with disdain. His eyes didn't leave the Vulcan, who lay naked and slumped against one wall.

"Are you afraid I'll succeed where you failed?" Madred challenged.

The remark earned him a look of contempt. "It's no longer safe to keep him here," Semil snapped. He looked past the Jem'Hadar guards and directed one of the other prisoners to assist Sorehl. "Help him up. And put some clothes on him." The Klingon staggered in to comply.

"What do you mean?"

"Even you must have heard the alert," Semil replied. Though there had been no shots fired at this installation, secreted away on the smaller inner planet, the sound of battle should have been unmistakable.

Madred looked confused. "I was told the Federation ships were driven back."

"We pushed them too far," the Vorta reported, not believing his own voice. "One of the Klingon ships planted a device in the sun. Our scans show it will go nova within hours." Semil had gone over stolen records of the days when Aegis orbited Canar II. Two years ago, a scientist had tampered with the star, nearly destroying the system. Somehow, the Federation had learned to duplicate the effect. Unable to recapture the system, they were determined to wipe the Dominion from it.

But he would not let his prize go with it.

With the diminished capacity of his senses, Sorehl was only vaguely aware of the voices in his cell. Even then, he had learned scorn for those same senses, the ones that had been used to betray reality.

Something was draped over his bare torso. Strong hands lifted him, bringing pain to his weakened limbs. Still, he managed to stand.

"Let me help," rasped a whispery voice. The hands braced his shoulder, urging him to walk. Through the touch, he could sense the extinguished rage of a beaten soul. And yet, there was something familiar. Sorehl raised his head to meet the gaze of the once-mighty governor of Klingon occupied territories, K'Vorlag, a mere prisoner like himself.

"Get him to the ship," he heard another voice order. Sorehl had heard the taunting sounds of the Vorta for so long, he could no longer be certain it was real.

And the despair fell once again.

Having fled the Canar system...

[Semil, Vorta agent of the Dominion]

The stark metal grey of the room was lit solely by the synthetic glint of the single lit screen. Two Vorta, separated only by the layers of polymer composite and optical diode, spoke brusquely in the Dominionese tongue they had known for as long as their progenitors could remember.

"...both know there was no way to confirm the Federation ruse without jeopardizing our mission." Semil sat opposite the viewer, his left leg casually crossed over the other.

Onscreen, Weyoun's visage remained stern and serious. "Unfortunately, the Founders do not share your nonchalance. Losing the Canar system is a significant setback in our plans here. While we are on the subject, the Moriya system..."

Semil interrupted, "Yes, I have read the report."

"We acted on information you provided us. I am having difficulty explaining to the Founders how easily you have been misinformed." Weyoun cocked his head to the other side. "I need not remind you..."

"No, you needn't. I am well aware of the stakes, Weyoun. Perhaps instead of this constant badgering, you may consider allowing me to do what I must."

Weyoun clenched his eyes in a squint. "This isn't you, Semil. I don't fully understand, but you're changed... different. I remember once being able to depend on you, on your loyalties."

"That hasn't changed." Semil's mouth pursed in subtle defiance. The two Vorta assessed each other, instinct and habit borne of the genetically engineered mistrust rooted deep inside of each.

"Very well. What are your plans?"

"My source; I am certain there are mitigating circumstances surrounding his disinformation. I am bringing the fleet to conduct a full investigation of those circumstances. I believe only our interpretations to be flawed, not the conclusions."

"You don't see flaw with your methods of interrogation?"

"I've rechecked the protocols, everything is in order. I suspect there may be one variable that was... unaccounted for in my initial projections." The slur in Semil's speech rasped across the light years.

"You didn't have this much trouble with the Klingon."

"The Klingon was a far less complicated mind."

"They often are." Weyoun sighed. "Very well. I will report your findings, and expect a complete update as soon as you reach your destination." Weyoun leaned into the viewscreen. "Be careful, Semil. I would hate to see you throw all this away."

Semil bowed his head slowly, respectfully. "End transmission." The screen clicked off, leaving the Vorta in darkness; sheer, comforting, welcoming darkness.

Liberation

With Aegis returned to orbit above Canar II, the two senior command officers debate whether Captain Sorehl may yet be alive as a Dominion prisoner.

[Commander Eriid Sej, executive officer
Captain Thomas Halloway, commanding officer]

Halloway stared past his reflection in the arching windows of the Conference Room in the direction of the darkened Canar horizon. Specifically, he watched the ships arc across their orbits in the distance; a Miranda-class frigate, two D'Kora-class marauders, and a bird of prey. He watched the uneven blink of their formation lights, waiting for the different timings of the lights to blink together.

The door chimed. "Enter."

Halloway's reflection in the window was joined by his second-in-command. Both men stood silent, watching the planet, the ships and the stars arc by in almost Aristotelean perfection, the laws of physics providing the gears and axles for this most giant machinery.

Eriid swallowed before he spoke. "We just got word, no survivors."

Halloway exhaled loudly as his head shook no. "Damn. The **Churchill** was a damn fine ship." Another silence passed. "Any word on a replacement flagship for the Eighth?"

Sej's voice remained quiet, following another pause. "Probably the **Valparaiso**."

Halloway nodded. "The rate we're losing ships, you're going to have a pretty ratty selection when you make Captain."

"S'okay, I told myself to get comfortable when I took this post." The humor lost on him, Sej replied with the blunt poker-face that he'd picked up from his last commanding officer. It was his only true sign of

melancholy. Sej turned his head slightly towards Halloway. "I almost forgot, the Ferengi are demanding to keep their ships at Airlocks 4 and 7."

Halloway shook his head, still staring out the window. "Not with the **Belgrade** and the **Mandela** arriving tomorrow. Boot 'em out. Put 'em into orbit alongside."

Sej nodded. "The Majors won't be happy about it."

"Muldoon and Proctor?"

"They've been trying to convince me to pocket all the latinum the Ferengi have been trying to slip me in exchange for favors."

Halloway managed a slight guffaw. "To buy rounds at the bar, no doubt."

Ereiid shrugged. "The thought crossed my mind." The lights in the distance continued to blink out-of-phase as another lengthy pause punctuated Sej's search for words. "I went over the sensor logs again from the first attack with Rocks. Not a sign of anything even remotely Vulcanoid on the planet or on the ships." They had hoped to find Captain Sorehl among the prisoners held in the Dominion installation on Canar I.

"Doesn't mean he's necessarily dead yet."

"You're saying we shouldn't give up hope yet?"

"I didn't say that. It's a very real possibility he's dead."

Sej contemplated for a long moment. "No, every report is consistent. The Dominion keeps its prisoners alive."

"...unless they're no longer valuable and are a risk." Halloway interrupted.

"So now he is dead? Aren't you supposed to be the decisive one?" Sej turned querulously.

"Being decisive doesn't mean you don't weigh out all the possibilities." Halloway briefly cast his eyes askance at his exec before returning them to the view.

Sej sighed deeply as he turned back to watching the blinks in the window. "I was almost comfortable being back here again."

"Every honeymoon's got to end."

Sej stared, silent. "What is that one humanism? Nuptial firearms, or something?"

"Shotgun wedding."

Ereiid nodded. "Shotgun wedding. I'll remember that one."

The two men stood silent, their eyes cast in the distance as the lights blinked in unison.

[Drankum, Ferengi ambassador]

Drankum sat in the shuttle glaring at the controls. He had been forced to spend yet another few weeks on diplomatic assignment to setup a new trade route in a nearby system. *This excursion*, Drankum thought, *would cost him profits*.

He looked over the report Patty had sent. And indeed, profits were down by 2%. *Hopefully*, Drankum thought, *the situation would improve once his main objective on Aegis was complete*. The setup of a new Canar System Trade Route still beckoned in the distance. Such a route would bring great profits to whatever government was to control it. His goal was to have that route firmly in Ferengi hands.

Several star systems near Canar were still having a hard time getting back on their feet after the Dominion invasion. Some planets were in a state of emergency. The only thing most of the planets had, was computer credits. Everything else had either been destroyed or damaged.

StarFleet was attempting to assist, but couldn't divert enough resources to the cause. But the Ferengi Merchant Fleet was ready. Supplies were standing by. If a green light was given to make Aegis the trading center for the sector, the base's importance would greatly improve. It would no longer be just a military outpost, but also a commerce center. *Now*, Drankum said to himself, *all that remained was to move the plan forward*.

[Lieutenant Michael O'Connor, chief engineer]

Mike ran his thickly gloved hand over the starbase's exterior hull. The suit's built-in sensors funnelled information straight to the faceplate on his EVA suit, displaying it in a brightly lit, translucent readout to the right side. The major structural repairs were complete. His presence on the hull wasn't from any distrust of his team; on the contrary, he thought they were exceptional. However, he didn't think he'd ever get rid of the habit of checking everything over personally. Turning down the grip strength on his magnetic boots, he made long strides toward the access hatch. He stepped on the lift platform and keyed the control pedestal. The platform descended into the station. He watched hatch slide back in place above him and

saw the atmosphere light glow green. He twisted off his helmet, tucked it under his arm, and opened the inner door. Stowing the bulky suit in the locker, Mike returned to Engineering.

Sitting in his office, Mike ran over the checklist of repairs, sending off updates to other departments. Picking up a dart from the holder on his desk, he threw it at the dartboard on the wall, hitting the center of the section marked off "Outer Hull." Absentmindedly picking another, he rolled its shaft between the palms of his hands as he spoke. "Computer, open log. Hull repairs complete. Most of the Dominion damage and shock of warp flight has been repaired. Teams are finishing up on the other ships and some have been dispatched to the surface to assist with the repair of the colony.

"Still, I'm not sure I'll be truly happy until we find out what happened to Captain Sorehl. We should never have let those Dominion bastards take him -- we knew they couldn't be trusted!" Sighing softly, he closed the log.

Excavations left behind by the Dominion cause earthquakes to rock the colony, changing the landscape and wounding many.

PERSONAL LOG

Dr. Cara Sabin, recording

We've set up triage planetside and have begun receiving wounded. T'Vlen and Spawn have been helping me here non-stop for the past... eight hours. In that time, we've managed to triage some 150 patients, the worst of whom have been beamed to Aegis. We're stabilizing the rest as they wait their turn to go up.

The next wave of patients should be here momentarily. I've had nurses and medtechs sent down to assist us once we got triage set up. ::pause as a low rumble is heard:: I'm not sure exactly how stable this area is. I've learned that a good portion of the colony sank two full meters. There are reports of sinkholes collapsing whole sections in the main settlement. Add in the flooding and we have a mess down here.

Fleet officers accept risk in our lives. But here I've treated babies caught in collapsing buildings, children whose parents can't be found, and parents looking for displaced children. I've seen the faces of the evac teams as they've delivered the wounded. I think everyone who's participated in this effort should have a session with Counselor Hart afterward.

[Lieutenant Commander D'Mysus Ramson, second officer
Captain Thomas Halloway, commanding officer]

Captain Halloway had permitted himself the luxury of a tour of prominent sites on Canar II. Ramson had been more than happy and more than qualified to indulge him.

They had seen the main settlement and the burnt-out Dominion installation. Now, Ramson was opting to show Halloway some of the planet's natural wonders... and recent discoveries.

"Cohen said they found this early on during Dominion occupation," the Minarian second officer explained. "It's totally flooded." Ramson pointed to two large rocks amongst a clutter of others spread out on the desert floor. To the north, one could see a steep plateau and the peaks of mountains beyond its edge. "Not enough dry space to use as a base or even storage. And the water's too salty to drink without purifiers." Looking around the otherwise arid landscape, he added, "This whole area was once a large inland sea. And apparently," grinning and pointing down, "...that's what's left of it."

Halloway scrambled down the rock face, dislodging small pebbles. He came to a stop beside his second officer and looked at the dark opening. "And the entire body of water is now subterranean. Amazing," the captain remarked. "There must be some beautiful mineral features in there."

Ramson nodded. "This is the only entrance large enough to fit through," he indicated. "Once you dive under the edge and come up to the north, you have a larger cave with a couple of small cracks in the ceiling that let in fresh air and some light. From what I've heard, there's a network of passages all over. But I wouldn't try swimming around in them just yet. In all the galaxy, cave diving is still one of the most dangerous thing you can do."

Halloway smirked, "I used to do a bit of wet spelunking around the Azure Coral Reef on Pacifica, where I grew up. If we can get equipment together, I wouldn't mind a bit of exploring."

Ramson smiled back. "I thought you might say that, sir. I planned to put together an expedition in a day or so."

The captain nodded. "Good show. Put me on it." His commbadge chirped. "Hang on a sec." He tapped the insignia. "This is Halloway."

The voice of Lieutenant Renckly was clear over the channel. "Captain, sorry to disturb you. Incoming orders from StarFleet HQ. Not urgent, but for your eyes only."

Halloway exhaled through his nose. "Very well, Ops. I'll return aboard the Congo in twenty minutes. Captain out." He glanced to Ramson. "Well, let's see what they have for us now."

[Lieutenant Gideon Hart, station counselor]

It felt like the worst thing she'd ever done. Inflicting horrible pain, she'd pressed a hot blade to skin, sealing flesh together with heat. Nothing hurt worse than a burn. Rocks bore the pain well. They both knew it had saved his life. But she had never intentionally, purposely caused anyone so much pain. His hand clasped around hers gave her comfort.

Her uniform pants had splotches of blood on them, and she had used the last remnants of her shirt to dress the Lieutenant's arm. A large, brightly colored kerchief she'd found below was tied around her chest, and her black hair was tangled and matted, forever getting in her eyes. She probably looked like a stowaway, or a ruffian, but she didn't really care.

The battle had been won without her help. *She was a counselor, not a soldier*, she told herself. The others were scientists, engineers, specialists... they fought bravely, and earned their wounds. She felt no particular guilt, knowing how surely she would have died had she tried to stand up to a Jem'Hadar. She'd only felt worthless. If Rocks pulled through, she'd feel more human.

Oddly enough, her seasickness was gone for the time being. Sunshine caressed her face as Rocks slept peacefully beside her. She relaxed, enjoying this inexplicable moment. The British had terrorized her people during the Crusades, and had the most uncomfortable uniforms and the silliest weapons she had ever seen. Yet they ruled the seas proudly, and she was grateful for the hospitality now. The boat rocked gently on the waters, the salty air brushed over her skin. Others were fighting the battle. She waited for them to come home...

PERSONAL LOG

Ensign Nelson Defont

The starship **Perseus** had just entered the Ovetra system, closing on the Dominion ship, when there was a sudden flash of light. Our whole crew found themselves in naval uniforms, standing on the deck of a Terran sailing ship. Chekov identified the vessel as a nineteenth century galleon, the HMS **Perseus**. The experience was unsettling. I had never been aboard a sea vessel, much less an ancient wooden one. I found myself some ten meters in the air, in a part of the ship called the Crow's Nest. The ocean bounded us on three sides. Another ship sailed directly for us, blocking our path to a lush island beyond. Using the spyglass available to me, I determined it was a French warship crewed by non-other than Jem'Hadar soldiers. Mr. Lieutenant Commander Ramson ordered all hands to prepare for battle. Cannon fire sounded from the enemy ship and pieces of rigging recoiled from the impact. Our cannon replied in short order.

Lieutenant O'Connor manned the wheel, piloting the **Perseus** toward the enemy warship as Major Muldoon armed his marines for boarding action. We sailed broadside to broadside, exchanging more cannon fire. I was wounded by shrapnel. Grappling hooks swung out, latching onto the enemy ship, and pulled it closer to us. Lieutenant Renckly went first, using android strength to leap across the remaining distance. Muldoon led the others, scrambling in a frantic charge across the ropes. I saw the fighting. It was furious. Swords clashed and muskets fired. The Jem'Hadar didn't seem as well adapted to their limited environment and our crew gained the upper hand. Rocks and Chekov were injured during the swordplay.

We searched the French ship, but found no sign of the captain aboard. Abandoning our prize, we put a hole in her water line. Disabled, the French ship could not pursue us as we sailed on toward the island. Major Muldoon prepared a landing party, taking the long boat. The uninjured joined him. Gideon helped me down from the Crow's Nest, tending my wounds.

[Lieutenant (j.g.) L'Hona Amnor, security officer]

As the long boat jolted to a stop on the beach, Amnor leapt out onto the moist sand. Looking down to steady her foot, she no longer saw the polished brass of the British naval clothes she'd been wearing. Her StarFleet uniform brought a grin, as did the welcome sight of her phaser slung in its holster. It was good news. She wasn't sure they'd be able to fight their way to the Captain without loss of life. She looked up and down the beach.

"Vulcan life-sign," Renckly reported, reading his tricorder, "in those caves."

Her mind registered the android's words. Vulcan. The captain. She broke into a run, straight into the dense foliage. The caves were in sight, not far beyond. Renckly and Muldoon both bounded past her. She thought briefly that caution would be a wise idea. She swung wide on her approach, looking for Jem'Hadar or anyone else in the area that might be a threat.

L'Hona saw the away team hit the forcefield. They couldn't get to the captain. "You cannot interfere," she heard one voice say. Looking to the source of the sound, she cursed. One of the damned Ovetra. It made sense for them to be behind this. Despite the distance, she could hear Renckly tell them to drop the field, to let them help the Captain, but they didn't care. They were probably enjoying this little display. She turned her gaze towards the cave. She could see the captain. Crude shackles bound his wrists. He was dirty, unshaven, bruised. His clothes were tattered. Semil stood beside him, triumphantly threatening the crew from behind the safety of the Ovetra barreir. She watched the captain's face. Was it rage that clouded his eyes? A cold knot settled into her gut. What had the Vorta done to him?

Semil sent some kind of blast at the captain, sending him back against the cave wall. He slid limply to the ground. She glanced at the Ovetra, cursing him for refusing to let them intervene. L'Hona couldn't stand it. "Captain!" she called.

If only he could hear her, could know they were there, she thought, maybe that would give him the strength to continue. His eyes opened. Had it worked? Had he heard her? The Vorta had turned toward them. He was speaking, but she didn't hear any of it. Behind him, ever so slowly, the captain roused, teetering as he got to his feet. Semil was laughing at them, his back still turned on the Vulcan. Amnor focused on the captain, wishing she could help him. She watched as his arms strained, pulling against the shackles. With a sudden burst of freedom, one hand wrenched free, its thumb horribly dislocated. He took two more deliberate steps forward.

Sorehl's hand, slick and green with blood, came up to rest on the Vorta. Semil looked startled as the fingers tensed, clamping on his shoulder. He blinked, then smiled, but didn't fall. He didn't even pull away. His mouth turned up in a derisive sneer. "Captain," he said dismissively, almost laughing, "you know a neck pinch won't work."

But he was surprised again a moment later. The captain's other, still-shacked hand wrapped around the Vorta's neck. Semil's eyes flew open wide as the Vulcan grit his teeth. A violent crack sent Semil's head twisting into an unreal angle. The body jerked forward, falling to the the ground violently. The captain watched him fail, his mouth agape. With a ragged sigh, his eyes fluttered, and he swooned forward onto his knees, then into the dirt.

"Captain!" she shouted again, rushing forward despite the shield. Surprised, she found nothing to impede her. She didn't stop. The others rushed in behind her, reaching the fallen Vulcan. Amnor spoke to him tentatively, hoping desperately that he was alright. Crouching next to him, she felt for a pulse. She was rewarded by a flutter beneath her fingers. Chekov dropped down beside her, scanning the Captain. Logan said something, but she wasn't sure what. "You scan him. I'll carry," she told him. Gently, trying not to jar him, she picked the captain up. He was so light. Muldoon stepped aside, standing over the Vorta's lifeless body. She headed for the beach, carrying Sorehl in her arms.

[Ensign Nelson Defont, mission operations]

Nelson Defont sat on the deck of the HMS **Perseus**. His wounds were serious, and his blood level was dropping. He sat back on the bench near aft holding together what dignity he had left. He was a poor sight, his environment suit had a large gash near the left leg. The suit itself now seemed to weigh a ton. The fluid that moved the suit and made it easy to maneuver was almost gone. Defont's breathing slowed a great amount. His face was turning pale and whitish. He was dying, only the Quadaz could save him now.

In the distance a paddle boat could be heard. Nelson barely had the strength to open his eyes and listen, as the sounds of his fellow crewmates got closer and closer. He concentrated on what they were saying. They had found Captain Sorehl! Defont was ecstatic. The away team carrying phaser rifles hoisted themselves back onto the galleon.

The shift was almost magical. The deck of the nineteenth century ship turned into the interior of the starship **Perseus**. Nelson barely had time to see his surroundings as he lost consciousness.

[Lieutenant (j.g.) L'Hona Amnor, security officer]

Amnor carried the unconscious captain in her arms. Chekov kept pace beside her. He looked over from his tricorder at her. "Is he heavy?"

She laid the captain down gently in the skiff. "No, unfortunately." Taking off her uniform jacket, she laid it over him. She knew Vulcans hated cold as much as Klingons did. Fortunately, the sun was warm overhead.

L'Hona picked up the oars and started rowing. "Will he be alright, Logan?" she asked, very concerned. He looked so frail, so... No! I won't say he looks beaten. He can't be. He's too strong for that. But, still...

"Sure. He's dehydrated, malnourished, bruised, and there's no telling what emotional damage he's suffered, but he'll live," Chekov told her.

She looked at him, laying in the boat. She remembered the look of rage on his face.

Chekov grabbed the other set of oars, and helped her row.

"Shouldn't you tend to him?" she asked.

The medic shrugged and told her there wasn't much else he could do here. "We'll be back to the ship soon. If only it were our real ship."

They pulled up alongside the HMS **Perseus**. She lifted the captain, accepting help from Chekov. Cautiously, she stepped onto the deck. It was still the old ship. How could they care properly for Captain Sorehl here? Chekov followed her onboard.

Amnor looked around, finding that they were in the shuttle bay of the starship **Perseus**. Chekov blinked in surprise, startled by the sudden change. "About time!" She found herself heading out, running towards sickbay. Amnor looked back over her shoulder, not slowing.

Arriving in the small sickbay, Amnor laid the captain gently on the nearest biobed. She brushed the captain's hair away from his forehead. As Chekov started his scans, Amnor . She found a shackle still clasp the captain's wrist. She found a nearby tool and pried it off. She threw it into the corner in disgust.

Chekov continued his work. "This is my fault, you know. You told me to stay close to him on that mission. I was next to him when we transported. I should have transported first, checked it out." Amnor could hear the self-blame in his voice.

"You can't have known. And even if you had, they may still have managed it... or they would have killed you. I'm sorry I sent you, instead of doing the job myself, as I should have. I shouldn't have put that on you."

[Captain Thomas Halloway, commanding officer]

Ten hours.

Captain Thomas Halloway stood beside the chair, looking aft. With much of the crew assisting the colonists or gone on the **Perseus**, the Command Center was nearly empty. The engineering panels were in use as a huge situation board. With blinking displays and swaths of red, they told the implausible news of the last Priority One message - the Betazoid homeworld was now an occupied world of the Dominion. The unanticipated invasion had come from the Calandra Sector, an overwhelming attack of the planet's obsolete and undermanned defenses. Betazed had fallen in less than ten hours.

"This is... this is... catastrophic," Halloway said aloud.

Commander Ereiid Sej approached the captain. He answered in cautious tones. "We've driven them out before."

Halloway looked away. "This is different," he said gravely. "Dominion boots on home soil." Only weeks earlier, he had commanded the successful liberation of Canar. The euphoria of that triumph made this news seem even more bitter. Privately, he wondered if diverting forces here had weakened the border near Betazed. "You recognize the next threat..."

Sej nodded, lifting a PADD. "The 10th Fleet is regrouping to protect Andor and Tellar. **Enterprise** will head the group to defend routes toward Vulcan, Alpha Centauri, and Earth."

And I should be out there with them, an inner voice demanded. "And us?" the captain asked, cloaking his thoughts.

The executive officer shook his head. "We seem to be a less-interesting target. Other than the enemy ship detected near Ovetra, **Sovereign** reports no activity."

Halloway folded his arms, thinking of the team he had sent on **Perseus**. Aegis had lost contact with the ship as soon as it had entered the Ovetra system. If they did not return, the injury to the station...

As if his thought had willed it, a flutter sounded at the Admin console. Sej crossed over, hurrying down the steps of the circular platform. His expert hands managed familiar controls. "**Perseus**," he announced, "clearing the system." He paused, looking up. "I don't believe it. They have Captain Sorehl with them."

Halloway gave a firm nod. Energized by the news, his voice took on the unmistakable command tone as he strode over. "Get them back here. And advise them of the situation." He descended the steps toward the lower deck of the Command Center. "I'll try to get through to Headquarters. I have no intention to wait and see how this war is going to turn out."

[Lieutenant Commander D'Mysus Ramson, second officer]

As soon as the first of the away team stepped back onto the HMS **Perseus**, the illusion that clouded the minds of the crew lifted like a vapor. Amnor and Chekov had taken the captain to the safety of sickbay. Ramson made his way toward the bridge at once.

They'd cleared the system and relayed the good news.

Only to be met with direst report of the war.

D'Mysus fell back into the command seat as he read the message. The hand holding the PADD went lifeless beside him. After a pause, he lifted it again. This time, he accessed the **Perseus'** roster. Making notes of a couple of crewmen, he reached for the arm console.

"Attention all decks," he began. "We've received some serious news from Aegis. There was a surprise attack from Jem'Hadar forces in the Calandra system; they Betazoid homeworld fell under attack and has fallen into Dominion hands." He paused. "To those with family on Betazed, I express my regrets. We're told we'll have further information upon once we dock at the station in..." looking down at his console, "eight hours. Ramson out."

He closed the channel. The automatic sensors were the loudest sound on the **Perseus** bridge. No one moved. No one spoke. Ramson leaned back in the center chair, shaking his head slowly. His thoughts focused on his own homeworld. His wife and children were with him at Canar, but new fears grew of his mother and others back on New Minara.

If Betazed wasn't safe, where was?

[Lieutenant Commander Patrick Renckly, chief of operations]

Renckly could not resist the temptation. He took a walk down to the sickbay of the USS **Perseus**. He passed through where the captain was, crossing the distance to where the stasis chambers were. Inside one, lay the body of the Vorta, Semil, drained of life.

Renckly thought of the Vorta's game of superiority. How he thought the Federation was insignificant, weak and unable to stand against the Dominion. This same superiority had been his undoing. He had turned his back, thinking he had crushed the captain. But Sorehl came back and crushed him.

Renckly understood the irony. Had Sorehl not done the job, the irony of the situation would have been enough to kill the Vorta. Addressing the corpse of Semil, he said "Now, my friend, who has the last laugh now?"

*The **Perseus** returns, bearing the injured Captain Sorehl from the Ovetra homeworld. With new orders to assume command of a starship, Halloway reflects before leaving Aegis...*

[Captain Thomas Halloway, commanding officer]

Alone, Captain Thomas Halloway swam in the simulated surf of his native Pacifica.

The swell of another wave rose up before him, not yet close enough to shore to break. He took a deep breath and relaxed. No sense struggling against it. The trick was to let the water sweep under and leave you where you were, not waste strength in a vain effort to maintain position. *Well might man stretch forth his arm to stop the mighty Missouri in its decreed course*, he'd once read.

He took a deep breath, remembering to savor the fleeting pleasures life provided. The salt air was invigorating. He smiled, imagining he could still feel the warmth of Counselor Gideon's lips against his.

As the wave named Aegis had passed behind him, he imagined the next, named **Yorktown**. In the wake of losing Betazed, the Admiralty had listened to reason. They'd returned him to the job for which he'd shown unswerving ability - command of a starship.

He indulged himself in the pride he felt at being associated with that noble name again. Halloway had captained the Ambassador-class **Yorktown** for five years, his first command. That namesake had been destroyed above Earth during the second Borg invasion. He had watched it blown apart from the vantage of his then-command, the **Victory**. In the eulogy he had delivered at the memorial service, he had challenged the attending brass not to let the name **Yorktown** be forgotten. It seemed they had heard him. The new Sovereign-class vessel bore the name well.

He knew full well that, unless the Dominion was stopped, his command might last two weeks.

He pushed his arms through the water, drawing himself toward the beach. At last, he brought his feet down and felt the sand swirl beneath him in the gentle undertow. Trodding out of the surging sea, he snatched up a towel. It was time to make a quiet exit. The runabout Tiber was ready and he had no bags to pack. He had given his good-byes to Gideon. No sense bothering the XO. As acting captain, Commander Sej would already be tending more duties than one man should have. *He must increase, Halloway remembered the quote, and I must decrease.*

Halloway scooped up his folded uniform and flipped the towel over his shoulder. He paused to glance at the beautiful seascape, then strode out of the holodeck. As the doors closed behind him, the ocean had already erased all trace of his footprints.

[Lieutenant (j.g.) L'Hona Amnor, security officer
Lieutenant Gideon Hart, station counselor]

Amnor was sitting beside the captain's bedside in sickbay when Gideon came in. The counselor glanced around nervously. "Lt. Amnor?"

L'Hona looked up, "Yes?"

Gid wondered how to start her line of questioning without agitating the security officer. "How are you feeling? Recovering well?" Gideon asked, hopping onto the biobed opposite her chair.

"No physical pain, no," Amnor sighed.

"Well, then, let's talk emotions," Gid went on. "Any letdown from battle lust?"

"What do you mean?"

Gideon looked apologetic, "With the battle ended, do you feel exhilarated and washed out?"

"I feel a lot like I do after every fight. Exhilaration, fatigue, guilt."

"Guilt?" Gid repeated. Amnor nodded, glancing at the captain.

Gideon followed her look. "For him?"

"For a lot of things. Every battle is different."

"But this one had guilt," the counselor repeated.

"It was a reminder, a big reminder of how we failed him."

"How did we fail?" Gideon asked.

"Not you... security. It was our department that caused all this. It's our job to protect the officers, not set them up to be handed over to the enemy."

"Ah... an old guilt..."

"It feels awfully new to me. It helps that we brought him back, but it reminds me that we failed the captain."

"I don't know what happened... how did they take him?"

"He was supposed to deliver an apology for a security lapse on Aegis, the one where those two Jem'Hadar were killed. He got on a Cardassian ship, but they never brought him back."

"He left the station willingly..." she said in a questioning tone.

"Willingly? I doubt it. Probably ordered to go," Amnor said, shaking her head.

"Who orders the captain?"

"The Admiralty, I suppose."

"You can't be responsible for events that happen off-station. Did he ask for an escort?"

"Yes. Chekov. But the Cardassians beamed him right back."

"Lieutenant... what more could you have done? He walked into their hands, under orders. That isn't your fault."

"I know that, intellectually. That doesn't stop how it feels. We didn't even try to get him back."

"Perhaps you don't want to admit you couldn't have done anything," Gideon analyzed. "It's not easy to face being helpless. Thinking you failed is better than accepting that you did what you could and it was out of your hands."

Amnor looked pensively at the captain. "I know Cara can fix his body," she thought aloud, "but what else have they done to him? You should have seen it," she whispered, trailing off. She'd seen the fleeting glimpse of rage, looking so alien in the eyes of a Vulcan.

"That's my concern," Gideon answered. She slipped off the biobed and placed a reassuring hand on the other woman's knee. "As counselor. To make sure he's fully competent again."

"Can you help him?"

"Of course I can." She tilted her head, hoping the certainty in her voice would force the fact into reality.

[Lieutenant (j.g.) L'Hona Amnor, security officer]

L'Hona entered her quarters at the end of her duty shift. Shaking her head she went to the computer terminal. Not sure how to begin, she sat down, and leaned back. "Computer, list next of kin for Captain Sorehl. Visual display." Someone had to contact them. If they hadn't been told, they should be. The computer listed four names on her screen. She read them carefully. *T'Salik, spouse*. Amnor was surprised. The captain was married? The second name shocked her even more. *T'Kel, daughter*. How little she really knew about the captain.

The last known location for both of them was listed as Vulcan, at the home of a sister-in-law. "Computer, establish subspace communication."

Mike walked down the hall toward L'Hona's quarters. The computer said she was there, but she wasn't responding. It wasn't like her to be late, and they had agreed to meet for dinner thirty minutes ago. He rang the chime on her door.

The doors slid open. As soon as he saw her, he knew there was trouble. The emotions hit him like a ton of bricks. Failure. Anger. Fear. "L'Hona? What's wrong?"

She looked up at him. "Too late. They're already gone." He went to her, kneeling beside her and pulling her into his arms. She didn't resist. He saw an itinerary on her screen, but didn't understand why it had her so upset.

"What are you talking about? How were we too late?"

"I was trying to contact the Captain's family. But it's too late. They already left."

Mike wondered what she meant, then looked back at the screen. The transport had failed to complete its flight plan. It's last confirmed stop was highlighted. Betazed, he read, realizing the importance. His own homeworld - now an occupied territory of the Dominion. The captain's family had gone there and no further.

[Lieutenant Tivok TVlen, science officer
Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

All of the work going on in sickbay seemed a footnote to the patient in Isolation 1 - Captain Sorehl. Since his return, recovery had been in the forefront of everyone's thoughts, especially those in sickbay who were in charge of his care.

This occupied TVlen's thoughts as he went about his duties. Finally, he gave voice to his thoughts. "How is the Captain doing?" he asked Cara. She looked tired. "I haven't checked him since I came on duty. Would you mind?"

"Not at all." He moved to Sorehl's room.

TVlen quickly checked the biobed, and had just looked up at Sorehl when the Captain's eyes opened. He made eye contact with TVlen and blinked. TVlen did not move, watching him closely. With a ragged voice, he said by way of greeting in formal Vulcan, "Vlen-kam."

Non-plussed, TVlen made a slow bow and replied, "T'Kahr Sorehl."

"It would seem I have been recovered," he said. His voice seemed to be gaining strength by the moment.

"Indeed. How are you?"

He slowed his breathing and gingerly sat up. "Only minor physical damage."

TVlen moved to his side. "That may not be a good idea yet, sir." *Well*, he thought, *someone has to be the first to broach the subject*. "It's not the physical we're worried about at present."

Sorehl tried to wave TVlen off, but he moved to the Captain's side. He let himself be helped into a seated position. "My physical injuries are the least of my concern."

TVlen pulled a chair to the corner of the bed and sat. "What does concern you?"

He looked intently at TVlen. "I am concerned that I can no longer trust my mental faculties." In a shocking display of emotion, he dropped his eyes to his hands.

"Why?" TVlen asked cautiously. He had to let the captain make the request.

The captain looked at TVlen again. "I am not certain which reality to believe."

"I understand." *Only too well*, he told himself.

Sorehl tilted his head. "And yet, somehow my thoughts tell me you may have some key to that."

"I do, sir," TVlen relented. He moved closer to Sorehl. With great caution, he placed his fingers across the captain's face. His thoughts reached out to touch the mind of his kindred intellect. The captain closed his eyes, gathering himself, and let his arms drop to his sides.

Confirming the contact was firm, TVlen meandered gently through the captain's mind. The landscape was vastly different than the ordered realm he had once observed. At last, he found the well-hidden cleft he sought. His mind sent out a single word, the key to unlock the barrier he had carefully constructed in the captain's mind before his mission of apology to the Cardassians.

There was a surge. Memories flooded back. Discreetly, TVlen began to extricate himself from the captain's mind. Moments later, he pulled his fingers away.

Sorehl breathed a single word, "So." The transfer was complete. TVlen watched him closely. The look was still haunted, but there was more of the usual spark in his eyes. TVlen allowed himself some inward relief at that good sign.

"Was it worth it? Did it work?" TVlen ventured.

The captain eyed him. "Yes. Events proved it a necessary precaution." He looked down at his hands again. "Your effort saved Federation lives."

"It is your life that the crew is concerned with."

Sorehl looked away blankly. "I am not certain I have walked away with the life I knew."

"Sir?"

The fellow Vulcan looked down. There was a passing shade of guilt for the short moment it took him to control it. "During my experience I... broke. Several times, in fact. I am told the Ovetra's influence may have been the only thing that saved me from permanent insanity. Were it not for the defenses you provided and the fabricated memories you constructed, the Dominion would surely have extracted crucial information from me."

TVlen stood. "Sir, you can't blame yourself. You knew what the Dominion could do. That's why you came to me before the mission."

He nodded. "Blame is illogical, true. But it is disconcerting to face one's... inability to resist." He looked at his hands again. "The inability to control the... urge... to violence."

"Sir, they played with your mind, twisted your grasp of reality. It was a contrivance. Their sole aim was to break you down and weaken your resolve."

"They succeeded," he replied.

"There will be time to consider that," TVlen advised him. "You will reason through it. It will help you become even more disciplined."

"Perhaps," he said, standing. "I shall do much meditation to assure that." He moved to the door.

"Salvation may be more transitive than we believe. Again, my thanks." He took one last look around the little room. "It is time for me to re-enter reality." And with that, he walked into the crowded sickbay. TVlen was glad that Sorehl had returned to them; a recovering captain was much preferred to none at all.

[Lieutenant Gideon Hart, station counselor
Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

It had taken much of her professional training not to show revulsion at the captain's account - how he had killed the Vorta with his bare hands. Amnor had shared the story, but the description in first person was more disturbing. Gideon sensed he shared the same revulsion. The signs of his guilt were evident, despite his attempts to mute them. Sorehl had seldom let his speech falter, as he had in this narrative.

"Once he was dead," she repeated, "you said you felt relief. Can you explain why?"

The captain looked up from his hands. "The threat... was over. He could not harm the crew. He could not expose the secrets he obtained."

Gideon nodded. "You felt constrained to end the threat."

"Yes," Sorehl responded. He moved toward the viewport looking out upon the dark face of Canar II. The sun was hidden behind the bulk of the Canar II, allowing a shroud of darkness to cover his own face. "It is possible," he spoke softly, "my logic was uncertain."

Gideon stood. "Because you benefited from his death?" she offered, with a touch of challenge. "Because it put an end to your own torture?"

Sorehl turned to meet her gaze. "Do not think my suffering has ended, counselor. I assure you," he paused. "Semil tortures me still."

"And where is the logic in submitting to it?"

He paused. "Submission is not my goal. Self-mastery is. I wish to be returned to duty."

Gideon blinked at the directness of the request. "Are you certain..."

Sorehl continued. "I cannot ignore the needs of the many merely to nurse self-destructive regret. This is an urgent time. Commander Sej will be taking **Perseus** away from the station. My skills will be needed here on Aegis. Allow me to exercise them."

Gideon took time to think. "I'd prefer more time for a better profile."

"Your observations need not cease. If aberrations occur, it would be within your option to revoke my reinstatement."

Her voice remained hesitant, "Your experience in sickbay showed you're not exactly up-to-speed on the current state of events." The captain had been unable to identify some of his own officers and was largely unaware of movement along the warfront.

"A captain is well accustomed to education by briefing," he noted. "I would have the available support of the senior staff."

Gideon eyed him skeptically. "You'll be flexible to their advice? And mine?"

"I have no ego to bruise, counselor."

She didn't know if she believed that, but she knew Sorehl would act that way. "We can certainly try it. I'll enter my approval for you to return to duty." She paused. "Welcome back, captain."

"Thank you," he replied. "If you'll wait, I shall change into uniform. We can proceed to the Command Center." With a nod, he turned toward the sleeping section of his cabin. The partition slid shut behind him.

Standing alone in the drawing room, she felt the sudden rush of sunlight on her face as Aegis moved out of eclipse, signalling a new dawn for the planet below and the heavens above.

Soveriegnty

[Commander Eriied Sej, executive officer]

Sej hated command.

As he gazed out the aft facing ready room window of the starship **Perseus**, he reaffirmed in his mind, in his thoughts, how deeply and fervently he hated command. He hated the meetings. He hated secret communiques from Admirals. He hated having to put on a show of good will for every ensign he passed down every corridor. He hated the self-serving smugness that he was supposed to feel every time someone called him "sir". Most of all, he hated the fact that he'd left the person best suited for the job back at Aegis.

Unknowingly, his teeth clenched as his fingers tabbed the desktop panel. He began his log...

FIRST OFFICER'S LOG, Stardate 9804.27

We remain on course for our rendezvous with the starship **Sovereign**. It seems common sense is another resource in short supply. Despite our protests, the Department of Defense went ahead with Secretary Selvik's planned tour of the war zone. The exact itinerary is being kept secret for security reasons, but I do know the Secretary plans on including Aegis in his tour.

[Lieutenant Tivok TVlen, science officer]

Although the verb was a misnomer, it had been pleasurable to "fly" again. As much as TVlen was fascinated by experiments and studies, it was still pleasing to take a ship out and feel the power of the engines respond to your commands. But this was no longer a pleasure cruise.

According to plan, they had met up with the starship **Sovereign** and a small convoy of ships outbound from DS9. Nearing the Badlands, they adjusted course. **Sovereign**, however, had not. Refusing to answer any and all hails, it continued into the plasma field.

The starship **Gallant** had been the unlucky target of the mighty warship's surprise attack. It reeled away, venting deuterium. The smaller escort ships scattered away like flushed quail. With comm traffic jammed, T'Vlen had his hands full dodging panicked ships and trying to avoid weapon arcs.

Onscreen, he could see the **Sovereign**, first of her class, turning to bear quantum torpedos. T'Vlen knew a bad day was only going to get worse.

[Lieutenant L'Hona Amnor, security officer
Lieutenant (j.g.) Kyrios, security officer]

Amnor and Kyrios were working in the turmoil on the bridge of the **Perseus**. Sej was down, injured. Proctor was calling the shots, as the two security officers manned the tactical console. The starship **Gallant** was being battered by withering fire from the hijacked **Sovereign**. Life support on that ship was failing. "We've got to come up with some options. They're totally open; they can't take much more."

Kyrios looked over the sensor information. "Tractor beams?"

"We'd tear them apart. If they get to their life pods, we could extend our shields."

"We can't even tell them to abandon ship, and if we don't get them quickly...," Amnor trailed off. "We need about six minutes to beam them all off," she theorized aloud. "Check **Gallant's** shield variance. If they're smart they've changed it, but... it's worth a try."

Kyrios brought up specs on the **Gallant**. "Pulling them closer would be our best bet. Expand shields and take our chances."

"We'd be too easy a target," Amnor replied. "What about **Sovereign's** command codes?"

"No response," Kyrios answered. "Already tried it." The Caitan tapped on the console, looking over more information. "Whatever we are going to do, we need to make it soon." She frowned, her tail swishing agitatedly.

"They are pulling away," Ensign Defont shouted from his position at Ops, "heading back into the Badlands."

Major Proctor leaned toward T'Vlen. "Helm, bring us around. We've got to follow them."

Amnor was alarmed. "We can't leave the **Gallant** behind!"

Proctor swiveled the chair toward tactical. "That's the most powerful warship in the fleet out there," he challenged. "We're not letting it fall into enemy hands!"

"We're not leaving those people to die!" she shouted back.

"Irrelevant," T'Vlen noted from helm. Proctor whirled his chair back to face the Vulcan. "Warp propulsion is down," he continued. "We're not going anywhere."

The Marine squeezed a fist, knowing they could never sustain pursuit at impulse. "Get engineering on it. And bring us alongside the **Gallant**." Onscreen, he watched as the image of the starship **Sovereign** receded into the plasma field.

[Lieutenant Sam Hartle, engineer]

Hartle had been working frantically for the past three hours trying to regain control of the badly beat-up ship. He had managed to restore propulsion to warp seven, and with help from Amnor and Kyrios, had gotten shields and sensors in respectable shape. Weapons systems were relatively undamaged. While that was nice, none of it had been put to use; they had been unable to relocate the **Sovereign**. He leaned back in the chair in warp engineering, sweating slightly, and closed his eyes.

He opened them moments later, deciding to monitor the current situation with **Sovereign**. The larger ship had left a trail of trace gases as it passed through the Badlands. **Perseus** was doing its best to follow.

Sam pulled up schematics for the new class of ship they were now fighting, any information that might be useful in figuring out a solution to this impossible task. They needed to disable **Sovereign**, but not destroy it.

[Lieutenant Tivok T'Vlen, science officer]

It was a sharp, short fight. The two ships had nearly barrelled into each other in the maelstrom of the plasma field. **Perseus** took two solid hits that threatened to undo all the repairs that had been done, but Kyrios' careful shooting had damaged **Sovereign's** propulsion system. The warship pulled away, but was leaking a faint trail of deuterium. **Perseus** followed the trail to a nearby protostar, finding **Sovereign** hidden in the radiation backwash.

TVlen piloted the ship in the most stealthily effective manner possible, emerging close to the hijacked ship. Their attack run was so fast and so low they nearly clipped the top of the **Sovereign** bridge. But it had its intended effect. Sovereign had been unable to bring her big guns to bear. **Perseus** pumped a mass of fire into the weakened ship.

TVlen rolled the smaller ship, ready to come around for another pass, when a solid torpedo hit pounded the already abused port engine nacelle. It quit, and their speed fell away. Both damaged, the two ships floated dead in space. Fire licked out from open wounds before being extinguished by the vacuum.

Ominously, it was then that phaser fire was detected onboard the **Sovereign**.

[Lieutenant (j.g.) Kyrios, security officer]

Kyrios couldn't believe it, they finally managed to catch up with the **Sovereign**. Ramson organized the boarding party, and they went into action. Just seconds after the transporter effect faded, there was a rumble, like the sound of decompression. The interior of the **Sovereign** rocked. Kyrios shuddered and the fur on the back of her neck bristled. This was not going to be good. Kyrios squinted in the dark, seeing officers down. Phaser shots cut through the dark.

Hartle ducked down, pulling loose an access panel. Kyrios hurried to help, thinking her keen hearing and eyesight would be of assistance crawling around in the tubes. With catlike reflexes, she darted in.

[Lieutenant L'Hona Amnor, security officer]

The bridge of the starship **Sovereign** was still in a state of mild disarray. Boarding parties had managed to wrest control of the ship away from the hijackers. Major Proctor sat in the Captain's chair. Commander Sej and Lieutenant Commander Ramson were still down in sickbay. The Secretary of Defense had been hurt, but he was still alive. Amnor stood at Tactical, working hard to get the ship's systems back to the levels they should be at. *Strange*, she thought, *that just a few hours ago, we were trying to damage these same systems. And we didn't think we were getting anywhere.* She glanced at the shield strength. Barely at 40%. They were still headed out of the Badlands. It would be a while until they got back to Aegis. Hopefully they wouldn't run into any problems on the way.

At least the crew of the Gallant was now being taken care of properly. Sickbay on the **Perseus** had been heavily damaged. She was still surprised that they'd managed to keep life support functioning long enough for the away teams to secure the **Sovereign**. Even then, some had suffered effects of the failing atmosphere. She didn't envy Chekov the work ahead of him. Not that she had it much easier. The vast majority of the security staff had been killed, leaving only a few crewmen. She had taken on the job of acting security chief for the journey back to Aegis. Kyrios was still on duty as well. She was down in engineering, working with Hartle to get the weapons systems functioning again.

L'Hona reached a hand out to grip the Tactical console to steady herself. The room was still shifting occasionally, and her head was throbbing. She would take the time to visit sickbay when she could, and ask Logan to look at it. For now, there was too much to do. If they were attacked by the Dominion, they would be in trouble. Letting go of the console, she began working again on the shields. Forty percent wouldn't last long against a Jem'Hadar ship. She wondered if Aegis had yet received their transmissions. She looked forward to getting back. It would be nice to return to normalcy... not that things were ever normal on StarBase Aegis.

Who Governs the Governor?

[Lieutenant Commander D'Mysus Ramson, tactical officer]

It was an odd contrast between memory and the scene spread out before him now. Cohen slowly sat on the edge of a large boulder, the waves of Canar's newest sea lapping up to the tip of his cane. He drew a small line in the wet sands which was quickly erased as the next wave washed to shore. Most of the water still was a dark red from the sands, but out in the deeper waters a faint blue could be seen emerging as the sediment settled.

"Cy?" A voice from behind took the old man by surprise.

Turning, he saw Donaldson... his arm in a sling. "You startled me." Turning back towards the water, "Didn't hear your steps over the waves."

"Scans show the tectonics have settled down. Damn the Dominion and all their reckless digs. We never had quakes like these to deal with before they came. And now StarFleet has even more reason to take over."

"What are you talking about, 'take over'?"

"Governor Chatham is dead. They pulled his body from some rubble this morning."

Cohen shook his head. "Who's running things now?"

Donaldson shrugged. "No one's trusted the council since they threw in with the Dominion. They want to elect an outsider."

"That's understandable."

"Some of us have been talking. You understand how things are here. And you know how to deal with StarFleet." Donaldson could see Cylis tense at the idea. "Listen. You banded the resistance together when the Dominion took over. We know you're a leader."

"No."

"But..."

"No, I said!" He turned, a clearness was in the old man's eyes that hadn't been there in several years. "I've seen a lot during my years in StarFleet. I even glimpsed my own future once. As the years have gone by the image has become more clear... leading this colony wasn't a part of it." A pause lapsed between them, the silence letting the rippling waves catch Cohen's attention again. "You'll have to look elsewhere. Though, I do believe you're on the right track."

Donaldson stood uncertainly, watching Cy's cane sink into the sand as he walked slowly off.

[Major Robert Muldoon, security chief]

Muldoon didn't hide his irritation. He stood beside the door to the dockmaster's station, surveying the latest mess to drop in his lap. Civilian protestors had managed to smuggle themselves aboard the drydock for a sit-in. Their presence was entirely illegal and a total disruption to construction efforts.

He smirked. The illegal part meant even the captain couldn't object if he invoked a little forcible removal. He watched his people deploy themselves throughout the crowd, starting to drag some of the more resisting towards the transporter complex.

Lieutenant Stemmons approached PADD in hand, "Sir, they've been active down on the planet for a few weeks now... posters, ads, a rally or two. They want the Federation to stop building ships in..."

"I don't care what they want," the Marine interrupted. "I only care who they are. What d'you have?"

Stemmons fumbled with the PADD, "Uhh..." He paused to read. "The Bolian. The guy in charge... Cam Awi. He's running for governor of the colony, sir."

Muldoon grinned, "Is he? How is he doing? They take polls down there?"

"Not sure, sir. I'll check."

"Good. Get info on all these people. I want names. I'll figure out what to do with that later. I want to know what tavern, bar, beerhall, or whatever they were meeting in." He watched his team as they effectively thinned the crowd. There were a few shoves, but no one seemed to want to wind up on the business end of a stun-stick.

Counselor Gideon Hart was amongst some of them, attempting to be a voice of reason to the gathered protestors. Muldoon watched the Bolian turn away from her, unwilling to listen.

Suddenly, both figures grew dark, silhouetted against the blinding light of an explosion, ripping through the room. In slow motion, Muldoon felt a wall of compressed air hit him, knocking him back against the bulkhead. He rebounded, dropping to his knees and one hand. People screamed. Debris clattered on the deck in front of him.

As Muldoon looked up at the fire and chaos, he felt no shock, only rage. Someone had set a bomb on the drydock, on his watch. Anger rising, he got to his feet.

[Lieutenant Commander Renckly, chief engineer]

In the streets of the colony on Canar II, Gar Awi strode toward three men and a woman who talked excitedly. He listened to her hurried speech. "Slow down, Linna!" the Bolian shouted, interrupting. "Now, talk to me."

Linna took a deep breath. "I was up on the starbase. I was in their sickbay; there was a large explosion. I'm not sure what it was from." Gar nodded for her to continue. "Your brother, Cam, was beamed into their sickbay with two StarFleet people."

"Dictatorial animals," Gar snorted. His blue skin darkened.

Linna went on. "By the time I crossed over to see him..." she paused, "He's dead, Gar."

"Dead," Gar repeated. His face twisted into a snarl, "Damn the Federation! They killed him! He raised his voice and they silenced him!" He waved his fists above him. "We were better off under the Dominion!"

Linna continued. "One of the StarFleet people saw me and made me leave. Put me on one of the ferries. I came straight here."

Gar nodded, still infuriated with grief and rage. "You've done well. I swear, upon my brother, that I will win this planet for him. We'll see an end to the Federation occupation of Canar."

[Lieutenant Gideon Hart, station counselor]

Gideon Hart's eyes flew open. A moment later she stopped screaming and gulped, willing to stare blankly at the dark wardrobe on the other side of the room while her mind adjusted to reality. The nightmare flooded into her again each time she closed her eyes. The paralyzing fear seeped out of her body as the unmoving, unvivid furniture she could see calmed her.

"Lights!"

She threw her hands in front of her face and cringed, shielding herself reflexively from the brightness.

Gideon's quarters formed around her, calm, still, and warm. The dull walls said that no burning Cam Awi chased her, but her heartrate remained fast. She rolled onto her back and yanked the covers off her body. "Computer, personal log." She closed her eyes and the brightness remained.

"I feel responsible for Cam Awi's death. I watched him die right next to me. If he hadn't been standing between me and the explosion..." she trailed off. "If he had listened to me, would we have been somewhere else? Somewhere away from the bomb? Could I have stopped the political conflict that's happening now?"

Ego, she told herself. A counselor on a tiny station could not impact universal events. Right? She tapped the bed with her palm and Saragossa catapulted onto the bed, her body knocking eagerly into Gideon's. Gideon stretched out and put her cheek against the dog's fur, comforted, and fell back into sleep.

[Lieutenant Commander Patrick Renckly, chief of operations]

Cam had always been a fool. He'd been the one that chose to move the family to Canar. He'd stubbornly held to his quaint isolationist ideas when the DMZ was created. He'd tried to ignore the starbase in orbit, and after the Dominion invaded, he'd openly told them he would not resist them. When the Federation returned, he'd tried to challenge their strategic use of the colony. None of these things had bothered Gar Awi, despite the flawed motivation behind them.

The fact that his brother's "cause" had gotten others to follow him was a valuable tool. Now those followers were his. And it had only taken the death his brother to do it. Adored by those who'd stayed when the Dominion took over, his death was sure to stir up sentiment against the Federation. Many colonists were still angry at being abandoned by StarFleet. Cam's death and the explosion had shaken things up. The Vulcan captain of the starbase had even deigned to descend from his throne in orbit to address the council.

Gar waited outside the assembly. Colonists began to filter out, signalling the end of the session. Gar climbed onto the pedestal of the original colony marker, a monument to those who had first settled here. His family's name was on it.

He raised his arms and started to speak. "Fellow citizens of Canar!" Members of the crowd stopped where they were. He pointed at the top of the plaza steps, where the Vulcan captain stood. "The Federation," he continued, "has used their militant arm to simulate an 'accident,' an explosion, to kill my brother. He is dead. And for what? Because he dared to tell them - you cannot build your ships of war here! You cannot make us an unwilling target!" The emotion was evident in his voice. "But, I swear to you, that I shall accomplish what my brother started. They cannot silence him!"

"This Federation will offer their assistance. No doubt they will build us in their own image, make us fit their sprawling empire. You know how they work! Even more insidious than the Borg! These are the same cowards who have twice told us to leave our homes when the going got tough. But we persevered. We have survived before, and we will continue to survive! I will not have them dictate our choices." He raised his voice. The whole congregation heard him now. "I hereby officially announce my name, Gar Awi, as a candidate for the Governorship of the colony." Heads turned. The crowd

murmured. Several people nodded. One or more raised a fist of solidarity. There was a spontaneous smattering of applause. Others stood silent.

Gar climbed down. Several colonists stretched arms to assist and patted his back once he was down. He smiled, seeing so many approving eyes.

At the top of the stairs, beside the entrance to the assembly hall, one set of eyes did not approve. Sorehl folded his arms, musing on how ill-suited he was to predict the outcome. Logic had little place in politics.

[Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

The solitary officer stepped inside the landing bay and walked with precision steps to the main control console. With an efficient sequence of taps, the chief of operations signaled the large spacedoors on the opposite side of the room to mechanically slide open. The bright blue glow of the containment field signaled the vacuum beyond.

The small craft in the distance came into view, soon recognizable as a Starfleet Danube-class runabout. The ship gracefully glided past the hazy blue glow of the spacedoors and settled with a deep thud on the duranium deckplating. The bright glow of the Colorado's nacelles dimmed as the resonant hum of the runabout tailed off. Lieutenant Renckly started toward the starboard hatch, which slid open.

Captain Sorehl turned in his chair toward the opening door. His visit with the council had seemed productive, despite the outdoor performance by Gar Awi. It was a logical desire to have Muldoon investigate Awi, but one which could easily be seen as StarFleet intrusion on local affairs. He found himself grateful to have someone as experienced as Ambassador Briel onhand. Despite his obvious connection to the Federation, Briel had won some support.

He crouched as he passed through the runabout hatch and caught sight of Renckly, waiting to meet him. He nodded as he stepped out onto the deck. "Lieutenant," he greeted.

"Captain," the android responded. "Sorry to call you back from the surface..."

"Some things are best left to superior diplomats," Sorehl answered. The two of them proceeded toward the turbolift. "What news do you have?"

"Rocks has confirmed the emitting device was a lambda field generator." Renckly followed his CO into the lift. "Which seems to confirm Dr. Sabin's suspicions about the presence of Kreiger waves."

"Command Center," the Vulcan ordered the computer, then turned to Renckly. "Curious. As I recall," he began, drawing on his background, "the Apgar design required a series of reflective coils and mirrors. Nothing like that should have been present on the drydock."

Renckly approximated a shrug. "The power modules we found on the emitter were Dominion, but the rest looked jury-rigged. And the closest settlement was an abandoned Maquis site. I don't think any of those people were involved. Muldoon's continuing to investigate."

"Tell me about the Congo's progress."

"Spawn has been skirting the Badlands, looking for any sign of where Perseus and Sovereign went. Nothing yet."

"Understood," the captain said, stepping through the parting doors.

[Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

Sorehl stroked his bearded chin, staring out his office viewports at the damaged drydock floating beyond. It's twisted superstructure was clear evidence of the recent explosion. The political situation on the colony below troubled him, as well. But his present concerns were of even larger scope.

The secured transmission had come from SB375. The Second Fleet had failed for a third time to pry Betazed from the Dominion's grasp. Admiral Ross had been unwilling to divulge details over subspace, but confirmed that the Secretary of Defense had been travelling aboard the **Sovereign** carrying new directives for stations along the border. Now both it and the **Perseus** were missing. It was critical that his ship reach...

"Captain," the chief of operations' voice intruded on his reflections, "the runabout Congo has located the **Sovereign**, sir! I'm getting a relayed message from Commander Sej."

It took Sorehl only two great strides to move from the window to his desk. He leaned down, spun the viewer and opened the channel. "This is the captain," he announced.

A somewhat ruffled version of his executive officer appeared onscreen. "Coming to you live from the starship **Sovereign**," Sej answered with some effort.

It took Sorehl a moment to recognize the Trill was speaking from a half-prone position. Biobed sensors blinked in the background. He was in sickbay. "Report," he prompted gently.

Sej shifted, leaning on one elbow. "Somehow members of the Orion Syndicate gained control of this ship, planning to hand it over to the Dominion. It was a dogged fight, but **Perseus** overtook and surprised it here in the Badlands."

Sorehl dismissed his initial questions, opting for the critical one. "And Secretary Selvik?"

The Trill nodded knowingly. "Unconscious by alive, yes." He coughed. "**Perseus** took a beating, but we have her in tow."

The captain's mind sifted through command options. He remembered the urgent tones used by Admiral Ross, then gave his orders, "Make all due haste, Ereiid. Use **Perseus** for parts and leave her behind, if necessary."

Sej looked away from the screen for a moment. "Understood," he answered. "See you in drydock."

Sorehl chose not to correct him over the open channel. "Best speed. See to it," he added officiously. He leaned in toward the viewer, letting his tone change. "And advise the crew I am not displeased with their performance."

The executive officer blinked slowly. "I'll pass along the compliment. **Sovereign** out."

[Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

Captain Sorehl climbed down from the Jeffries tube into the expansive engineering room of the Sovereign-class starship. With two shifts of officers crowded into the double-decked area, the contrasting sea of yellow and black uniforms blended into the illusion of a productive beehive. He nodded, finding favor with the metaphor.

At first, he had joined the teams working repairs. But soon, he noticed the junior officers unable to ignore his rank, making him more a hinderance than a help. Assuming a collection of smaller tasks from Lieutenant (j.g.) Hartle, he had retreated into the Jeffries tube for more solitary work.

Two shifts later, he now emerged to report his success. Hartle was still there, as well, directing other crewman. The Vulcan brushed his hands and approached the engineer, catching the younger man's attention.

"Mr. Hartle, I have completed transtator swapout in the injector undercarriage," he informed. "I believe the duotronic relays can now sustain an increase in constrictor field strength." The ability to report specific progress was oddly satisfying. Despite his primary degree in starship systems engineering, his career had not focused on that discipline. There was a certain refreshment in dealing with concise, solvable problems for once.

Hartle looked at him, not altogether certain how to respond. "Very good, sir," he offered. Was he supposed to give his commanding officer another assignment? "Lieutenant O'Connor has moved on to the tactical systems. Perhaps you...?" He trailed off.

Sorehl nodded. Another area of untapped background. "I shall see to assisting him in that effort. Please advise..." His comment was interrupted by signal from his commbadge. He tapped it. "This is the captain."

It was Chekov. "Sir, you asked to be notified when Secretary Selvik's vitals were up."

"Understood," the captain answered. "I am on my way." He gave a polite nod to Hartle, then headed toward the corridor to fore. Passing the intermix chamber, he tapped his badge again. "Sorehl to Commander Sej," he intoned.

"Sej here."

"Ereiid, I am enroute to sickbay as we speak."

"The Secretary?"

"Not yet conscious," Sorehl explained, "but stable enough to initiate contact." He entered a vacant turbolift. "Sickbay."

"Contact?" asked the disembodied voice.

"It is imperative we receive the directives he is carrying. Time is critical. To accomodate this, I shall attempt a low-intrusive mind touch."

On the bridge of the **Sovereign**, Sej lay where he'd been rerouting console nanocircuits. He almost sat up, hearing the last statement. His face showed concern; his voice lowered. "Is that entirely... wise, sir?" The trauma of the captain's experience with Semil was barely past-tense.

The voice on the other end of the comm signal didn't waver, not that anyone expected it to. "The need is pressing," he insisted. "Selvik is a fellow Vulcan, and the touch is mild, requiring only a semi-conscious state. I need only undisturbed privacy to accomplish it."

Sej leaned on his elbow, still not liking the explanation.

"For the duration, I shall be unaccessable," Sorehl relayed. "You shall need to assume command, of course. Please see to it I am not summoned."

The Trill let out a breath. "Aye, sir. Happy to mind the store."

"Sorehl out."

Sej glanced up at the aft chronometer. If he guessed right, for the next hour, the captain would indeed be out...

MEDICAL LOG

Dr. Cara Sabin, recording

This has been one of the busiest weeks I've experienced since coming to the station. **Sovereign** has docked, bringing a flood of injured and a sickbay in need of much repair. I've activated two shifts of Medical personnel to cope with the situation. One shift is on the station, dealing with the incoming wounded. The other is assigned to **Sovereign** to triage the people over there and to begin trying to set that sickbay to rights.

Captain Sorehl has closeted himself on **Sovereign** with the Secretary of Defense, according to reports I've been given. The Secretary's vital signs have improved, a good sign and I hope a continuing trend. As soon as Dr. Who reports in to relieve me, I'm headed over to there to supervise movement of the last patients and to assess the progress with sickbay repairs. I also want to check the status of **Perseus'** sickbay and arrange for any repairs or equipment replacement. Both ships will need to be restocked with medical supplies. I'd better get moving... too much work to be done yet.

[Lieutenant Mike O'Connor, chief engineer]

Mike's hands slid smoothly from circuit to circuit, efficiently repairing weakened components, replacing the ones irreparably damaged. Putting back the panel, he moved on to the next one, wasting no time. Pulling off the cover, he found nothing but a blackened hulk of twisted metal. "Damn. Looks like we may have overdone it on the damage." Raising his voice, he shouted to a familiar face in the group of engineers clustered at the other end of the tube, repairing one of the more badly damaged sections. "Copper!" The young engineer raised his head, spotted his superior officer, and made his way to him. "I've got to get back to Engineering and see how we're progressing overall. Pull this entire system out, and replace it. A repair like this'll take too much time. One thing we don't have, according to the captain." Copper nodded once, then set to work. Mike crawled to the end of the tunnel and exited, standing.

It seemed strange to have his entire staff here, working on someone else's ship, while their own foundered nearby. But those had been the captain's orders - orders to ignore the **Perseus**.

Stepping out of the turbolift, he made his way through the sea of uniformed engineers in Main Engineering. Spotting Hartle from the other side of the room, he finally reached his senior assistant. "Sam, I just finished navigational systems. I'm moving on to Tac. As soon as Copper gets done, have him join me." Sam looked up from the PADD he was holding and nodded once, then returned to the group of engineers huddled around him. Mike waded back through the sea of engineers, returning to work...

[Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

Aboard the USS **Sovereign**, Captain Sorehl walked solemnly out of sickbay on Deck 16. The mind touch had allowed the Secretary of Defense to reveal his immediate directives for Aegis. The Federation was, even now, preparing to launch an offensive against the enemy. That plan included a role for the Sovereign-class starship now under rapid repair in drydock.

Sorehl moved resolutely toward engineering, conveniently on the same deck. It was his highest priority to make this valuable asset available to his comrades. He entered the multi-decked heart of the vessel, noting with displeasure the slow pulse of the intermix chamber and the disarray of exposed optical cabling. Fragments of a broken plasma coupling crunched under his feet as he approached the master situation board. With fierce efficiency, he assessed the progress of repairs. It would not be enough. **Sovereign** would never be ready in time.

In the privacy of his darkened office, the starbase captain attended to the necessary communication. The glow of the desk monitor cast deep shadows across his stark, Vulcan features. "With regret," he spoke toward the screen, "I must advise you I shall be unable to make our scheduled dinner appointment."

Onscreen, Captain Benjamin Sisko frowned slightly, understanding the veiled report: **Sovereign** would not be joining the forces massing at Deep Space Nine for an assault on Chin'toka. Sisko leaned forward, tossing a leather-bound sphere between his hands. "That's too bad, captain," he answered. "The jambalaya promises to be a powerful mix."

"Serving your own recipe?" the Vulcan asked.

"Like any good chef," Sisko replied, looking wistful. "I'll be sure you get some dessert."

Sorehl nodded. "I shall expect it. Aegis out."

The lights came up in response to the closed channel. Sorehl stood, stepping toward the viewport. Two damaged starships hung against the backdrop of Canar II. Neither would be able to help in this crucial event. Yet, if he understood Sisko correctly, Aegis could expect to see casualties from the battle soon after.

He stepped close enough to the transparent aluminum to feel the chill of the vacuum beyond. He had certified the commendations forwarded by Sej and added his own. The entire crew deserved recognition. They had prevented a powerful warship from falling into enemy hands. Sorehl mused how often heroism was dismissed as routine behavior for a StarFleet officer. He had no doubt such obligations would be in greater demand. Survival against the Dominion would require no less.

Battle for the Sionex

*After a successful attack on Chin'toka, the Romulan warbird **Sionex** emerges from the Badlands, under attack by a Dominion fighter wing.*

[Lieutenant Mike O'Connor, chief engineer]

Mike dashed across for the fighter bay, heading for his customary seat in Blue One. His flightsuit already on, he yanked on his gloves. His helmet came on last, fitting snugly over his head. He practically leaped into the fighter, touching only one rung of the ladder on the side. His palm slid over his visor, bringing it down in front of his eyes, even as his other hand quickly flipped the switches to close the canopy and start the engines.

A few moments later, Mike was in the depths of space. His hand reached forward to the lever, his steady voice smoothly counting down over the comm. At zero, he hauled back, and the stars spread into lines around him.

Once in warp, Mike let his mind wander. There were battles being fought every day... on all scales. Somehow, they were all related, as well. There was the epic - fleet against fleet, armies against armies. Chin'toka was the most recent. Then there was the smaller skirmishes - this battle to rescue an ailing Romulan ship. Each one counted in its own way. "The web of war," Mike sighed quietly.

[Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

From inside the cockpit of Gold One, Captain Sorehl adjusted his sensors. Lieutenant Sam Hartle sat at the 4 o'clock position, assuming the wingman spot. "All fighter leads, check in," the Vulcan commanded aloud. Orderly responses came over the channel.

"Green One, standing by," Renckly answered first.

Muldoon was next. "Red One, standing by."

"Blue Leader," O'Connor finished the roll call, "Standing by."

Despite the professionalism of the latter two, his Vulcan ears detected the excitement and anticipation in their voices. The android, of course, betrayed no such obvious cues.

"Acknowledged. All units, turn to bearing 025 mark 4; and take care to avoid the plasmatic disturbances." From the tone in his voice, Sorehl might as well have been ordering tea from a replicator.

He glanced ahead at the panoramic sight of the Badlands. The massive collection of plasma and energy clashed with the vastness of space. Surges of reds, oranges and yellows beckoned the eye, while eddys of energy threatened to destroy any ship that dared approach.

And out there, yet unseen, was the Romulan warbird **Sionex** about to emerge. The limits of light prevented them from seeing the battle ahead, but the sensors suffered no such disadvantage. Still ten minutes from intercept, scans showed the warbird amid a squadron of six Jem'Hadar fighters.

The irony of being summoned to aid a centuries-old enemy of the Federation marked, once again, how the quadrant had changed.

"Look sharp," he spoke over the open comm. He parroted the command phrases taught him by better officers. "Team leaders, you have autonomous command of your wings. Sorehl out."

It was time to prove how unified the Alpha Quadrant could be against the Dominion...

[Lieutenant Mike O'Connor, chief engineer]

As they dropped out of warp, Mike surveyed the damage. The **Sionex** looked badly damaged. The Dominion fighters were swarming around it like angry gnats. Mike immediately gave the order for Blue Wing to break off and attack. Luckily, the Jem'Hadar fighters saw the Aegis pilots as more of a threat than the crippled **Sionex**, and turned their attentions to them. All the Aegis wings swarmed down on them, strafing them continuously and drawing their fire. Though they couldn't do much damage to the larger ships, they continued to try.

Early in the battle, the fighters turned the brunt of their attack on Blue Wing. After Blue Four was destroyed, Mike reformed the wing and sent them in for another run. Renckly ordered Green Wing in to assist, but Blue still took heavy casualties. Blue Three spun out of control and erupted into a fireball, while Blue Two lie dead in space. Mike couldn't ignore Amnor's pleas for help. Ignoring his own safety, he let go of his controls, contacting **Sionex** to beam her aboard.

[Lieutenant L'Hona Amnor, security officer]

They had arrived at the battle, and Mike had ordered Blue Wing to break formation and attack the Jem'Hadar fighters. Seconds later, Blue Four lit up, torn apart by weapons fire. Mike called them back to form up. Then the Jem'Hadar opened up on them. "Break off, break off!" Mike yelled. She swore and hauled her fighter into a sharp turn. But she wasn't quick enough. Several shots struck her fighter, and sent her spinning out of control. She fought against the navigational controls, desperately trying to regain control of the craft.

"I'm losing her," she radioed to Mike. Navigation was off-line by now, and she was dizzy from the lag in the inertial dampeners.

Another shot struck her battered fighter, sending a surge through the already mangled systems, and igniting a fire in her cabin. The suppression systems were off-line; she tried to route power away from the burning areas. The flames caught the edge of her flight suit, hot enough to start it smoldering. She was venting plasma from one engine, and nothing in the cabin seemed to be responding. "I've got a cabin fire," she spoke into the open channel. She was trying to breathe, but it was getting hotter. Would she burn to death? Or would the Jem'Hadar finish her first?

She started to gasp for breath as available oxygen was eaten by the fire. Her lungs started to burn from the heat. She cried out in pain as the flames shot higher, burning through her flight suit. The craft spinning, she knew it was over. She screamed loudly, growing hoarse, and blacked out. Seconds later, her breathing and heart stopped.

On the **Sionex**, Lt. Sprint was locking on to her capsule. He beamed the occupant to their sickbay.

The Romulan doctor looked down at the charred creature before him. The scanner told him that Starfleet had lost another officer. As the cool, fresh air washed over Amnor, her Klingon heritage asserted itself. Her lungs expanded, filling with air. Her heart began to beat. The doctor looked back at the readings. There was a small blip, then another. Minutes later, the evacuation was called.

[Lieutenant Mike O'Connor, chief engineer]

Mike and Nathan were the only two survivors of Blue Wing. They fell into line behind the captain as Gold Wing began taking a beating. As the fighters started taking heavier losses, Mike could hear Sorehl's voice calmly ordering Aegis to scramble Red Wing and the runabout Tiber. Out of the corner of his eye, Mike saw Green One, Renc's ship, take heavy damage. Before long, it was dead in space. A few seconds later, it erupted into another fireball. Mike wiped a tear from his eye, but knew grieving wouldn't help anyone survive this battle. There would be plenty of time after.

Mike turned his attentions forward once again as two fighters targetted the captain. He moved to intercept, but couldn't stop them before Gold One took a few solid hits. Just as he targetted the first

fighter, the captain employed a braking maneuver, coming to a complete stop. As he flew by at sub-impulse speeds, he could've sworn he saw a humanoid shape impact Gold One. He shook his head.

The Dominion were taking slow but steady losses to the Aegis fighter wings. Mike smiled, beginning to think they would win this. Then, another blip appeared on his sensors. A very big blip. He turned his head to watch a huge enemy battleship emerge from the Badlands. "Not good...not good at all..." he muttered under his breath.

As the remains of the Aegis wings tried to regroup, the captain led the damaged ships back to the station. Mike fell into position to guard the **Sionex**, but was ordered back to the station. As he closed on Aegis, his scanners showed the starship **Sovereign** launching. But that ship still had heavy internal damage! She would never stand up to a Dominion battleship. Mike watched with disbelief as the large ship moved closer and closer to the **Sionex**, which had positioned itself directly in the battleship's way. **Sovereign** sped past his little fighter, moving quickly through the field of debris. As they neared, the battleship abruptly turned away, retreating to Cardassian space.

Mike banked his fighter, quickly ordering his emergency teams on standby, and waited for the go-ahead from Captain Sorehl to send his crews to the Romulan ship.

[Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

The ruse had worked. The still-damaged starship, lacking sufficient crew to control her, had managed to scare off the Dominion attack force. As the lone officer on the **Sovereign** bridge, Sorehl thumbed the button to trigger a hail of the warbird **Sionex**. Automated functions at each console kept the starship in position. The viewer coalesced with a hum, revealing the image of the female Romulan commander. The background was clearly battle-worn; acrid smoke drifted across the view.

Erei'Riov Qal brought the hail onscreen, using one of the few controls that still worked. Commander tr'Alis saw the Federation captain. A Vulcan. She wondered, *could things get any worse?* Now she'd have to argue for every restriction against his people; he would say her restrictions were illogical, perhaps even paranoid. Some might point to their common ancestral heritage, expecting them to inherently understand each other. She might admit their similar racial lineage... but she didn't have to like it. "Captain Sorehl, I am Commander tr'Alis of the **Sionex**. While I am thankful for your assistance, I fail to understand why, if you had a vessel such as this, you sent only a handful of fighters at first. You have lost many people. The logic escapes me. It is amazing that my vessel is still as intact as it is."

Even in thanks, the words speak disapproval, he noted. The irony befitted such arrogant posturing. It had been the Romulan Empire which jealously withheld their fleet while the rest of the Alpha Quadrant bled itself dry. But such observations, spoken aloud, would not do for diplomacy. He opted to defer discussion of the delay in deploying **Sovereign**.

"Commander," he spoke instead, "I have engineering teams standing by to assist."

tr'Alis controlled her reaction. The teams would be well-trained to see and remember everything that they could get their hands on. Qal cast a leery eye over his shoulder. Now came a test of this new alliance with the Federation. A repair team would be hard to keep away from sensitive areas of the D'Deridex-class warbird. How much could they compromise?

But her own crew would never manage to repair the ship quickly enough.

"Captain, I appreciate your offer," she acknowledged with some effort. "But my Intelligence Officer will insist on certain limitations. Any equipment brought aboard must be cleared. No holographic devices. No access to our computers. Anyone who violates restricted areas will be dealt with by my security." She left the threat hanging, watching for a response.

The face onscreen didn't change. Still, she imagined a muted skepticism. "Very well, Commander," the Vulcan answered. "I shall instruct my chief engineer accordingly. Our position here is tenable; I advise towing **Sionex** to safe harbor further within Aegis defensive sphere."

"That is acceptable," she assented. "I would like to see to the retrieval of my crew as well."

"Runabouts are gathering lifepods from your vessel. Unless you object, our doctors will address the wounded aboard Aegis."

"Agreed." She signalled to Qal to close the channel. Once done, she spoke candidly. "They had a ship like that, but sent only a few small fighters? Perhaps they do not desire this alliance as much as I had thought. But perhaps we can get a few of our people onto this **Sovereign**. To assist repairs, of

course." Qal's return smile said he understood. She nodded. "You will oversee security for the Federation people coming aboard... not that you require my authorization." She smiled thinly, understanding his position as a member of the Tal Shiar.

Qal dismissed himself to make the arrangements.

tr'Alis considered her remaining staff. Despite her injury, t'Sha seemed fine; she would assemble the list of repairs needed. Maq would see to the crew, making sure the injured were treated.

Glancing down at her arm, she saw that she would need to see a medic. She was not at all sure she trusted Federation treatment. *Sooner or later*, she realized, *she would have to*.

[Erei'Riov Rui'Qal, Romulan intelligence officer]

On the battered bridge of the Romulan warbird **Sionex**, Qal reviewed his console readings briefly and glanced around the smoke filled bridge. He rolled his chair to another section of the Operations station and activated the ship's log recorder.

"Our situation is grim. We evaded the enemy on a course of 203 mark 001 through the Badlands, but had encountered a squadron of Jem'Hadar fighters. With our already damage state, the attack caused further damage to systems. We were unable to cloak due to damaged sustained during the assault on Chin'toka.

"The first wave hit our port weapons array. Attempts to repair the disrupter systems in that section have failed. Navigations Officer Erein Loka suffered major injuries shortly thereafter, forcing a transfer of helm control to my station.

"Attempts to restore primary defensive systems were successful, activating shields at 50% of normal operation. Our primary forward battery sustained three direct hits, causing an overload of our torpedo launching systems. Given the situation, Commander tr'Alis ordered a distress call be sent. Shortly thereafter, a Federation fighter squadron appeared on sensors and attempted to engage the enemy.

"During this time, the shield system aboard the **Sionex** failed. A direct hit to the portside warp nacelle caused us to switch to backup power systems. Soon thereafter, it became clear the Federation fighters were barely holding their own against superior Jem'Hadar forces. It was at this time a Dominion battleship appeared on sensors. This vessel pressed its attack on our ship, causing impulse power to fail. Computer systems overloaded preventing a direct power transfer to the system. Once dead in space, direct hits destroyed remaining defensive systems.

Partial impulse was restored, although **Sionex** was leaking plasma from the port nacelle, with the warp coils completely fractured. A direct impact caused decompression of Deck 20. With emergency force fields nonoperational, the deck was completely exposed to space. Commander tr'Alis ordered a collision course be set to for the Dominion battleship. Navigational controls were slow to respond. Evacuation orders were sent. Once the collision course was locked, the Jem'Hadar vessel proceeded to open fire.

All but the bridge crew left via lifepods. With forty-two seconds remaining until impact, the automatic navigational control systems were destroyed. Manual course changes were slow to respond, but continued on course. Three impacts caused hull breaches on Decks 25 through 40. Two-seconds before impact, the Jem'Hadar ship made a radical evasive maneuver. Slow computer response time failed to match their course.

After this situation, a Federation vessel entered the area, opening fire on the enemy vessel. Identification of the vessel confirmed her as the USS **Sovereign**, Sovereign-class. Orders were given by Commander tr'Alis to keep close to the Jem'Hadar in an attempt to activate the auto destruct system. However, before this sequence was engaged the Dominion battleship changed course for Cardassian space and entered warp.

Damage reports confirm that all defensive and offensive systems are offline. Port disrupter arrays have been fused. Starboard disrupter arrays are nearly powerless. The vessel's shield network is offline, with sensors showing half of the shield generators destroyed. The cloaking device has taken major damage, and as stated is offline.

Warp drive is offline, with massive damage to the port nacelle. The **Sionex** continues to leak plasma. Impulse drive is operational at 60% nominal. Navigational response time is ten seconds per command, making further course changes almost impossible. The vessel is running on battery power only, with units running low on available energy. Life support is not available beyond the bridge. Hull breaches aboard ship include Deck 20 through Deck 40 in multiple sections.

Given this situation, I find a dangerous situation developing. As Intelligence Officer, it is my duty to keep the Empire's secrets. With the nearest facility a Federation StarBase, I am worried about the technology aboard our ship. We lack enough personnel to make repairs ourselves. In the words of our cousin race, this situation should prove fascinating.

End Log."

[Doctor Cara Sabin, chief medical officer]

The runabout Tiber beamed the wounded directly to sickbay. Dr. Sabin had just entered Sickbay, when the first wave arrived. She identified Amnor by her mind's touch, and headed over. Cara got her stabilized, and sent her to Dr. No for surgery.

Cara drug her tired body into her quarters and dropped into a chair. She was only on a break. Things had calmed somewhat. The initial flood of patients had slowed to a trickle, but there was still post-op to check on, patients with burns to check progress on and a few orthopedic patients that were undergoing regenerative therapy. She rubbed her head, leaned back against the sofa and closed her eyes. What had ever made her think she could run a sickbay and have any kind of life? She lived on coffee... tea when Gideon was watching... and not enough sleep most of the time. At least that was the way it had been lately.

Trying to take care of patients, keep up with paperwork, which was a battle even in this century, and supervise the rest of the department took a large chunk of her time. Being short-handed hadn't helped. Now with these new midshipmen Bradley and Wild, maybe things would be easier. Cara was going to be forever grateful to Chekov for helping out in Medical. She wished he'd just stay there. He was very talented and good with people. That was important especially in high stress situations.

"Doctor Sabin," spoke a voice behind her. She turned to see one of the new midshipmen. "We could use a hand with one of the Romulan patients."

With a nod, Cara stood, re-entering the arena where her talents found best use.

[Midshipman Vinessa Bradley, medical officer]

Put to work, and right away. There was something Vinessa didn't mind. She did mind being confused about why there were Romulan patients all over sickbay. She wasn't sure what had occurred before she had arrived, but there they were, with a sprinkling of StarFleet officers among them. The war was changing things.

Of course, being a doctor, you had to dissociate your personal feelings while working on patients. It was the only way you didn't go insane yourself. At least, that's what her mother had always told her, being a doctor in her own right. It was her experience with this that Vinessa respected in her mother, and this was the only thing they could really talk about anymore.

Well, her first surgery aboard the Aegis had been a success, albeit a bittersweet one. Vinessa knew and so did Dr. Sabin and the rest of her new fellow medical staff, that something more could be done.

Vinessa did leave sickbay later that night, yawning and already feeling a bit worn. Perhaps it was the transport to Aegis, she hadn't had a nap in a while. She looked forward to slipping under those covers and falling asleep.

A Pause Before the Swarm

*Having taken the repaired starship **Sovereign** to StarBase 315, Captain Sorehl chances to dine with some distinguished company.*

[Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

"...needless to say," the elder captain concluded, setting down his cup of Earl Grey tea. "the Nausicaans chose to move their future mining endeavors outside the Morikin system."

"Incredible," Captain Thomas Holloway remarked. "That's not exactly how most cadets spend their third-year training." He flashed his trademark grin, trying to conceal his delight at sharing a table with the captain of the flagship of the Federation. Though he commanded a similar ship of the line, Holloway marveled that he could be considered a colleague of Jean-Luc Picard.

Although no less impressed, discipline prevented Captain Sorehl from displaying his reaction to such distinguished company. He did not delude himself with the conceit of believing he was in any way either

man's peer. Instead, he looked to the window beyond, toward the ships moving in slow concert. "It appears," he ventured, "**Yorktown** has moved into position within the Remmler Array. The baryon sweep should commence shortly."

Halloway looked up from his beverage. "At least they're using a more leisurely pace. The last time my ship went through one of these Dominion Isolation Protocols, they were in such a hurry, I didn't get a chance to clear out my aquarium." He shook his head. "Lost over a dozen rare fish I'd brought on from Pacifica."

Picard pursed his lips. "Be grateful security is tight. We had to contend with some uninvited guests during the **Enterprise-D's** last baryon sweep." He paused for effect. "But that, gentlemen," he said as he stood, tugging at the corners of his tunic, "is a story for another day." He held up his hand to keep the others from getting up.

Halloway rested a hand on the unopened bottle beside him. "Thank you for the gift."

"My pleasure," Picard answered. His eyes looked thoughtful for a moment. "I'll give you the same advice my brother used to give me, 'don't drink it alone'."

As the two other officers exchanged partings, curiosity forced Sorehl to try and read the bottle's label. He looked up to see the elder captain leaving the lounge.

"Chateau Picard, LaBarre, France, circa 2363," Halloway read aloud for the Vulcan, "the year he beat me out for the **Enterprise**." He smirked a bit. "Still, it was a good year."

"An intriguing personality," Sorehl observed. "There is a Vulcan quality about the man."

"High praise, indeed," Halloway noted, sipping his coffee. He set down the mug. "I admit, I wasn't sure you'd accept the invitation to join us. You've been a busy man since I left Aegis - stopping a hijacked starship, rescuing a Romulan warbird..."

"It is my crew you should credit," Sorehl answered with a dismissive shake of his head. Ego was not an impediment to his thoughts. "You have been busy yourself, with the Second Fleet. Tell me," the Vulcan leaned in closer, "what are conditions on the Betazoid homeworld?"

Halloway tried not to wince. **Yorktown** had seen action in two of three failed attempts to dislodge the Dominion from Betazed. He did not like to be reminded of defeat. "You've read the wires. Expected loss of civil liberties. Curfews. Property seized. Travel restricted. Nothing horrific..." He trailed off.

"But your perception?"

"After our success at Chin'toka," he recounted, "I worry about retaliation against the populace on Betazed. The Dominion could try to intimidate any officers with relatives there. My chief surgeon is Betazoid. God, I'd hate to lose Hashbaz, but if they threatened his family -he might have to resign his commission. And who could blame him?"

Sorehl stared at him silently for a time. "I assume some StarFleet assets remain in place in the sector."

Halloway leaned back in his chair. "Well now, it's a planet full of telepaths, isn't it? Dominion counter-intelligence may be ruthless, but they don't have thought police."

"I should like to learn more about what assets remain on Betazed. To whom would I direct my inquiry?" He was careful in his wording to conceal the urgency in his request.

Halloway frowned. "Not sure. But I can check into it."

"You have my thanks," Sorehl answered, getting to his feet. "If you wish to reach me, I shall be leaving aboard the starship **Firmament** at 2300."

"They made you give up **Sovereign** for an Epoch-class, hmmm? Not exactly a trade up."

Sorehl merely tilted his head.

Halloway stood, wrapping one hand around the bottle. "Well, God speed. And give my best to your counselor."

Sorehl raised an eyebrow, wondering if the captain of the **Yorktown** was commenting on the quality of his recover from the Vorta's experiments. Uncertain, he answered merely, "I shall do that." With a bow of the head, he turned and left the lounge.

CANAR II - SURVEILLANCE REPORT
SUBJECT: Gar Awi, civilian
George Stemmons Jr. , Badge 2707
Lieutenant Junior Grade, Security Divison.

Gentlemen:

The past week has been active for Mr. Awi and his band of followers. Since his declaration to run for governor he has been campaigning non stop throughout the colony. So far he has spoken at several taverns and the colony market place. His followers have been posting his campaign ads throughout the colony, many of which contain anti-Federation propaganda.

Mr. Awi's speeches at the aforementioned public places have been decidedly anti-Federation as well. He speaks with a conviction to his cause, especially about the earlier withdrawal of StarFleet from Canar. He is a talented orator, and audiences have been accepting his message and seem enthusiastic about forcing the Federation from Canar. While no threats of violence have been made by Mr. Awi, his proclamation that "something must be done" may indicate a willingness to use it in the future. Mr. Awi's message has not reached the entire population of the colony yet; however, as stated, all who have come in contact with it are accepting it.

[Lieutenant Gideon Hart, station counselor]

Gideon tossed another PADD onto the pile and sighed. Muldoon, by some miracle, had passed his psychiatric exam. One less problem to worry about - unless he killed one of the Romulans now housed aboard Aegis. Steam drifted from her teacup, and she took another sip.

Setting down the tea cup and inhaling the scent of hazelnut, she kept thinking. Sorehl was healing adequately. She thought the continued war efforts were giving him a purpose of spirit. Only time would tell if his actions would be enough to sanctify him. She examined her own meager involvement in the global efforts. She had done her part, and decided she worked best in a crisis. Without a crisis?

She stood up and the door slid open. Sickbay was experiencing business as usual, the arrogant, point-eared patients seeming to fit into to Aegis's brand of normalcy. She leaned against the doorjamb and folded her arms across her chest, wondering why she didn't fit into the easy, social scene. Counselors were probably not supposed to be anti-social. She sighed and headed out.

[Lieutenant Commander Patrick Renckly, second officer]

"I've done it!" Gar Awi clenched his hands above his head in triumph.

"Um....what did you do?" asked one of his advisors.

"Found the perfect way to sabotage that Federation fool." He pointed to the Romulan PADD he had recently acquired. "I wrote on here that for 10,000 bars of GPL, he will sell the colony to the Romulans."

His advisers applauded him. "Brilliant, sir!"

"And, another idea to sweeten the pot. I have also acquired a Federation hand phaser. When I announce the findings on the PADD, Big John," he pointed into the shadows, "will fire the phaser at me, missing, of course. It will seem like an assassination attempt. The phaser will be left on the ground, and you," pointing to one of his advisers, "will make sure he escapes."

Gar Awi laughed. Unpleasantly. "This will surely turn the tide against Briel. Permanently."

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

"I won't have to throw myself in front of any phaser fire, will I?"

The Ambassador simply said, "You're the bodyguard. You tell me."

"That's great. If I die, I will not be happy."

"If you die, you will not be. And neither will I. Come now. It's a five hour trek to the city. We had better get started."

"Five hours? What did I do to deserve this... no, wait. Better not answer that one."

"Surely someone young like you, can keep up with an old timer like me," the Ambassador said with a laugh.

"Don't worry. They haven't been able to kill me yet."

"Yet," Briel repeated.

"So, who am I protecting you from?"

"Anyone who wants me dead... or out of the picture. It might be a very long list."

"Psycho's, Cardies, political enemies. It's all the same. Why would anyone be after you?"

"I am running for the office of Governor," Briel explained. "There is some opposition."

"I don't keep up with local events. Politics doesn't interest me."

"Unfortunate. It can be quite stimulating at times."

"Politics? Stimulating? Try blowing up Cardassian strongholds. Now, that's stimulating." Spawn looked ahead. "So, how long have we been walking?"

"Five minutes. Getting tired?"

"No. I'm running out of things to say."

"Well, when you do, I am sure I will do enough talking for the both of us."

The ambassador started humming, something that Spawn knew would start to irritate him. Thinking quickly, he said, "I'm not sure it's so good to be out in the open like this. A sniper could get off a good phaser shot."

"I doubt it would matter. I've been shot at before."

Not wanting to be outdone, Spawn said, "Ever had a knife to your throat, surrounded by several Cardassians with phasers?"

Briel looked thoughtful. "Yes, actually."

Spawn blinked back at him. "I hate when that happens." Spawn walked the rest of the way to the village without muttering a single word.

[Major Robert Muldoon, security chief]

Stemmons watched the man pass his door through the peep-hole. He didn't look StarFleet. He sighed and sat back on his bed. The mattress was pancake thin, stained all over, and the bare springs groaned loudly under his weight. Stemmons wasn't planning on much sleep. He had to stay alert. He had a long couple of nights ahead of him.

Stemmons hopped up and glanced out the window. The blinking vacancy sign illuminated the street. No one out there looked like a StarFleet observer. He rubbed his eyes and walked back to the bed. He pulled the disruptor pistol from his waistband and placed it on the night stand. Like everything else in the place, it was old and decrepit looking. One leg was missing its base, making the stand shift back and forth. He took a handful of Bezendrine tablets with rusty water. He sat, back against the headboard, and stared at the opposite wall.

It was covered in Gar Awi posters, official campaign promo posters and the unofficial stuff he had printed. One bore a picture of his late brother Cam with "Another Victim of the Federation" printed below. Another picture had Awi in a devastated neighborhood in the warehouse district playing nice guy to some of the lowlife. Stemmons recognized the neighborhood from Muldoon's trip to find the Dominion agents. Other posters featured Aegis crew members and Federation hotshots with "Enemies to Canar" written above it. Other posters were less anti-Federation, other were more so. Stemmon's shrine to Awi included stacks of fliers, his surveillance glossies from Awi's first speech, and a set of audio recordings of each of Awi's speeches.

Stemmons rubbed his eyes and checked his watch. He checked his watch. Their schedule shouldn't be so routine. They shouldn't post notices about where Gar Awi would be speaking. They shouldn't always take the same car. Someone might start following him. They might find him out. Find out he'd switched sides. Stemmons paced.

The comm buzzed. Once. Twice. Not again. Stemmons waited an eternity. The comm buzzed again, he activated the switch before it was finished. "Yeah?"

"We're waiting outside... bring the fliers"

"Where we headin' to?"

"Night Owl... its some little bar over the north side of town... don't forget the fliers and stuff. Place draws a big crowd. The more crap we can throw on the walls the better. Now hurry up..." The comm clicked off.

Stemmons hopped off his bed, stuffed his pistol into his waistband, pulled his shirt over the bulge, and grabbed the fliers from the dresser. Stemmons checked the window again: Awi's car. No one else. His hands shook as he unbolted the door. He stuck his head out: None of Muldoon's lackies. Stemmons locked the door behind him.

On his computer screen another report sat typed, but not yet sent....

CANAR II - SURVEILLANCE REPORT
SUBJECT: Gar Awi, civilian
George Stemmons Jr., Badge 2707
Lieutenant Junior Grade, Security Division.

Gentlemen:

Regret to report there is little change in Mr. Awi's campaign. As of present, I have been unable to infiltrate or even get within surveillance range of Mr. Awi or his followers. Since his speech he has become very paranoid. I will continue to follow his movements from the closest possible distance and will report any findings...

[Ambassador Joseph Briel, candidate for governor]

Since the beginning they had been listening. Watching as others lived, died, worked, played, built empires, and graves. He, was the oldest of them... so old that he himself could not remember. It was time out of mind. Yet, he had always listened. First, to his own kind, then to the multitudes of races that they found throughout the galaxy. Many faces had borne his name. Many names had borne his face. Now he lived among the younger races. They intrigued him. It was rare that he became immersed in their universe, in their culture. However, this time he could not resist. The world had called to him, asked him to remain... and to guide. It was because of his own curiosity that he now stood on the surface of this world listening to it's voice and millions of others. Using talents he had acquired over the ages, he could pinpoint a single voice among the masses and hear it, and only it.

Unfortunately, the years had not been all too kind to him. He found it difficult to listen as clearly as he would like. In his youth he could have heard a voice a million miles away. Now all he could hear were faint whispers of echoes. Yet, a whisper was all he needed to understand. The starbase that sat in orbit of this beautiful world was about to face a crisis. A chorus was rising, threatening to cause quite a commotion. He had always found it odd, that these younger races were constantly faced with life-threatening dilemmas. That they were usually able to overcome them was a testament to their strength. They would overcome this as well.

Looking out among the green fields of Canar, he decided to spend the evening hours outdoors, since returning to the Aegis was not possible. The old man entered the tent and began to prepare an evening meal for himself and young Lieutenant Spawn, who stood guard outside. *A bodyguard*, he mused. It had been a long time since he had one of those. However, it was a good precaution. He was not as powerful or as quick as he used to be. This world was surrounded by a shadow of dark intrigue. Murderers, thieves, and politicians, all attempting to confuse and control the innocent people of this world. He could not allow this to happen...not here. Too many times in his life...he had stood back and watched. Civilizations conquered... innocents enslaved... worlds destroyed. Now, at the end of his life... he would no longer watch...he would help and change things... hopefully for the better. The people of this world...and those on the station above, were becoming his surrogate family. Yet, they could never fill the void in his heart.

The Ambassador sat back in a large soft chair, watching the grass wave in the evening breeze. Like that breeze, he would gently urge the people of this world to his cause. He only hoped that things did not go badly. If they did... No, he would not think of such things. He would not allow things to go badly. This time... he would make a difference.

The Swarm Returns

Xenological File: The Swarm

A violent hive organism known as the "Swarm" made it first appearance with a series of system malfunctions on StarBase Aegis in 2372. At a later date, the U.S.S. **Illustrator** encountered a hive traveling to a Federation outpost via an asteroid. The ship was invaded, but with a much smaller Swarm than had been seen by Aegis. Similar methods as Aegis' proved useful in removing the insectoids. The following is a summary of research on the remains of the Swarm and eyewitness accounts:

The Swarm is classified as a super-organism, like Terran bees and ants. The primary classification of individual organisms are the workers. Barely one centimeter long, they resemble Terran ants. The second classification are the soldiers. These vary depending on role. Some have thick exo-skeletons and wide bodies up to 5 centimeters. Others have sharp pincers, mandibles and/or stingers for attack and defense. Besides these two main classifications are a number of specialised groupings which perform many of the same functions as a humanoid bodies organs - sight, sound, and digestion. Other groupings perform unique tasks, such as winged scouts, nearly microscopic mites which can interface with circuitry, and others.

The collective communicates with each part via gamma waves. Although they swarm in large masses, disruption of their communications confuses the larger body and spawns separate smaller masses that can remain mobile and functional. The "nesting" patterns require a central command center where the leadership dwells. Reduced temperature areas are kept for the storage of food. The Swarm at large prefers areas of increased temperature and humidity.

The Swarm is uninterested in negotiation or peaceful co-habitation. The use of deadly force is authorized in defense against these dangerous beings.

[Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

The Command Center was alive with officers. In the midst of them, Captain Sorehl gripped the edge of the Ops console. He recognized the sobering truth.

The Swarm had returned to torment Aegis.

The first report had come from sickbay - a Romulan fatality, curiously covered with insect bites. The environmental failure soon followed with a sudden elevation in station temperature. Kyrios and Chekov had come to the aid of Commander tr'Alis aboard the **Sionex**. A teeming mass of insects had overcome them quickly, prompting Renckly's invention with the transporter.

Now, his station was at risk. He had witnessed the lone insectoid scout buzz around Deck One, finally taking refuge in the atmospheric duct.

They had been here before, more than two years ago, bringing death to over 80 souls. Of those who had survived it, almost none were still aboard besides the current command staff. Sorehl found the ordeal among his more salient memories: finding the skeleton of crewman Kylosh; plunging 30 decks down an empty turboshaft to escape; Sej barely surviving a vicious attack. Blair had devised a method of confusing them using gamma bursts, but the effect had not lasted.

Sorehl looked at the station status. There were at Red Alert, under quarantine. Renckly was about to sever the docking link with the Romulan warbird. Although environmental systems were not responding, they had not yet lost other systems. The captain remembered all too well how that could change. The Swarm seemed able to interface with the computer directly.

The insects were already in sole possession of the warbird **Sionex**. It would be a race against time to keep Aegis from their collective hands.

[Lieutenant Mike O'Connor, chief engineer]

Mike stared nervously at the control in front of him. He had only heard of the Swarm once or twice in his year on Aegis, and no one seemed to eager to continue any conversation involving them. Now they were back. Once he realized that the computer was affected, even after the severance of ties with the **Sionex**, he contacted Ensign Shield, who began locking down the controls. Mike glanced over at the captain. Even he seemed shaken. He requested permission to begin encrypting computer access. The quick reply came from Commander Sej, "I've already locked out command codes, but do it."

Mike started up the encryption sequencers, watching as the computer reported successful lockdowns or errors in the process that indicated an infiltrated system. He watched the healthy systems tick by - security, external sensors, primary life support, transporters. He relayed these out loud. At the end of the list, Commander Sej questioned him about the main computer overrides. Mike glanced down. To his horror, he realized that they couldn't be locked down from his console, and accessing them would allow them to undo what he had just finished in a matter of minutes.

Mike acted quickly, shouting a warning to the captain as he simultaneously pulled up the hatch cover on a Jefferies Tube. With his head turned, he didn't notice the black cloud rushing at him until it was almost too late. He slammed the cover down, but he felt the stings on his hands. The Command Center quickly erupted into confusion. He heard the captain order them to clear the deck. Struggling to get away from the growing number of insects, Mike pulled the cover from another Jefferies Tube and dove inside. He plummeted straight down, managing to wrap one hand around a ladder rung as he jerked to a stop. He slid down the remaining ladder, dropping weakly to the bottom of the Tube. He grabbed a phaser from a weapons panel and holstered it, then pressed forward, looking for others.

[Lieutenant Kyrios, security officer]

Kyrios came to in sickbay. She couldn't really remember what had happened, but she was sore and itchy and worried about Logan. She tried to scratch, but was soon told by an unfamiliar female voice not

to. She did not recognize the woman and proceeded to extend her claws to scratch anyway. The woman identified herself as Dr. Bradley, and tried to make Kyrios lay back down. She wanted to scratch so badly!

The doctor tried to reassure her, and continued to insist that she not scratch. They continued to talk while the doctor treated her, until she heard a familiar sound. A loud buzzing sound behind the walls. Kyrios sat up. "Doctorr, they arrre herrre."

Despite her weakened condition, she got up, helping an enlisted man to his feet. The two doctors in sickbay seemed on the verge of panic, and only their professionalism kept them from doing just that. Where was Sabin? Kyrios saw Midshipman Wild get a phaser, and realized she no longer had hers. Wild tossed her a spare.

As ranking officer, Kyrios stepped in to organize things. They needed a safe place with lots of room for the patients. "We need to head toward the holodeck," she ordered. Gesturing with her phaser, she guided doctors and patients out the door and into the Promenade. Watching the last leave, she checked her weapon's setting and followed.

[Lieutenant Mike O'Connor, chief engineer]

Mike knew this access tunnel reached out from the center of Deck Four. The next chamber should be an access junction. The automatic doors weren't working, so he quickly pried the panel off, activating the manual release. He pulled himself through, closing the doors. He placed his hand against the shiny interface. "Computer, activate core access. Palmprint security clearance," he paused, waiting for the customary acknowledgement. Hearing it, he continued, "Shut down all core command overrides and encrypt pathways." The computer responded, announcing encryption was complete. Mike smiled, continuing, "Computer, deactivate primary shield."

His smile turned to a frown when the computer responded in its emotionless monotone, "Unable to comply."

The same happened when he attempted to shunt power from the shields to other systems. How else to get the shields down so help could get in? Mike ordered the computer to disengage safeties and overload the shield generators.

"Working," came the answer.

Turning his attention to combatting the Swarm directly, Mike remembered something he had heard T'Vlen mention... something about Blair using gamma bursts to disorient them. Mike queried the computer if the sequencers were still online, and, when he received an affirmative reply, he began charging them. He grinned vengefully as he muttered, "Okay, Swarm, time to kiss your sanity goodbye."

Just as he was about to access the sequencer, the station shook violently. Mike bounced off the bulkhead. The access panel went dark. "What was that?!"

"Shield generator overload," the computer responded. "Primary shield failure."

Mike cursed under his breath, then replied, "Ask and you shall receive, I guess."

The buzzing grew louder from the access tunnel. "Looks like I've outlived my welcome." He pulled on the manual release, opening a hatch into a crawlspace above Deck Five. Turning back, he let the hatch shut and welded it with his phaser. He took a breath, realizing he was panting. He was about to drop down onto the Promenade when he heard more buzzing below.

He froze. Surrounded. He gripped his phaser tightly, waiting for a break in the Swarm.

[Lieutenant (j.g.) Kyrios, security officer]

Arriving at the holodeck, Kyrios addressed the arch. She was pleased to hear it respond. After that last explosion, she feared power would go down. "Computer, initiate Chekov medical simulation." The air hummed as the interior of sickbay was reproduced inside the chamber. "Therrre doctorr," she said, addressing Bradley, "you even have some beds." Wild shouted out a warning about the Swarm entering the Promenade, then sealed the door.

"Doctorr Bradley, we may need a back up plan."

The doctor let out a breath and said, "Where can we go? We can't make people crawl into the Jeffries Tubes. Not in the condition they're in." She began to pace.

Kyrios considered their options, not finding many. The buzzing outside the holodeck door got louder. "They arrre trying to get in. We need to think quickly." She pointed at the doctors, raising her phaser. "Wide sprrrread, lethal powerrr."

The doors split open slightly, and the bugs began to trickle in. All three officers fired. Bradley put herself between the door and the biobeds, trying to protect the patients as much as possible. Kyrios found herself wishing they had a giant bug-eater. She was beginning to itch again, but kept firing.

The insects kept buzzing in through the small crack. Kyrios looked around the holodeck for some kind of alternative. "I have an idea," she shouted, "get all the patients to move overrrr therrre." The Swarm was used to being the hunter. What if they became the hunted? Kyrios shouted at the holodeck interface, "Computer, add a nest of Talarian hook spiders to this simulation!" Several arachnids with half-meter-long legs appeared, descending from the ceiling. Strands of webbing followed them.

Doctor Bradley was still laying down covering fire as she shouted, "You are brilliant!"

"Let's see if it worrrrks!" Kyrios watched as the spiders cast even more strands. She leaned against a wall to catch her breath, smiling, watching the webs hang heavy full of the horrid bugs. They all held their phasers ready, waiting to see the results of the arachnid warriors. Kyrios heard a noise at the holodeck door. Red light pulsed outside, visible through the door crack.

"Move everrryone away frrrrom the doorrrr," she shouted. Wild pointed his phaser at the door, but Kyrios told him to wait. "Get down!" she yelled. The doors whined as they slid open. Instead of a wall of insects, there was a solitary person in an environmental suit, brandishing a phaser rifle. Walking in, he caused a crunching sound as his boots smashed the fallen bugs.

It was Captain Sorehl.

Suited up, he flailed at the webs as they started to bind him. Bradley and Kyrios hurried to assist him.

The captain raised an eyebrow, finally getting free, "Holographic arachnid webs?"

Kyrios smiled, "Yes, Sirrr." Lieutenant O'Connor rushed into the holodeck, phaser at ready.

He looked to Kyrios, "An excellent concept. I believe that gives me... an idea."

She smiled even more. "Thank you, Sirrr," she said purring.

[Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

Captain Sorehl stood in the holodeck, assessing the situation. In addition to the wounded, there were seven able-bodied members of the crew here. Not many against the Swarm. He drew a breath from inside his EVA suit.

Lieutenant Kyrios had demonstrated an important trait of the holodeck. Because they could be used to create an environment hostile to the insects, the four rooms lining the Promenade were the most defensible place on the station.

If a stand was to be made, logically, it would be from here.

In the careful structure of his mind, the Vulcan sketched out his strategy.

They would need to secure the other three holodecks. They would need to decide what environment would be easiest to defend themselves within. They would need to get as many surviving members of the crew here. Only then could they turn their attention to making an offense against the Swarm.

Sorehl stuck out his chin resolutely, assuming the stance that would turn thought into action. "Mr. O'Connor, your orders are to make certain the holodeck reactors remain powered and under our control." With a quick nod, the chief engineer scurried toward the grid along the wall, opening an access panel.

He glanced toward Kyrios. "I need teams to secure the other three holodecks on this level. Bring them online." The Caitan nodded, turning to suit up. The captain turned toward the young doctors. "We will maintain this area as a medical ward, the other areas we will make less hospitable for the Swarm."

"I shall attempt to contact other portions of the station and advise them to proceed to our position. I recommend all of you find protective garments from the corridor bins." He paused. "Those are my orders."

The group spurred to movement, a collective will to match that of the life form arrayed against them...

[Lieutenant Tivok T'Vlen, science officer]

Pain. That was the overriding feeling that came to T'Vlen when he was conscious. He was too hurt to be glad he still lived. He felt stinging bites across his shoulders and upper arms.

He vaguely remembered firing his phaser in an attempt to set off the fire system on the CC, but it had failed. He didn't, or couldn't, yet remember why. His last conscious thought was of realizing he'd failed, and that he was going to die.

He was therefore surprised when he woke up. For a while, T'Vlen thought that the reason he had restricted movement was due to injuries, but slowly he realized he was somehow trapped. He forced himself to stay conscious enough to evaluate the situation.

The Swarm had encased him in some type of cocoon. Many insects saved their prey in this way to use the prey as incubators, or save the food for their queen. T'Vlen liked none of those options. He must find a way out.

He heard a moan somewhere beside him. Squinting, his eyes resolved the form of Ensign Richard Shield, also encased. T'Vlen slid his hands down his own torso, reaching for the phaser he'd tucked there. He closed his eyes. The Swarm had stripped him of all of his technological devices, right down to his comm badge.

With nothing else to do, T'Vlen began to thrash sideways, and kick at the bottom of his cocoon, searching for a weakness.

[Ensign Mateo Falcone, engineer
Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

Beside Captain Sorehl in engineering, Ensign Mateo Falcone boosted power through the direct connection to Lieutenant Hartle and some Romulan in Drankum's Bar. The captain stood, EVA helmet in hand, as he spoke to Hartle over the dedicated link. The Vulcan directed the unseen engineer to use their newfound power to restore communications and order all personnel to evacuate or reach the holodecks. "We will make our stand there," he finished.

The explosion that ripped through Main Engineering took them completely by surprise.

In the chaos, the images that followed were disjointed. The flames were everywhere. The bulkhead lowering. He looked for the captain. The computer chimed something. Oxygen was thinning. Heat seared past. He felt an arm clamp around him, stumbling him forward. There were plumes of thick, green gas spewing from beside the reaction chamber. The bulkhead was almost down.

With sudden clarity, he knew they weren't both going to make it.

Falcone squirmed, trying to wrench his benefactor in front of him, through the closing gap. But Vulcan strength won out. The young engineer careened forward, losing his breath as he slammed down on the deck beyond. There was a flash of light behind him and a suction sound as the bulkhead eased into place.

"Warning," the computer chimed, "reactor core primary coolant failure."

Falcone spun, pressing his hands against the transparent aluminum. The swirling gas was starting to wash over the fallen figure, its EVA suit aflame. Through the mist, he could see a helmet rolling away. "Captain!" he shouted vainly, watching him disappear from view.

"Warning," the computer alerted, "fire suppression system must vent Deck 108. All personnel should proceed to other decks."

Falcone pounded a fist against the clear surface. The chamber beyond was sealed off. There was no way to get back in. The coolant now filling Main Engineering would disintegrate flesh. On the rest of the deck, the ensuing vacuum would snuff him out as well as the fire.

Gritting his teeth, he moved toward the turbolift shaft, toward the rungs to safety...

[Lieutenant Cara Sabin, chief medical officer
Lieutenant Christopher Rocks, chief science officer]

Entering the holodeck behind Lieutenant Sprint, Cara watched him set Lieutenant Rocks in the makeshift treatment area. As the doctor knelt beside Rocks to tend him, Sprint went off to report in. Removing equipment from her medkit, Cara looked around to see if there was anyone else free. Seeing the other doctors occupied with other patients, she set to work by herself. Cara took a deep breath and centered herself, reaching for the normal cool calm that was her usual demeanor when working.

Chris' eyes fluttered open again and focused on the black and yellow grid above him. He realized he was in one of the holodecks. "Lie still," he heard a voice telling him. It was Cara. He gasped softly and coughed.

She reached for her scanner and began running it slowly over his damaged body. She frowned at the reading. "Damn... I need a real sickbay. This is ridiculous." Setting the scanner down again, she prepped a hypo to try and stabilize his erratic vital signs. Heartbeat rapid and erratic, respiration depressed and strained... and other damage she hadn't even had time to decipher yet. She added an analgesic as he groaned again. "I'm going to give you something for the pain. And I've got to try to find out what internal damage there is."

Chris groaned, leaning forward. Blood oozed from his mouth, pooling on the deck. Cara jerked backward as one of the insects crawled out of the fluid, buzzing away loudly. The science officer flopped his head back; the color had drained from his face. His eyes rolled back as he gagged. His muscles tensed.

"No! No!" she shouted as he fell back. "You aren't going to die. I won't let you!" she shouted. Pushing back the desperation that clawed at her mind, she flipped the hypo in her hand, pumping a massive dose of cardiac stimulant into his body.

His back arched as he gasped for air. Cara watched him with one eye, keeping the other on the scanner in her hand. She was gasping for air herself. She watched his heart rate settle, then go steady. Rocking back on her heels, she let out the breath she hadn't realized she was holding. She took quick stock of the wound in his throat and then gave him something to ease his breathing. "You're going to be all right. I promise."

She looked across the holodeck, wondering how many others were suffering similar traumas.

[Ensign Mateo Falcone, engineer]

Falcone kept climbing the rungs. He must have climbed fifty decks by now. The ex-Maquis felt the powerful ache in his arms. It was still fifty decks before he would reach the holodecks on the Promenade, where the captain had said to go.

He glanced down past the hundreds of rungs below him, toward Main Engineering. The captain was still down there. Falcone pictured the explosion and the corrosive coolant fumes. By now, the fire suppression systems would have kicked in, exposing the deck to vacuum. The muscles in his jaw tightened. Any one of those three things was enough to kill the captain. As painful as it was, he had to press on. He had to deliver the captain's plan to Hartle if they were going to survive.

Falcone reached up for the next rung, as another explosion rocked the station. He saw bright plumes below him. He panted, reminded more than ever of his race against time.

[Lieutenant L'Hona Amnor, security officer]

Amnor sat in the holodeck, resting. She was almost feeling alive again. Dr. No had treated her injuries, and moved on to tend other wounded. Looking around the holodeck, she saw how many there were. Some of the security staff lay sedated amongst the science and engineering officers. She wondered where the captain had disappeared to. They should have heard from him by now. Where was he? They had to gain the upper hand soon, or they'd lose Aegis.

[Lieutenant (j.g.) Sam Hartle, engineer]

Within the confines of Drankum's Bar, Sam continued to take advantage of the independent computer and power supply system that the Ferengi kept onhand for record keeping. He and the Romulan Subcommander Qal had been able to make contact with several parts of the station, using those systems. They had learned the warbird **Sionex** had been completely overwhelmed, but that **Perseus**, although unmanned, was uncompromised.

Captain Sorehl had contacted them from Main Engineering, giving them orders to pass on. Since then, from their vantage in Drankum's office, they had seen many officers reach safety across the Promenade, entering the holodecks.

Then there was the explosion. They'd lost all contact with Main Engineering.

Qal advised dumping power into one of the available station systems, to make at least one valiant attempt to drive back the Swarm. Hartle knew they could power at least one auxiliary system. But which?

[Lieutenant Tivok T'Vlen, science officer]

Vulcans were not true telepaths. While the advanced nature of their mind sciences had achieved much, their abilities were generally limited to those with whom they could make physical contact. Still, Tivok T'Vlen felt it was his only option. He tried hard to broadcast his distress, to let someone, anyone, know the danger before he passed out. If he could let someone know that he and Shield were trapped down here, they might be retrieved. He knew his condition was worsening and time was short before he lapsed into unconsciousness.

He felt as if his limbs were somehow heavier than normal. Part of his mind was able to quite amicably inform him of its condition, when he was conscious anyway.

He'd been hurt like this once before, on a trip to Vulcan. Backpacking with his father in the desert near home, he'd been bitten by an arachnid with a nasty venom. He'd swelled up and almost died before his Dad had backtracked and found him.

T'Vlen snapped his attention back to the present. The swarm... their bite must have an anti-coagulant in it, to keep the blood flowing. The anti-coagulant had a venomous side effect. Like mosquitos and bees, this could have a reactive quality to it, per individual. He wanted to think on it more, but was incapable of being more clinical about that. He was able to send only a brief message before he blacked out again.

[Lieutenant Cara Sabin, chief medical officer]

Cara moved through the corridors, searching for more wounded. She sank to her knees as waves of dizziness and pain flooded her. She fought to hold back the feelings and clear her mind enough to tell from where it was coming. She tried to clear her mind of the numbling pain that was filling her. Someone was reaching for her, someone in pain. But who?

Then an achingly familiar presence filled her, a presence she hadn't felt for what seemed like eons and she jerked upright. "Tivok," she whispered. *Where are you?* If he could only hear her. She waited, but could sense no coherent answer, only more pain. How could she send someone for him? Internal communication was down, and the Swarm was still in control of the station. She didn't even know where he was. She focused on him, resolving to find him herself. "Oh, please let me find him," she offered up the whispered prayer and hoped someone was listening.

She started to move to the ladder then stopped in her tracks. The wounded. The captain had given the order to retreat to the holodecks. Everyone that could was on their way. There would be even more injured streaming in. And she was the CMO; it was her job to be there, to bring order to some of the chaos that would reign. A half turn back toward the triage area before another wave of pain and disorientation forced her to crouch down and grab hold of the wall.

She couldn't ignore the pain. She sensed the terror and pain Tivok was feeling. She wasn't a security officer. Her job was healing people, not playing rescuer. Orders... she had orders... to stay in the holodecks. Do her job, let someone else go find him, take the chance of getting caught by those horrid creatures.

But there were others who could help the injured. But what about T'Vlen? She was the only one who could guarantee that she could locate him, at least as long as he was alive. Once more she turned, half stumbling toward the exit. Down... he was below her, somewhere in the heart of the station. How far she didn't know, but she'd go until going any further meant he got further away instead of closer..or until she could tell more surely what direction to take.

Down and down she climbed, only stopping to wipe the sweat-drenched hair from her eyes. She rubbed her hands on her uniform so she didn't lose her grip on the rungs. The Vulcan's presence grew stronger for a long while, then she noticed it diminishing and began to climb back up again. Deck 13. The cargo bay complex started here. She stepped off the rungs and onto the deck. Glancing around, she pulled the hatch from a lateral Jeffries tube and slid inside. Stopping again to wipe her brow, she closed her eyes for a moment and tried to focus on him.

She was so hot, she thought she'd faint soon if she couldn't take some of this clothing off and get cool somehow, but she kept going knowing she had to find him. The Jeffries tube ended at an access hatch. Cautiously she opened it and peered out. She could hear buzzing, but it was in the opposite direction. Crossing both sets of fingers, she hoped they wouldn't notice a lone humanoid female.

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

He couldn't remember how he had gotten there. The last thing he could remember was standing outside the Ambassador's tent on the surface of Canar II. Briel had hurried out, telling him something about a swarm of insects invading the Aegis. Now, he was in a dark corner of one of the many corridors of StarBase Aegis. The gap in his memory could have included a period of time anywhere from five minutes to five years for all he knew.

Spawn's mind kept wandering to one of the many nightmares that kept him awake almost every night; the one which he always dreaded the most. He was running through a passageway, completely surrounded by darkness. He heard a strange buzzing behind him, and when he turned around, he always saw a large group of giant insects running toward him. In the end, he would always wake up just as the swarm pounced on him. His whole life, nothing had ever frightened him... nothing, except insects. Now he was living his nightmare. He was trapped in a dark corridor, on a station over-run by the Swarm.

Spawn was wrapped in an eerie silence, feeling nothing but the sweat that was running down his face from the terror that was overwhelming him. With every minute that passed, his memory drifted away. Soon, he could remember nothing except his dream and his current situation.

As he clutched his phaser, Spawn heard a strange noise which sounded like it was coming from inside the wall behind him. He ran down the corridor as fast as he could, not stopping until he reached a dead end. He quickly darted back the way he came until he found another path he could take in his search for a safe haven. Breath heaving, he talked to himself, "You could handle Cardassians and Jem'Hadar, but you run away from bugs."

Spawn heard the buzzing sounds he had feared his whole life emanating from behind him. He turned around and saw a group of the giant insects, moving quickly toward him. He ran away as fast as he could, but when he looked over his shoulder, he saw that the Swarm was gaining on him, ready to pounce on him at any moment.

[Lieutenant Commander D'Mysus Ramson, tactical officer]

"Progress on the Green Blood's ship?" the voice asked across the void.

"Satisfactory," came the response. "Power source adequate. Full incorporation expected."

The passages and corridors of the warbird **Sionex** writhed with countless numbers, blocking out any sight of the bulkheads. An open panel to the main computer core sparked randomly across a visible sheet of isoliner circuitry. At the near-microscopic level, the tiniest mites of the Swarm dug into the chips with conductive mandibles, manipulating the current's signals. In other places the creatures flung themselves into the live current of the pathways. Hundreds had done so before, now fried and fallen to the side. This one, however, successfully gripped tight. Energy sparked between its mandibles. This match found, it added one more step in the living circuit pathway.

"Almost all of the lockouts have been bypassed. Damaged areas being replaced."

"We will continue to examine the Red Blood hive."

The turbolift opened on the Command Center. A mass of crawling beings covered all the walls, every panel, and every station. Out of the lift another mass scurried out and to the center of the deck. Receeding, a large shimmering white cocoon was left behind. The Swarmer, having delivered its package returned to the lift.

The central hive hanging from the ceiling drooped down and closer to the cocoon. Dozens of insects emerged from the outer layers of the silken shroud and migrated to one end. With deliberate movement, they pulled back the sticky silk until the head of a being was visible.

A beetle crawled up the unconscious crewman's neck. Climbing across the chin and up to the lower lip, it stepped over the open mouth. A quick flutter of shelled wing covers and the beetle shot out a fine spray.

The Efrosian crewman's eyes shot open. Despite the vile odor, he could do nothing but breath... gasp for air. The muscles of his face tensed and twisted in pain. His vision blurred in foggy patterns of confusion. His thoughts spun in disarray like something was eating his mind and sanity. Which was exactly what was happening. The larva implanted in him while cocooned had grown and spread slowly through his nervous system. They had finally found their target... his brain and the knowledge stored chemically within.

The central hive came together tightly and dropped onto the bewildered soul. His end came quickly with a million cutting insect jaws and one muffled scream. The larva who had digested his synapses and neurons migrated to the inner reaches of the Swarm mind, ready to pass on what they had learned.

"Bring another."

[Lieutenant (j.g.) Sam Hartle, engineer]

Sam's mind had been drifting for a few minutes, considering their next move. Qal nudged him. "Your chief engineer says he wants a word with you," the Romulan reported. They'd used the available power to restore internal communications.

Hartle moved to the comm panel eagerly. "Mike, what is your status?"

"I'm in Holodeck Two, not far from you. I've got Commander Sej with me. He's injured. What are you are that Romulan up to?" O'Connor asked.

"Well, we've restored communication and we're working to on an idea to gain the upper hand against the Swarm. I think we have enough power to transmit command codes to the Perseus. If we can establish contact, maybe we can use her transporters to help us out," replied the assistant engineer.

“Alright, stay put. Charlie and I are going to try an experiment,” Mike advised him. “Once we have the results, we’ll join you over in Drankum’s. O’Connor out.”

[Midshipman Vinessa Bradley, medical intern]

Still shaken up, Vinessa Bradley worked quietly over one of the many patients that were gathered in the holodeck. Her hair was a mess, and her eyelids drooped with fatigue. She felt another itch and squirmed. She wasn’t sure if it was real, or that she just had the creepy crawlies because of all the bugs, but .. she was definitely squirming.

There was a sharp pinch on her arm. Vinessa grabbed at it, smashing the bug with the palm of her hand. She took in a sharp breath as things started swirling around her. *Damn*, she thought, *I’ve always been allergic to most bug bites*.

She fell over, laying on the ground, blacked out, her airway slowly closing.

This probably meant she was allergic to this too.

[Lieutenant (j.g.) Logan Chekov, medic]

Logan ran his hands over his face again, feeling the rough bandage he had put on his eyes. The pain in his legs had left but the tingling feeling it had caused still remained. It was all new to him. Feeling so physically weak that he couldn’t muster enough strength to even stand. On top of it all, he was blind. His eyes burned uncomfortably like someone was holding a hot needle to them. His body ached all over, like the exhaustion of a good workout.

His body was drained from the medications pumping through him. They had saved his life but strained his weakened systems. By the saltiness in the air, he knew the station was dying, being drained off everything. The vents weren’t working, leaving the taste and stench of sweat.

The hairs on his arms lifted slightly as though there was a slight breeze coming over him. He finally realized it had to be the transporter. But where was he going? He felt himself appear in his new surroundings. He breathed deeply, the air was crisp and fresh, no sweat and dampness. It had to be the **Perseus**, it had to.

[Lieutenant Michael O’Connor, chief engineer]

Mike knelt in the center of the access junction, setting down the portable gamma wave emitter. It would just barely cover the intersection and surrounding area; he prayed it would still have some effect on the Swarm. Ensign Charlie Smith stood watch beside him, phaser rifle at ready. If they were disturbed in the next few minutes, it wouldn’t matter what the Swarm did to them. The whole section would get vaporized in a flash. In his hands, he gently cradled his most precise tools... and the innards of a photonic grenade.

There wasn’t much time to stop the building overload taking place at the base of the station. With access to Main Engineering gone, the only hope was to retake the Command Center. If not, the fusion reactors in the engineering module would continue unchecked until they blew apart the lower half of the starbase. But the Swarm held Deck One.

If he could the main charge’s intermix slightly, he was sure he could take out the Swarm without damaging the Command Center. He just had to make sure it was only dangerous to organic matter, and would completely pass through inorganic matter, like a baryon sweep. When he had bypassed the concussive charge, he stopped for a few moments to relax his hands. That’s when he heard the buzzing.

Charlie, a silent sentinel behind him, jumped into action. He held his phaser rifle steady, and with a nod to Mike, tapped the panel to open the access door. Mike smiled widely at what he saw. The Swarm seemed to be holding itself back, keeping their distance from the access junction. They were hitting the edge of the gamma wave sphere and didn’t enjoy having their collective consciousness disrupted. “Fish in a barrel,” uttered the Klingon with the human name. Charlie took them all out in one quick sweep, then closed the access door.

Mike went back to his work, and, after a few more minutes, was finished. He carefully attached the single grenade to the clip on his belt, stood, and stretched. He gathered up his tools, slinging them over his shoulder, and did the same with his phaser rifle. Last of all, he picked up the gloves for his EVA suit and put them back on. They were far too bulky for the delicate work he had to do, but they would provide some protection against the Swarm. When he was ready, he motioned to Charlie, and they headed out of the safe zone and into the breach.

[Erei'Riov Rui'Qal, Romulan intelligence officer]

In the V.I.P. quarters aboard Aegis, Qal sat waiting for time to pass. It had been several days since the Swarm had disappeared from the Federation Station with the **Sionex**. They had taken the warbird, transforming it into some sort of hive, and fled into the Badlands. The Federation starship **Perseus** had gone after them, but found only an impulse trail that dead-ended in the remnants of a quantum implosion. Qal shook his head. The Empire was sending another craft to retrieve the crew of the **Sionex**.

The Tal Shair officer stood and started to pace slowly around the room deep in thought about what would be ahead. Upon returning to Romulus, Qal would be debriefed for several days about the loss of the **Sionex**. But life, and his career, would move forward. Commander tr'Alis, who had been injured in the insect attack, had proven a loyal and capable officer. She would get another Command and return to the Dominion front; he was sure of it.

"Sprint to Erei'Riov Qal," a voice stated from a terminal on the wall.

"Proceed," the Romulan replied.

"Subcommander, the shuttle is ready to convey you to the warbird **Alionex**," Sprint reported. "Captain Sorehl extends his farewells and his best wishes for the recovery of your commander."

Qal nodded slightly and started to walk towards the door, "Very well. We shall be on our way." He exited the quarters. He basked in the open environment of the Federation station, once again marvelling that a Romulan was permitted to walk freely here. This alliance still seemed unreal. Still bearing that feeling, he stepped onto the turbolift.

MEDICAL LOG

Dr. Cara Sabin, recording

We've returned to the station and begun the process of cleaning up. The list of fatalities mounts hourly. The last report was sixty deaths and over a hundred injured. We've managed to stay on top of the injuries. My staff has exercised superb triage skills and has worked tirelessly and without thought to themselves. I'm placing a personal commendation into their files.

Two deaths in particular have disturbed me. The newest additions to my staff - Dr. Vinessa Bradley and Dr. Philip Wild. They had barely arrived; both shared great potential to be good doctors and a credit to the uniform. I'll be sending my personal condolences to their families.

Commander Sej is recovering and should be back to duty within a few days. Lieutenant Rocks' optic nerve is slowly regenerating; it will be a week or more before his eyesight is back to normal. He has been released to his quarters to recuperate. Lieutenant T'Vlen was originally released, against my better judgment, back to duty to help us retake the station. He is, however, to report to sickbay within the next 24 hours for follow-up evaluation. Lieutenant Kyrios is under the care of Dr. Chekov.

The medical staff has been moving back and forth from the station to **Perseus** as we have patients both places. We've released all who could safely recuperate in their quarters, but I'm not happy with that situation. Under the circumstances keeping close tabs on them is the best we can do since the beds in both sickbays are full.

Once again I would like to say, I've never been prouder of the officers I've worked with than I am at this moment. They have performed above and beyond the call and deserve our thanks. Sickbay will be closed to all but emergencies during the funeral services for all officers who have given their lives in defense of this station. It is only fitting that we all stop and pay our final respects to these brave, dedicated souls and wish them peace in their next life.

[Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

Captain Sorehl stood silent in his appraisal, hands clasped behind his back. With slow, deliberate steps, he walked between the rows of torpedo casings. Occasionally, he caught his reflection on the polished black surfaces, where exposed from beneath draped flags of the United Federation of Planets. Space was a dangerous place, the caskets spoke to him, and not for the timid.

He paused beside the marker which identified the remains of two young medical interns, Midshipman Phillip Wild and Midshipman Vanessa Bradley. Sorehl had not even met them. Nor had he known

Crewman Levi Matthews, who died while pulling him clear from the Swarm. Nearly sixty caskets lined Cargo Bay One, in memory of those lost.

Some did not even carry the bodies they honored. In their voracious attack, the Swarm had left little of their victims to identify. The captain had directed Amnor and her team to talk with witnesses, find every discarded badge, collect every DNA trace.

The captain inclined his head, his superior hearing noting the arrival of a turbolift. He turned to see Lieutenant Commander Ramson step onto the deck. "You have something for me, D'Mysus?" Sorehl asked.

The Minarian approached. With Commander Sej still convalescing in sickbay, additional duties had fallen on the second officer. "There's been a political development down on the surface," he began.

"Go on," the captain prompted, concealing any wariness in his voice.

Ramson looked as if he'd tasted something vile. "Gar Awi is using the Swarm crisis to declare a state of 'emergency readiness' for the colony. In the absence of a head of state, he forced the council to name him governor *pro tempore* until the official election."

"How does this change things?" the captain inquired, looking thoughtful.

Ramson shook his head. "As of this minute, he is empowered to act as the governor of Canar. And he's already made his first edict, aimed at us."

Sorehl straightened his stance. "His personal jurisdiction does not extend to Aegis nor its placement in orbit," the captain stated categorically, "despite his claims."

"He hasn't started rattling that saber yet," Ramson explained. "He's decided he wants a full briefing on all StarFleet interaction with the planet, classified or not." He took a breath. "And as governor, he's entitled to it."

Sorehl began to understand the reason for the Minarian's earlier expression. It was a most distasteful prospect. "Information he may use to strengthen his position before the election."

"He becomes the instant incumbent - a powerful vantage point."

Despite his presupposed skill at diplomacy, the captain did not care for politics. "Go down there," he ordered. "You have a vested interest in this colony and you understand the paramount issue of security. I can think of no one better suited to handle this request. With the Romulans gone and the station in disrepair, our tactical needs are reduced." He paused, gesturing toward the caskets. "And I have command duties I cannot ignore."

If there was a legitimate protest, Ramson didn't voice it. "Very well," he answered instead. "I'll fail to point out this also gives you a chance to play engineer and get your hands dirty."

Sorehl tilted his head in an manner generally used for his former science chief. "Omission noted." Without a word, the two officers turned away from each other, intent on their respective duties.

Political Intrigue

Successful in proclaiming himself acting governor of the colony, Gar Awi continues his plot for control of Canar II.

[Lieutenant Patrick Renckly, chief of operations]

Gar Awi sat in his office on Canar. He had finally done it. He had acquired the power to lead Canar, even if it was only temporary. But it gave him an advantage and he knew it. He needed to seize this opportunity to consolidate his position.

Awi was still troubled, though. Briel had made no opposition to his appointment. The Bolian rubbed the blue, bifurcated ridge down chin. Something about that former ambassador always made him feel off balance.

Still, he smiled. He'd been able to force StarFleet into helping him. The officer that had come down from the starbase had tried to be subtle, evading all but the most direct questions. Awi had pressed him, sensing that Ramson did not want to be entirely forthcoming with him. It was then he'd learned about the temporal portals. Awi simply couldn't believe his ears. Artifacts on Canar that could transport people to other times! Gar had pressed the officer for more information, but decided that a more subtle tactic was in order. He'd demanded a tour. He would learn where this site was. Then he could use it to his advantage.

He considered the possibilities. Maybe he could use this to stir up more anti-Federation feelings, by claiming StarFleet was withholding Canar's birthright. Yes! He could use this as a means to demand that

Aegis withdraw from Canar. He could claim that they were committing outright theft of Canar's rightful property, and they would have to leave.

Insidious plots came to mind like welcome friends, eagerly embraced. Gar Awi would own this planet, driving the Federation from its heavens. And he would seize its treasures for himself. It was only a matter of time now.

[Lieutenant Michael O'Connor, chief engineer]

Mike sat back in his chair, quickly running his mind through the checklist of things he had to discuss with his senior engineering staff. Repairs from the Swarm attack would continue to top the list, but he was planning on making some changes to how the department worked. He had been chief long enough to get a feel of everything, now it was time to make it even better. Ensigns Shield and Copper were both still laid up in sickbay from their bouts with the Swarm. Shield was mostly fine, but Copper would be in there for awhile, recovering from plasma burns and coolant inhalation.

Beside him, Lieutenant Sam Hartle flipped on the sound system control for Main Engineering, a marvel in its own right. Classical music swelled through the adjoining decks. Mike grinned, looking at his assistant, "I swear, Sam, one day that thing is literally going to shake Aegis apart. What's our status on the reactor repairs?"

"Number Six is still giving us problems, but we've got Team A on it now," Hartle reported.

Mike nodded, "Very good." He quickly shifted his attention to the nearby ensign. "Falcone, what's our status on the repair of shields?"

"The sensor grid is pacing us. Non-tactical deflectors are up and running. Repulsion beams and screens, too. But it's taking us a long time to swap out the shield generators that blew."

Mike nodded. "Good. I talked with sciences earlier. We need to have one of their team out there helping with hull repairs. Sam, get with Rocks or T'Vlen to work that out."

"Aye, sir."

Falcone piped up at that point, "Beg the lieutenant's pardon...question, sir."

"Yes, ensign?"

"Civilian repairs? Are they still under civilian contract or have they fallen under our domain?"

Mike knew what was coming next. No doubt Drankum was hitting up Mike's people to make repairs to his bar. But policy was on the Ferengi's side. "They are under our domain as a result of the state of emergency imposed by the Swarm," Mike admitted. "Within reason, of course."

"Understood," Falcone replied.

[Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

Captain Sorehl entered his cabin. He stopped to scoop a handful of fine sand from the ceremonial bowl beside the entrance. In the ritual fashion, he rubbed the grains briskly between his palms, letting them fall back into the receptacle. The symbolic gesture was meant to cleanse him from external care, allowing him to enter home unencumbered. With flawless rationality, he recognized no captain could truly have that option.

He opened the front of the new "dress white" tunic he had worn to the latest memorial service. Slipping out of it, he wondered why StarFleet seemed incapable of maintaining a static wardrobe. He tossed it to the couch, noting yet another attempt to symbolically shed his command duties.

He stood, surveying the complete emptiness of his quarters. The warmth of the specially-tailored environment baked into him; he breathed the hot air into his nostrils. Still, it did not seem to penetrate the coldness within.

He snatched up his ceremonial robe, wrapping it around in a flourish. He bowed deeply, coming to a kneel in one of the cabin's alcoves. The slab of sandstone, hewn from the cliffs of Gol near his ancestral home, felt rough under his knees. The sensation focused his meditation.

He sorted the items in his mental queue before discarding them for deeper thoughts. The last of the personal condolences had been extended. Engineering had repairs well in hand. Sej would soon be fit for duty. Ramson would get a complete security detail ready to "protect" Gar Awi on his tour of dig sites on Canar. Dr. Sabin had been told her daughter was alive and well.

He let this thought evoke the purpose of his concentration. The fate of his own wife and daughter, also trapped on Betazed, was still uncertain. Even the distressing news he'd learned was unreliable. If Dominion agents were to learn their identity...

They would be a weakness we would be sure to exploit, he heard Semil advise him.

Sorehl strangled the outburst, the echo of the Vorta's mind that was still burned in his synapses. Even as he did so, he noted the ruthless logic of the insight. What had Halloway told him? *"The Dominion could try to intimidate any officers with relatives there,"* Sorehl remembered. *"My chief surgeon is Betazoid...if they threatened his family - that could coerce him to resign his commission. And who could blame him?"*

"Who, indeed?" he spoke aloud, breaking the silence of his thoughts.

It was not a weakness he could afford, he reasoned. He chided himself, took a cleansing breath of the warm, dry air, and returned to his regimen of self-mastery.

[Lieutenant L'Hona Amnor, acting security chief]

They'd been sweeping the underground archeological site for more than half an hour. None of the science and engineering officers who were helping Amnor had any idea of the significance of where they were. And if she did her job right, none of them would know the cavern's location was itself classified, much less that it housed an artifact purported to be a temporal portal.

Awi was not making that secret an easy one to keep. The acting governor had used his position to demand a tour of the dig site; the captain had been forced to oblige. Amnor now suspected Awi's entourage had 'accidentally' dropped a few things during the excursion. She had called for a full sensor sweep of all areas they had been.

Nearby, Ensign Silver bent his head to look more closely at his tricorder. "Lieutenant Amnor, I believe I've found something," he said, crouching down. He picked something from the dirt.

She walked over to him. Silver handed it to her as she arrived, brushing the dust off on his uniform. Amnor lifted her palm beacon, illuminating the object in her hand. "A transmitter. That's what I thought. Alright, let's check out some of the other areas they went."

[Lieutenant Patrick Renckly, chief of operations]

Gar Awi sat in his office happily, waiting for important information.

Awi's bodyguard, John Kinney, was impatient for the man bearing the important information to arrive, because the chasum, altered to look like bars of gold-pressed latinum, was heavy.

Chief Danatar Staso, the man carrying the information, stepped off the shuttle to Canar and looked around apprehensively. Wearing nondescript civilian clothing, he carried an innocuous-looking datapad. Staso quickly hurried to the designated meeting point. He was having doubts about this. The other things seemed so minor. Now, it felt like he was betraying StarFleet, an institution he had sworn to serve.

He quickly spotted Kinsey and walked up to him. He muttered, "Here's your information. Give me the latinum." Kinsey took off his backpack without a word and handed it to Staso. Without a word, he staggered back to the shuttle under his heavy load. Kinsey smiled after him, knowing Staso would have a real surprise. However, that was unimportant. Kinsey walked through the colony and walked up to the Governor's House. He walked in, wandering the halls until he at last reached Awi's door.

Kinney walked right in. "Here you go, Governor," he announced, waving the datapad, "the transporter logs from Aegis for the time you specified. Completely decrypted, all transports shown, just as you asked."

"Thank you. Did you give the Andorian his," he chuckled, "latinum?"

"Yes, I did. I put a real bar in, just to keep him... happy."

"Good thinking. Now, go on." He watched his aide leave. Awi smiled. The debate between he and Ambassador Briel was scheduled for tomorrow. But it didn't matter anymore. This one datapad would give him the key to victory over the El-Aurian, the smug Vulcan captain, and the governorship of Canar...

[Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

"Of course, it is regrettable to lose a practitioner with your experience," Sorehl admitted in his response to Counselor Gideon Hart. It was not in the formality of a starbase setting they spoke in. By design, the living room of the Ramson home on Canar, where Gideon was staying as a guest, was far from being rigid and confining. The Vulcan turned to offer his approval, "The loss to Aegis is a gain for this sector. I shall submit your resignation upon my return."

"Thank you, captain," Gideon answered. Calling him by rank seemed a bit out of place, given the traditional Vulcan apparel he now wore. It was a sharp contrast to the crisp uniform he was rarely seen out of. "I have every intention to remain available to any patients who wish to continue with me," she informed him. "Including yourself."

Sorehl pursed his lips. "I shall undoubtedly take you up on that offer."

"Is that the reason for the personal visit?" she asked, scooting to the edge of the comfortable sofa. She was not going to let her return to civilian life intervere with critical therapy - particularly the captain's recovery from his ordeal at the hands of the Dominion.

"Not... precisely," he answered in cautious tones. Standing across the room, he picked up a framed photograph. He examined the image of Jeralla, the Ramsons' adopted daughter, before setting it down. "I am about to embark on a brief respite. A few days in the unpopulated plateaus nearby. "

Gideon folded her arms. "A commune with nature?"

Sorehl glanced over at her. "I place to seek privacy with my thoughts."

The former counselor frowned. Solitude and self-sufficiency were high on the list of Vulcan values. But not always the best therapy. Still, a bit of introspection was good, short of becoming a hermit. "The terrain can be pretty rough," she cautioned.

"I assure you, during my kahs-wan I endured far harsher environments," he replied. Although he was no longer a youth, Canar had nothing so severe as the Fire Plains of Gol. "Afterwards, I suspect there will be thoughts to share with you."

"I look forward to it," she replied, getting to her feet.

He let her direct him to the front door. The two of them stepped out onto the porch, from where the runabout Colorado was visible. It seemed out of place, technology squatting uncomfortably in an unblemished wilderness. "D'Mysus and Saraina have made quite a home for their children," the captain mused. "I shall have to return when they are not away. No doubt, the beauty of the scene improves with the presence of family."

Unaware of any deeper meaning, Gideon merely tilted her head at the comment as he raised his hand in the split-fingered salute. Moments later, the runabout lifted off, restoring the unspoiled panaroma.

[The entire crew of StarBase Aegis]

In the plaza below, Ambassador Joseph Briel stood before the crowd, loudly challenging the claims of acting Governor Gar Awi. From his vantage point on the rooftop, Major Robert Muldoon could hear the elder statesman's voice rising up.

"You don't want a better Canar," Briel charged, "you merely want it for yourself!"

But Muldoon was no longer paying attention to the deliberation. His eyes were on the sniper. A man he recognized. Mostly obscured, the crouched figure was already assembling something.

Across the plaza, Major John Proctor watched the proceedings from yet another rooftop. In the crowd, he could see the bartender Drankum, craning to get a better look at the two candidates. In doing so, the Ferengi's ears blocked the view of several people behind him.

"Not once," Briel was continuing, "have you said what you will do to make Canar better!"

In his keen peripheral vision, Proctor caught movement at his level across the square.

Muldoon had managed to get close without attracting the sniper's attention, but the angle was terrible. He saw a weapon swing out over the ledge, taking aim. No time to take him out.

He let instinct take over. His coat ruffled as he pulled his own weapon out and dropped.

Peering across the plaza, Proctor saw a figure in shadow. A rifle was balanced in his hands. He saw a glint of sunlight reflecting off the scope. His trained eye knew where it was pointed. He leveled his own weapon at the sniper.

"People of Canar, you will not be destroyed by the Federation," Briel proclaimed, "You will help rule it!"

Muldoon fired.

An orange bolt lanced down from the rooftop on its way toward Ambassador Briel. The blast splintered the podium beside him into smoke-streaming debris.

Briel stepped back. Shouting erupted. Another shot fell harmlessly on the pavement, scattering the crowd in chaos. Governor Awi looked about wildly, his guards rushing forward.

The hidden gunman was himself startled to see the shots. He had not even fired. With sudden anxiety he realized there was someone else on the roof with him. Before he could turn to look, his muscles were

suddenly seized by the impact of a phaser stun. He tensed, dropping his weapon, then crumpled against the ledge.

Proctor looked up from his shot. One sniper down. But someone else had fired the actual shots. He looked for a second gunman. He caught sight of him just before he'd leapt out of view. Muldoon.

Lieutenant L'Hona Amnor was running against the tide of the panicked crowd. With Kyrios behind her, she shoved her way toward the podium. They were next to the ambassador in seconds. Briel was ignoring the fray, attempting to calm the crowd.

Awi stood there, dazed and confused, as his guards opened fire on the rooftops.

Kyrios felt her senses twitching as she tried to get some idea of what had happened. They had beamed down in the middle of an assassination attempt.

"Ambassador," Amnor asked, surveying the area, "are you injured?"

Briel looked back, as if taking sudden notice over the startled cries of others. "No," he replied nonchalantly, "I am fine, thank you."

Muldoon leapt down from the building, escaping the sudden flurry of weapons fire. His shot at the podium had done the trick - scattering the crowd and stopping the real sniper. Of course, the security forces wouldn't know that and would be pursuing him instead. With a vengeance.

Best to stay out of their way, he knew.

"We should get you to safety, sir," Amnor insisted.

"No," Briel insisted, "I will stay here. The people need a strong voice. I will not leave them when they need me."

Amnor saw Adams and a second security team shimmer into the plaza. Things were being contained. Beside them, a ruffled Ferengi got to his feet and looked around. "That's it," Drankum muttered, "I'm never leaving the bar again."

Proctor bounded from one rooftop to the next, finally reaching the site of the stunned sniper. He kicked him firmly, to check his condition. The sniper gave a satisfying twitch, coming to.

Not far from them, a door burst open. A colonial guard pointed the business end of a disruptor at him. "Drop your weapon! Identify yourself!"

Awi, trying to regain composure, tapped the ruined microphone. "Citizens, remain calm! My guards are already chasing a Federation suspect!"

Briel looked up from tending the frightened crowd, shaking his head in a look of disgust.

It had been a simple matter to dispatch Awi's guard, but the idiot had let the stunned sniper escape. Proctor wouldn't let him get away that easily.

Still moving across the rooftops, his attention was summoned by a voice on his commbadge.

"Proctor," Amnor demanded, "what're you doing here? Do you know who did this?"

He tapped his insignia. "I could kill you, but then I'd have to tell you."

"Where were you when these people needed you?" Briel raised his voice defiantly at the acting governor. "This was only a single act of violence. What would you do if the Dominion came back?"

"A Federation assassin just tried to kill me!" Awi shouted.

"A Federation assassin?" Briel challenged. "Then why was he trying to kill me, as well? If I am so much a StarFleet collaborator, why shoot me?"

A loud thunk sounded as Proctor landed on the garbage dumpster.

The sniper, still panting, spun around. He was surprised to find a phaser waving in his face.

"Hello, Stemmons," Proctor grinned.

Stemmons could hear the footsteps behind him as Amnor caught up with the pair. Clearly caught, he let his weapon clatter to the ground.

[Drankum, Ferengi diplomat and bartender]

Drankum continued to look around the center plaza of Canar. People seemed to be in shock over what had just happened. Some continued to remain on the ground, fearing another shot could come from somewhere. Drankum glanced down at his shirt and brushed off the dust. "I am never leaving that bar again. I'm down here for ten minutes, not even plundering anyone, and I almost get killed."

The Ferengi turned and started to head towards the podium where the two candidates were shouting at each other. "Well," he said to himself, "it appears Ferengi choices in this matter are Dangerous One or Dangerous Two. Profit had better be in one of them." He sat down on the steps to wait them out. According to his calculations, he should be able to talk to one of them to discuss his views about a Ferengi Trade Route going through the system. Although it could bypass them, it would be more profitable for both governments to make Canar a waypoint. The route could bring a significant amount of interstellar trade. He would have to find the right candidate to negotiate with. "It will be interesting...", he said, "but next time, I bring them to me... at the bar."

During questioning, the suspect in the assassination attempt on Ambassdaor Briel dies under mysterious circumstances.

Lieutenant Cara Sabin, reporting
Autopsy Subject: George Stemmons
Humanoid male, age 27

Visual exam of the subject revealed no marks on the lower torso other than two scars of indeterminate age. Upper torso was marked only by a small puncture site located to the right of the shoulder blade. Microscopic examination revealed this to have been left by a hypospray.

A cut-down and cross section of tissue was taken from this area. In it was found remnants of some kind of time-release capsule. Judging from the deterioration and material involved, I'm placing time of injection as six hours prior to death, prior to his being taken into Aegis custody.

Blood samples from the victim were run through a complete analysis. There were traces of a substance which identified as sodium hydrocyanate. This chemical is a more refined version of chemicals used for the same purpose historically: To commit suicide. However from placement of the injection, the chance that Lieutenant Stemmons injected himself are remote. The location is simply unreachable by humanoid limbs.

[Major Robert Muldoon, security chief]

Muldoon rested his head in his hand and swiveled in the chair slightly, trying to hide his double take. "They're where?"

"Betazed..." General Cutter repeated. "They apparently made contact with one of our agents still on the planet. We got from him who they are and where they were. They're being there will jeopardize our assets." Cutter sounded half accusatory.

"What did your agent do?" Muldoon shot back with a similar tone.

"Told them as much." Cutter glanced off screen, breaking the tension.

Muldoon paused, not to come back too quick. "Anything else?"

"No. He helped them where he could. He didn't want to be overly confrontational. They're fellow officers. Their cause was just and all that. You know what they say to rationalize a stupid decision."

"So what do you want to do about them?"

"I was wondering what you'd object to...."

"Just don't kill them."

"Are you turning humanitarian on me, Bobby?"

"Hardly. They'd all look towards me. Something would come out. I don't need the hassle."

"Weak argument."

Muldoon paused, staring at him momentarily. "I'd rather have them humiliated - publicly. Get them deemed reckless or unfit to be trusted with the security of this fine station. Restrict their duties, their authorization. Brand 'em with a scarlet letter."

"Ah, there's the Robert Muldoon we know and love. Find a weakness and exploit it as noisily and melodramatically as possible so no one will have any doubt over who won."

Muldoon shrugged acceptance.

"Careful, Robert. Like most things revenge is best in moderation."

"Who said this was about vengeance?"

Cutter studied him, and let it slide. Onscreen, he took a sip of coffee, "I saw your work on Canar. Very nice. Caught the shooter. You might have even nudged the colony toward a pro-Federation stance. Our guy could win. Plan to follow it up?"

[Commander Ereiid Sej, executive officer]

Ereiid's coffee had gone untouched, and had grown cold as Sprint continued to scroll down the agenda set forth on his PADD. "...and the **Apocalypse** signalled. They said they should put in by tomorrow night." Sej continued to stare blankly at the mug on his desk, nodding approval across the table to the Lieutenant. "There's also word from the search parties in the Badlands; there's no sign of the **Selassie**."

Sej threw back his head to stare at the ceiling as he frustratedly combed his fingers through his tousled black hair. He ran his fingers through his hair as he let free a deep, sustained exhalation. "That's Denwar's ship."

"You know Lieutenant Commander Getar?" Sprint lowered the PADD as he eyed the Trill.

Sej nodded in reply. "From the Academy. Denwar helped me with second-year quantum thermodynamics. I hated all those goddamn equilibria. He all made it seem so bloody easy." Wistful, Sej righted his head as he collected his thoughts, slowly and gently swivelling his seat about to take in the view through the arched windows.

"Commander, I'm..."

"Don't be sorry." Ereiid interrupted. "Denwar's not the only classmate of mine that there's no sign of." He turned his chair back and refixed his focus on Sprint.

Corris picked up the hint to continue and averted his eyes back to the PADD. "There are two more impending communiques from Starfleet Medical for you, and Lieutenant Renckly reports that Engineering has almost completed repairs to the **Cuauhtemoc**."

"Excellent. I'm sure Captain T'Kam will be delighted to be able to put out of dock again."

"As delighted as a Vulcan can be, sir."

Sej managed a slight, if not forced, chuckle as Sprint nodded his acknowledgment and headed out of the office into the Command Center.

The doors slid shut, leaving behind a blank-faced Sej and a pristine mug of cold coffee. Ereiid stared at the doors a moment before turning to activate the desktop viewer, tabbing the controls in an unemotional, mechanical dance of his fingertips.

The comm signal established, revealing onscreen a busy redheaded Betazoid woman, her back to the screen. "Starbase 266, Department of Anthroarchaeology, Lieutenant..." As the woman turned to face her viewscreen, she paused in surprise. "Ereiid...? What...?"

Sej interrupted. "Valis, it's about the **Selassie**."

The Lieutenant stared at the screen for a moment, across the light years, disbelieving. "Denwar...?" Her wrinkled brow was that of a person wanting desperately to cry, but inexplicably incapable. Sej shut his eyes knowingly and nodded his reply.

[Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

"Altair water with a cranberry accent," Alayne Masterson announced, setting the cool glass down on the table beside the captain.

Sorehl glanced up from the schematics he was reviewing. The young yeoman stood impassively, as if she were assessing some yet unspoken demand for her organizational talent.

While it was true that command officers were granted permission to permitted the assignment of a personal yeoman, it was a privilege often resisted by those below flag rank. As if in testament to the dwindling time he could devote to adminis-trivia, he had failed to renew the annual report that refused such service. Masterson had been dispatched to his aid at once, and his protests did not refute the logic - he was in need of administrative assistance.

"Thank you, yeoman," he offered. "I trust such personal attention is an indication that my agenda has no pressing demands?"

"Yes, sir," she shot back, pride quite evident. "Your schedule is clear until 1100 tomorrow."

It was an accomplishment. Although shore leave for the crew had ended abruptly, there had been a lull in activity. Some of his officers were still gone. Sej had accepted a special off-station assignment. In

the interim, the Admiralty had seen fit to provide a temporary replacement for his executive officer, Commander Stephen J. Bulloc. O'Connor and Amnor were still gone on personal leave. Election day was about to dawn on the colony below; polls showed the tide had turned against Gar Awi. Briel had gained support from his bravery under fire, and Muldoon had hinted at implicating evidence against the acting Governor.

"Very well," Sorehl replied. "I shall take myself off-duty. You are dismissed until 1100." With an abrupt turn, she marched purposefully out of the office.

A few moments later, the Vulcan stood, took the glass in hand and went out. He glanced around the Command Center with approval, seeing Hartle learning new duties from Renckly. Without a word, he stepped into the lift.

He waited for the doors to slide shut.

"Deck 101, authorization Sorehl, omega nine one one." He spoke the code that would grant him access to the classified decks recently partitioned in the upper Engineering Module.

"Voiceprint and authorization recognized," chimed the response. "This lift is now out of service to all other decks." It hummed in descent. It was time to see how the war was progressing...

[Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

Captain Sorehl emerged from the turbolift on Deck 5.

He turned toward the wall panel. "Computer, cancel command override of this lift."

A visual cue verified compliance as the verbal interface intoned, "This lift is now returned to service."

Satisfied, the Vulcan turned around, intent on returning to his cabin. He nearly collided with the young female yeoman standing beside him.

"Captain," she greeted.

"Good evening, Yeoman Masterson," Sorehl replied, concealing his surprise. His superior hearing usually keep him aware of others' approach. *No doubt fatigue has distracted me*, he reasoned.

She nodded curtly, both hands clasped behind her back. "I noticed the manifest had you 'off-station' for the past fourteen hours," she began. "I thought you deserved a status before retiring."

Sorehl blinked, impressed at her efficiency, while concerned at her knowledge of his whereabouts. "Your attentiveness is laudable," he answered, "but I trust my senior officers will brief me in due course."

"I thought you might be interested in other 'off-station' events," she asserted.

"Very well," he relented. "You may walk with me." He strode down the concentric corridor.

She fell in step beside him. "The elections are over. Ambassador Briel will be the new colony governor. There hasn't been any concession speech from Mr. Awi yet."

Sorehl nodded, continuing his pace.

The yeoman produced a PADD, reading notes. "There was a significant strike against Cardassian sites in the Calandra Sector. HQ might be thinking of making Aegis a staging center again. It might explain the influx of new officers." The two slowed as they approached the door to the captain's cabin. "No one in Personnel will verify the reasons for Commander Bulloc's assignment... or the duration."

The Vulcan folded his arms. "And what of Commander Sej?"

Masterson looked apologetic. "No word, sir. There may be certain classified elements..."

Sorehl gave a dismissive shake of his head. "Idle speculation on uncleared data is both illogical and unwise. We must accept the need for secrecy, particularly in war." The comment touched on his earlier concern. "On that note, you would do well not to monitor my 'off-station' activities too closely." Security demanded his trips to the restricted decks of the engineering module remain discreet. "I trust I make myself clear without further elaboration?"

"Yes, sir," the yeoman answered quickly. She spoke her next words carefully. "I informed Commander Bulloc that you might wish to speak with him privately. Shall I summon him?"

Sorehl blinked at her. She had anticipated his need to brief the acting XO. He noted the irony: he had often forecast the orders of his last commanding officer. *Refreshing*, he mused. "Very well. See to it." Without further comment, he turned and entered his empty quarters.

[Ambassador Joseph Briel, governor-elect of Canar II]

Captain Sorehl steepled his fingers as he stared across his desk at Ambassador Joseph Briel. The governor-elect of Canar II had just outlined a political strategy that would undoubtedly secure greater ties between the Federation and the colony.

It was elegant and, best of all, ruthlessly logical.

"A cabinet which includes officers of this station," the Vulcan restated. "The concept has merit."

"I'm glad you approve," Briel smiled.

"I trust you have candidates in mind?" the captain inquired.

"Yes," the elder statesman replied, "but I wanted your permission before making any offers." He laid both hands on the top of his cane. "Also, you should know I recommended that a Sector Marshall be placed on Canar."

The Vulcan nodded, reaching for a PADD on his desk. "The Department of Justice apparently agrees. I have been similarly advised by the Bureau of Colonial Administration to expedite the selection."

"Wonderful, I have already selected a candidate," the El Aurian beamed, producing a PADD of his own. "I think you'll concede the qualifications." He handed it to the captain.

Sorehl perused the electronic document. When he looked up, skepticism was evident in his glance. "Are you certain you have thought this out thoroughly?"

Briel shifted his hands on his cane. "Sometimes we must have faith, captain. At worst, the offer will be rejected."

"Very well," Sorehl assented. "I shall send a summons." He keyed a control at his desk to turn his intent into action.

The governor-elect inclined his head toward the viewport. "I see your starship is preparing to leave."

Sorehl glanced in that direction. The upper decks of the Oberth-class vessel peeked out above the downward slope of Aegis' primary module. The bridge exterior lights were just coming up. "Yes," he replied non-committally. "**Perseus** is about to embark on an ambitious scientific survey along the Badlands."

"Scientific, yes," Briel repeated, sounding unconvinced.

Renckly had assumed a likewise dubious tone, Sorehl noted. Perhaps he was just a bad liar. That thought didn't particularly bother him. It was an affront to his own Vulcan heritage to offer less than full disclosure, but security matters often required such resolution.

"And your own matters, captain?" the ambassador ventured. "Your family... they remain interred on Betazed?"

Sorehl set down the PADD. El Aurians were not strictly telepaths, but it was said their powers of perception were unmatched. "That matter has not yet reached resolution."

As if to spare him further discussion, the tone to his office sounded. Briel's candidate had arrived. With a nod to each other, they spoke in unison, "Enter..."

[Drankum, Ferengi diplomat and bartender]

Drankum continued to sit in the bar, looking into space. His attention was, for once, on his thoughts. "The last time I saw him like this was right before negotiation with the Klingons almost ten years ago," Patty said quietly to Jennifer.

The Ferengi continued to think and contemplate what had happened over the last twenty-four hours. The picture continued to play in his head. "Canar requires a Chamber of Commerce," Briel said with a serious look, "A place where all planetary and interplanetary trade can be coordinated."

Drankum had thought the El-Aurian was going to go off on some boring tangent and merely replied, "I would suppose so. Given it's location, it is a key trading point."

Then the Ambassador had made the offer which stunned him, "Mr. Drankum, I would like you to run the Chamber."

The Ferengi shook his head and ended the flashback, realizing he had been sitting at the same table and chair motionless for almost twenty minutes. Drankum glanced upwards, "Head of the Chamber of Commerce..."

His thoughts drifted to an encounter five years ago on Ferenginnar. It was a party, celebrating the closing of a great business deal. As part of the celebration, a "Seeker of the Future" had been hired. The Seeker was a form of entertainment, adept at telling people's future.

The green skinned alien had told many futures that evening and by this time, had consumed a few glasses of ale. "You will enjoy latinum and power," the Seeker began, "and work beyond your imagination. You will ally others and become a leader of trade. You will persuade many and preserve lives. But this role will prove your downfall and destruction."

Drankum blinked his eyes and ended the thought. Was this opportunity or danger?

The Omega Story

*Captain Sorehl responds to reports of a finding by the starship **Perseus** during a sentry patrol along the front.*

[Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

Captain Sorehl strode purposefully into the main security area. Although his attention was concentrated elsewhere, his peripheral vision sensed activity taking place near one of the holding cells. Both new and outgoing security chiefs, Amnor and Muldoon, were there. Muldoon had accepted an offer from Governor-elect Briel to assume the position of United Federation Marshall for the sector. A glint of light reflected off the badge Sorehl had replicated for him.

Marshall Muldoon, he repeated mentally. The alliteration sounded aesthetically pleasing.

He continued out into the corridor without a word, chiding himself for the distracting thought. He returned his mind to the Omega Directive. The starship **Perseus** had recovered a device of StarFleet origin, that contained the dangerous compound. In the 127 years since the first synthesis of the omega particle, the protocols for dealing with it were deeply shrouded, but well-established. Unique commando teams and operatives were trained in ways to defuse it, but only captains and higher-ranking flag officers were giving full briefings on the subject. Responsibility fell to them to protect the very fabric of subspace. His course was clear.

He stepped into the nearest turbolift. "Deck 120," he ordered. The lift complied. The captain paused, then tapped his combadge, "Sorehl to Engineering."

"O'Connor here," replied the chief engineer.

"I am enroute to the storage facility for the lower torpedo array," the Vulcan explained. "I shall require your assistance with special ordinance."

The pause was only momentary. "Yes, sir. On my way."

The captain waited before tapping his badge again. "Sorehl to Command Center."

The voice of Lieutenant Hartle responded, "Ops, reporting in."

"Have the runabout Colorado prepped and ready for launch in ten minutes."

"Aye, sir," was the efficient reply. The channel closed after a few seconds of silence.

The turbolift doors parted. Sorehl stepped out. The thrum of the station's hybrid M/ARM-fusion engine permeated the corridor. Rounding the bend, he passed a series of deuterium tank access ports. He tapped his badge once again. "Captain to sickbay," he spoke aloud.

"This is Dr. Sabin," came the reply.

"Doctor, this is a priority request," he explained, reaching the end of the curve. The door marked 'Torpedo Reactant Loading Area' slid open at his approach. "I require your available stockpile of arithrazine."

This pause was somewhat longer. "Captain, I'm sure you're aware arithrazine is a controlled substance," she noted. "It's also the only treatment we have for theta radiation poisoning."

The captain entered a darkened area. Photon torpedo casings lined the walls on their transfer pallets. "Noted," came his terse response. "You may release this quantity on my personal authority. Have the necessary units placed aboard the runabout Colorado with all due haste. Sorehl out."

He stepped toward one of six oddly-shaped casings. Each read 'Photorp Mark Q-II.' *The required yield might be as much as fifty isotons*, he calculated, *warranting the use of this rare torpedo*. He patted his tunic to locate the access key, while glancing around the room for the nearest antigrav unit.

As a Vulcan, Sorehl found it distasteful to share the extent of his background in tactical systems engineering. Nevertheless, he had worked with such devices for over a decade, even before his career in StarFleet. But the quantum detonation he'd witnessed at the Groombridge planetoid would pale in comparison to the effects of destabilized omega. The destruction of subspace would end all travel and communication near Canar - hardly the way to usher in a golden era for the colony.

Kneeling to adjust the antigrav, he heard the approach of his chief engineer. He would need O'Connor to help him arrange the protective buffer field needed to protect the warhead. He squinted, fixed in his task. It was time to try and put the duststorm back in the bottle.

*After reaching **Perseus** and the disabled **Mirage**, the captain and chief engineer divide their resources between the two ships. O'Connor meets resistance in his efforts to contain the explosive held aboard **Perseus**.*

[Lieutenant Michael O'Connor, chief engineer]

Mike stepped off the turbolift and down the hallway toward the cargo bay. The uniformed security officers restricting access to the deck nodded to him. If his security clearance had been much lower, he was sure the greeting would be much less cordial and much more painful. He strode past several other officers, mostly engineering and security, but a few medical, and approached the cargo bay.

Mike's attention was quickly drawn to the group of engineers and security personnel swarming near the doors. The first one he recognized was Copper. He was also the first to speak.

"Sir, they won't let us in," Copper explained. "They keep talking about some kind of security risk, but all I know is that if someone doesn't get in to take care of that thing soon, there we won't be around to talk about it."

Mike nodded, focusing his attention on the door ahead. As he approached, he was shocked to be confronted with the business end of a phaser rifle centered directly on his chest. His face flashed with anger, and he turned to confront the holder of the rifle. Mike glanced at the single pip on the officer's collar before responding. "Ensign, what in the hell do you think you're doing?" The ensign's stone-cold face registered hesitation and fear for just a second at being confronted by a senior officer who looked seriously upset.

It quickly returned to confidence though, and the junior officer responded, "Sorry, sir, no one allowed in unless approved by StarFleet Intelligence. Those are my orders."

"Ensign, do you know who I am? According to the information my officers have given me so far, we're all going to be dead real soon unless I get in there."

The ensign wavered once more, but stood his ground. "Yes, sir, you're the chief engineer of the station. I don't know if what you say is true, but my orders are very explicit - no one in, no one out until Major Proctor arrives."

Mike focused his gaze directly on the young officer's eyes. His steely gaze was frightening enough, but combined with just a touch of telepathy, it could be terrifying. As the officer began to buckle, Mike stepped toward the doors. This time the rifle came from the other side. Mike turned and came face to face with Phillips. He silently cursed his misfortune.

"I'm sorry, Mike, but I have no choice. Sir, if you don't step back right now, I will have to shoot you."

Mike turned and stomped away, grumbling and cursing. He entered the turbolift, waited for the doors to close, and then, in a low and very, very angry voice, he asked, "Computer, where in the hell is Major Proctor?!"

[Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

Captain Sorehl stepped off the turbolift that opened into the aft cargo bay of the starship **Mirage**. Holding firm to the upper arm of Captain Chiak, he roughly hauled the traitorous captain behind him. Though he was usually careful about exerting the full strength of his Vulcan frame on more fragile species, he felt no compulsion to offer Chiak such a courtesy.

Alarms blared, indicating the deteriorating state of the device that sat in the center of the open deck. A naked starfield passed by the gaping, twisted hole that **Perseus'** pulse phasers had ripped in the ship's superstructure. The tenuous blue glow hinted of the force field holding the atmosphere in.

Lieutenant Commander Thanos walked hurriedly toward the device. The Deltan officer stooped over to consider it.

Sorehl turned to Chiak, "How long do we have?"

Chiak shook his head. The fight was gone out of him. "I'm surprised it hasn't breached the casing already."

Thanos looked back. "Gonna be touch and go, but we can save this one."

Sorehl met his gaze. "We have more than one to deal with. Possibly even less stable."

The intelligence officer was already getting out his tools. "It will set this one off if it goes. Think your people can manage to keep that from happening?"

Sorehl squelched his indignation. There would be time for chastisement after the crisis. "They have a man aboard who has had some of the necessary training." The Vulcan considered briefly, filtering through a logic tree in his mind. "Still, if we remain in proximity, failure of either is failure of both."

Chiak groaned softly. "**Mirage** isn't going anywhere. We took a critical hit to the port nacelle. This isn't even a good spot for it to go off."

Sorehl dismissed the last sentence, choosing to act. "Captain Sorehl to Ramson."

"Captain!" came the response. "We've got everyone off of there except the three of you. Standing by."

"We shall be remaining," he reported. "Mr. Ramson, you have new orders. You are to leave this location at maximum warp and proceed, let me make this clear, no deeper into Federation space and no closer to Canar. Advise Major Proctor to join your efforts to stabilize things in your cargo bay."

"Understood," came the slightly uncertain reply.

Discontinuity

The new Federation Marshall asserts his position on the Canar II colony.

[Major Robert Muldoon, Federation Marshall]

Muldoon slid off the "hood" of his transport looking over the canyon. He puffed his cigar, walked to canyon's edge, and circled back. He sat back on the hood, setting down the cigar. He breathed in the dry air. It tasted like freedom. Freedom from his desk on Aegis. Freedom from the demands of his old position as security chief of the starbase. Freedom to deal with weightier matters of crime and punishment throughout the sector.

"Marshall....."

Muldoon turned back to the voice, Vogel rose from his seat. A Bolian in a police uniform stood before him. Sergeant Shoewalter was just behind him; he had led the man up from below.

Muldoon started to approach the man, then stopped to rest his rifle against the vehicle and pick up his cigar. He didn't ask the man's name, "We'll go to the tent over there..." He pointed to the smaller of the two tents that stood away from the ledge. Muldoon entered first and headed to a make-shift desk of crates. Vogel held the tent flap open for the Bolian. The Bolian entered looking for seat. Vogel remained outside. "You can stand." Muldoon puffed on his cigar for a moment. He recognized his impoliteness, "Sorry. I mean, no one brought an extra seat. You'll have to stand."

The Bolian nodded slowly. The former Marine's manner perplexed him.

Muldoon stood up and started pacing around his desk. "It's just this waiting, ya know? I hate overseeing engineering projects. They just take so long, and the climate out here is just so hot." He sighed and stopped in front of the Bolian. "I need you to tell your superiors..."

"You don't keep up with things on the colony. I'm the chief of the police force."

Muldoon nodded briefly, glancing at the man's badge. "Yeah, you're right. We're gonna fix that. Governor's orders." He glanced behind him taking a PADD off the crates. "Orders," he repeated. "I'm here to secure the dig sites. We're going to put in new surveillance equipment around the entrances. The engineers will be down later. Your people should help them."

"What're you saying?"

Muldoon spun around. "Basically, I'm in; you're out. I'm sure we'll work it out."

The Bolian remained in his place. "I'm... out?"

"Of the sites. Well, more like I have greater authority than you over them. So... you're in. But not as in as much as me." Muldoon blinked. "You'll maintain a presense in the sites. But they'll be Federation jurisdiction. As for the rest, I'll step in and take over investigations of yours that I feel are more important to the Federation than to this colony. Internal colony affairs will be totally in your hands, of course, but I reserve the authority to "aid" in investigations as I see fit. Which, given this colony's history, may be often." He paused, adding a smile for effect. "Welcome to the United Federation of Planets. It'll be a pleasure serving with you. Etcetera. Etcetera. Have a good one."

The police chief was already on his way out. He tossed the flap open and batted it violently out of his way as it swung back hitting him. Muldoon leaned back on his desk and thought. "Vogel..."

Vogel entered. "Sir?"

"You know those letters of apology we used to send out when we..."

"You, sir," Vogel corrected him.

"...when I offended someone," he finished. "Better change the letterhead and get one out."

Gar Awi appears on Aegis, making a failed attempt to kill the captain. Jumping in the way of the attack, Commander Bulloc is seriously injured.

[Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

The Vulcan stood quietly beside the biobed, looking even more sober than usual as he was tended by a junior member of the Aegis medical staff. He looked across at the figure laid out beneath the surgical support frame.

The disruptor had done its work on Commander Bulloc, whose timely intervention had prevented the weapon from hitting its intended target - him. Awi had been trying to kill him.

Sorehl remembered crawling over to the fallen XO, seeing the oddly-red blood blossoming on the human's uniform, visible even despite the dark fabric. The weapon had been set to kill.

Yet Bulloc was not, as yet, dead.

Why such a violent weapon had failed its primary purpose was puzzling. Reverting to his knowledge of high energy physics, Sorehl reasoned that Bulloc must have stepped within six inches of the disruptor, just inside the minimum nadium range. The beam that had struck the commander had not yet recombined its lethal energies into the standing wave that would have caused a high enough NDF to kill him.

What was the idiom, grasp the nettle? Bulloc had indeed done that. The XO had acted decisively in the face of threat; it had saved both their lives.

[Lieutenant Patrick Renckly, chief of operations]

Gar Awi cursed Aegis security in his pain. The phaser burst hadn't knocked him out, but it had given him a decent phaser burn on the back of his leg. It hurt. Gingerly hobbling over to the medical kit in his little prefab structure in the desert, he selected a protoplaser. Applying the wand over the reddened area, he felt the nerve endings numb. He put a bandage over it, grabbed a bottle of water from the nearby refrigeration unit, and sat back down.

He had been so close to finally ridding himself of the damned Vulcan. If only that idiot hadn't leapt in the way. Awi hadn't seen him before, but noticed he'd been a Commander. One less high ranking officer for StarFleet, he snorted.

Awi shook his head. With the Vulcan out of the way, Briel could have been next. He needed something to get that new Sector Marshal away from the El-Aurian. But a dead Commander wasn't going to shake things up enough. In fact, security would probably be tighter than ever. He's missed that chance.

Instead of cursing his luck, Awi looked at the planetary map on his wall. Twelve locations were pinpointed. No telling which of them had been the site he'd seen. They were scattered all over the planet, but he would have to check all of them to be sure he could find the right one. After he did that... Awi smiled. Victory was within his grasp. And then he could affect retribution on those that had tried to humble him.

[Lieutenant L'Hona Amnor, security chief]

Adams stood in Main Security, trying to decide if he should approach Lieutenant Amnor. She was still absolutely livid at security's failure to capture Gar Awi after the attack on the captain. If he listened carefully, he could still hear her yelling at the teams that had responded. Whoever said hell hath no fury like a woman scorned had never seen a really angry Klingon woman. By the time she threw them out (almost literally) fifteen minutes later, they were paler than the new white dress uniforms. That had only been a few minutes ago. He took a step towards her office, undecided.

The decision was out of his hands seconds later, when she called out, "Adams! Get in here."

Uh-oh, he thought, as he stepped into the room. He held no illusions that their friendship would save him from her wrath. He could still see anger in her posture and expression. "Yes, sir?" he greeted her formally. He made no attempt to sit, since he had a good idea what was coming.

She stood, looking at him silently for nearly a minute. He tried his best not to fidget under her glare. He firmly reminded himself to never purposefully irritate her. "We seem to have a problem, mister. Why is it that our people failed to anticipate the threat? Why is it that they were unable to neutralize one intruder? Why have they not been put through training on how to catch people without resorting to a footchase?!"

He paused only briefly before answering. "They have been, chief. Just as you ordered."

"Then why did they fail?" she yelled.

Adams flinched. He tried not to, but he couldn't help it. He had never seen her this mad. "I don't know, sir. I was not there, nor have I seen records of the incident. I was with you on the surface, if you

recall," he reminded her quietly. "But the why does not seem as important as what we will do now to prevent a recurrence. We can't change what happened."

Amnor blinked, staring at him. Some of the fury drained from her face, and she sat wearily in her chair. "Sit down, Andrew. I'm sorry. I have no right to yell at you."

Adams carefully took a chair. He sincerely hoped that the worse was over. "Permission to speak freely, sir?" She nodded. "Being trained is one thing. Having to use that training in the heat of the moment is another. What we need are some real training exercises. Something that they aren't expecting... preferably something that they don't know is an exercise."

The Klingon woman blinked again. "That's... that's a great idea, Mr. Adams. Tell me what you have in mind." She listened to his idea, leaning forward slowly, and coming to rest her elbows on the desk. Her eyes sparkled slightly at the mischievous possibilities. "I like it," she said finally, once he had finished. "Write it up, and make some discreet inquiries for... accomplices. Stick with the enlisted personnel at first. They might enjoy a chance to 'get into trouble'. Let me know when you have something ready. If you need anything..." She trailed off.

"I'll handle it, you'll be busy. Don't worry, if it's that important, I'll let you know."

She actually smiled. "Thank you, Andrew. What would I do without you?"

He grinned back, "I don't know. Is that all, Chief?"

Amnor groaned. "That's all. You're dismissed." He nodded, smiling, and left the office, as she turned back to her initial incident reports.

[Midshipman Savros, science officer]

Midshipman Savros opened his tricorder and began scanning Deck 20, Section 11. "These readings are consistent with phaser and disruptor fire," the Vulcan stated.

Renckly nodded, "I know. Before Gar Awi disappeared there was some shooting between him and security." The lieutenant commander turned, heading back towards the turbo lift.

"Commander," Savros questioned, "Is there anything else I should know?"

"Plenty," Renc answered without stopping his footsteps, "but as you have seen we are short handed. Please let me know when you have something concrete."

The midshipman returned to his tricorder paying close attention to evidence of transporter activity. He was still fresh from the Academy; he would have preferred to be more skilled in his use of the portable sensor. It was true though he was more proficient than many officers from the more emotional races, but he still felt unprepared for the task. Silently he wished he had joined StarFleet six years ago.

"Scans of the area reveal a residual Dominion transponder signature." Savros delivered his report to others in the Command Center.

The android looked up from the Ops station, "As I suspected."

Savros continued, "Knowing I would be reporting this. I did a computer search on transponder technology. Although most of the information is classified, I was able to determine that it has a range of about three light years. Nearly a parsec."

This information was not new to Renckly, but he chose not to interrupt.

"At a distance of one parsec, the former Governor is practically untraceable. However, two major possibilities exist," Savros explained. "One, he transported to Canar, his former base of support. Two, he transported to a ship or location behind the front."

"And your opinion?" Patrick smiled surmising the answer.

"My opinion, sir?"

"Where should we start looking?"

Savros paused to think over the matter. "Nowhere."

"Nowhere?" Renc was taken aback for a moment. "Please explain."

"He did not accomplish his objective and should most likely return."

[Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

Captain Sorehl stood, arms folded, beside the expansive viewport in the lounge portion of his office. The Galaxy-class starship **Victory** dominated the view, connected by rigid umbilicals to Deck 20 of the station. It was roughly the same size as Aegis itself, yet somehow graceful in its mass. He found the vessel's presence aesthetically pleasing and oddly... reassuring.

He turned away from the chilled surface of the transparent aluminum, chiding himself for such unorganized thoughts. How many months had he lacked the added discipline of T'Salik's mind in his meditation? The absence of his wife, and their daughter T'Kel, had made it difficult for him to maintain his external equanimity. His serenity had been challenged much in the past year - the cruelty of his Dominion captivity, the distasteful secrecy of war, the bitter colonial politics, and now this most recent attempt on his life.

He continued walking toward his desk.

Yeoman Masterson had left PADDs referencing the latest crew additions. He would commit each record to memory, a ritual he had adopted as an executive officer. At present, his acting XO remained in sickbay. Though Bulloc had survived Awi's disruptor, the completeness of his recovery was not yet certain.

A tone interrupted his reflection. He rotated his chair toward the desk viewer and signaled his acceptance of the incoming message.

An insignia dissolved, replaced with the image of a human captain, smiling broadly.

"Captain Jansen," Sorehl greeted. "How may I help you?"

Jansen waved a hand in mock dismissing. "Your engineers have earned their pay already," he praised. "My staff tells me they've already swapped out the damaged portions of our stardrive computer core, deflector dish, and sensor array. As soon as we integrate the new collimeter element for the dorsal phaser and align our dilithium matrix, we'll be ready to get underway."

Sorehl blinked. "I regret that may not be possible."

Jansen frowned. "I don't understand. Your man Shield said the last units were already in place. We can handle any calibrations on the way back to..."

"Your earlier statement was correct, however, it may be necessary to have you remain," the Vulcan answered, choosing his words diplomatically. "All traffic within this system has been restricted."

"Right, the Ferengi's transmission," the human glanced toward an officer at his left, nodding. "Of course, **Victory** isn't exactly a commercial ship."

"A valid point," Sorehl granted. "However, we are presently attempting to contain a dangerous and resourceful fugitive. In the interest of assuring continued relations with the colonial government..."

Jansen threw both hands in front of his chest. "Whoa, this sounds like a briefing I'd like to avoid. What kind of delay are we talking about?"

"Mr. Drankum advises me that the colony will be unable to financial survive a delay of more that three days," Sorehl reported. "I intend to recommend they lift their restriction before then, even if we fail to locate our suspect."

Jansen paused, considering. "I'll advise Admiral Saylek. If he thinks it's an acceptable delay, we'll stick around. Best I can do."

"Very well, captain. Aegis out."

Sorehl let the viewer go dark, continuing to stare at it before closing his eyes. In the forced darkness, he brought his fingers together in the double ta'al triangle. *Order from chaos*, he intoned, calling on the strictures of Surak. He let his mind sift through the myriad issues demanding his attention, trying to turn the abstract thought into concrete resolutions...

[Drankum, Canar Minister of Finance]

Drankum sat in his office on the second level of the Ministry of Trade and Commerce on Canar II. The last few days had been very busy for the Ferengi. While attempting to assist in efforts to capture the unprofitable Awi, he still dedicated several hours to tending bar on the station. Although Canar seemed to dominate the majority of his time, against Patty's recommendation, Drankum could still be found at the bar working a shift. "It keeps me in touch with latinum," the Ferengi had said to the objection. In addition, most days Drankum still used Aegis as his primary residence.

Recently, however, the search for Awi dominated the Ferengi's mind. Since his restriction of all traffic in and out of the system had been activated, the Canarian Trade Route had been shut down. The passage, which Drankum had created, ran through several key commercial areas with it's midpoint at Canar. With the lack of imports and exports, the still developing Canarian economy would suffer.

"I understand that, Captain L'loak, however the restrictions will remain until such time as the safety of Canar has been guaranteed. This unprofitable criminal must be captured," the Ferengi stated to a man pictured on the monitor before him.

The Tellarite freighter Captain grunted, "Look, Drankum, it's me...L'loak. I am not carrying any Dominion spy... nor would I take one with me."

The response was a smile, "Yes, I know it's you. If I recall, you tried to blame me when you were arrested near Alpha Centauri for carrying supplies to the Maquis. Consider this retribution. In any event, you will be contacted as soon as the restriction has been lifted. Canar out."

Drankum stood and took the jacket from behind his chair. He pressed a small console embedded in the desk, "Have my shuttle prepared for immediate departure." There was nothing more the Ferengi could do on Canar besides listen to complaints. If anything was to occur, it would be on Aegis.

[Lieutenant Sam Hartle, engineer]

Sam sat in his standard-issue office chair. He slumped and took a sip of the hazelnut coffee the replicator had made for him. The Gar Awi incident had been disturbing not only to him, but to the rest of the crew. While it was taken for granted that Fleet life had its dangers, the station was supposed to be their safe haven. Still, there would always be someone who thought they could make an impact on other people using violence. Sam learned that traffic in the sector had been for the most part cut off. That would mean Ops was a happening place at the moment. If he thought he could get away with firing on the Captain and First Officer, Awi would need all of his tricks to elude the investigating force that were pursuing him with great interest.

[Midshipman Savros, science officer]

Savros took a Vulcan stance behind the science station. He leaned into the console in confusion trying to understand why his prediction had not come true. Being one of two people in the Command Center gave him the opportunity to work without being disturbed.

The issue at hand is Awi, Savros redirected his thoughts. Why has he not returned as my calculations predicted? Could the scanners be malfunctioning? He began performing a diagnostic on sensor arrays, then moved to the LCARS console, and concluded with his own subroutine. Everything checked out. But why was the vengeful governor not here? He instructed the computer to perform enhanced passive scans on ships passing through the system, hoping to find some trace of Awi DNA. Nothing. He knew it was a violation of protocol but for a brief instant, considered scanning at full power. It would, after all, be the only way he could be sure.

The Vulcan straightened his back, reforming its proper arch. He had been at this far too long. Vulcans were capable of going long periods without sleep, but something about this was wearing heavily on him. Intuition. That thing explained to him by his "partners" on Ferenginar, but which Vulcans knew so little about. Perhaps it was the calm before the storm, but he knew Gar Awi was coming.

[Ensign Alex Miller, medical officer]

Dr. Alex Miller, standing beside Midshipman Robin Kethryveris, was listening to the captain explain the situation they were needed for. Although the briefing was very brief, the point was made. Ramson and most of the crew were out on the **Perseus**, racing to join the starship **Victory** in a battle against the Dominion. Now a crisis had developed on the colony. The captain was curiously silent on what type of crisis it was, but it must be bad since he was using every officer left on the station, many of them fresh from the Academy. Miller kept turning to look at Robin every few moments. *She's newer than I am*, he thought, *but she looks so calm; as if she's done all this before.*

The captain stepped onto the transporter pad. Miller, Robin, and Midshipman Savros followed suit. Behind them, Dr. Sabin and Renckly entered the room. Miller caught sight of his department head and immediately looked the opposite way. *The Ice Queen cometh*, he thought, shaking his head. Their professional relationship was not yet working out. He'd felt like a doormat in his first weeks in the department. Miller had tried to write it off as stress from Sabin's ongoing pregnancy.

The captain nodded to the transporter chief. The Andorian issued phasers to each person on the pad. Miller watched Sabin take hers, then step up on the pad. He shook his head. *In her condition*, he wondered, *what was she doing endangering herself on this kind of away mission?*

Miller stopped his line of thinking when he noticed Cara shooting a glare across the pad from him. He quickly stood up straight, realizing he'd been among non-telepaths too long. He'd forgotten she was a Betazoid, just like he was! She'd heard everything as if he'd broadcast it.

He saw Cara's mouth open to say something, but was saved as he began to shimmer away ...

[Midshipman Savros, science officer]

It was his first time on Canar II. Savros palmed the type-two phaser while looking about. Not entirely dissimilar to Vulcan, the planet was arid and desert-like, but included that class L-ish feel. On the other hand, the archeological site was gorgeous. *This is truly what StarFleet is all about*, thought Savros. Too bad this was not the occasion for a survey. The captain's briefing had indicated some urgency.

In the midst of his thoughts, the Midshipman overheard the conversation between the captain and the second officer.

"This is not a mere archeological site," the captain reported.

"Wait," Renckly spoke, seeking clarification, "Is this the site?" The android obviously knew something the others didn't.

"Yes, Awi's men have already breached the classified perimeter," Sorehl admitted.

If the captain intended to explain further, he didn't get a chance.

Even as the Midshipman digested the gravity of the Captain's statement, a bolt of energy sped between them, striking a nearby embankment. It left a noticeable cloud of dust. He turned instinctively and dove for cover. He regretted not having greater combat training.

Hitting the dirt, he struggled with his phaser. He returned fire, a feeble attempt considering he didn't bother to aim. More than anything in the world, the weapon evoked his strongest emotion - hatred. A phaser had taken the lives of his parents. It had nearly taken his own and now it could take the lives of others. *In the presence of such powerful feelings*, he asked himself, *who would not succumb?*

Savros dropped the phaser.

"Get inside!" Sorehl shouted to the away team. "Renckly and I will hold this position."

In almost an act of religious fanaticism, Savros brushed aside his fear and yielded to the call of his captain. He stooped, recovering his weapon, and was among the first to run into the site.

[Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

Sorehl squeezed the phaser rifle, sending a hail of orange pulses into the rocky hills. He was no marksman, but the barrage had its effect. Renckly leapt down beside him, turning his head to offer a better field of view to his heightened vision.

"The rest are inside, as you ordered," the chief of operations reported. "Sir, I don't think it's a good idea for you to be..."

"The greater danger is already inside," the captain objected. "Logically, if Awi is attacking the site, he believes he has means to control the temporal portal. We must deny him those means."

As if on cue, a group materialized nearby, led by security officer Adams. The group spread out.

"Captain," Renckly urged, "the away team's got to know what they're defending..."

"Agreed," Sorehl nodded. "It may be necessary to tell them."

Beside them, Adams joined their position. "Sir," the security man reported, assuming a crouched stance, "the security net around this place is still hindering communication and transport."

The captain looked out at the expanse separating them from the site entrance. "Mr. Renckly, I suspect you may be our best means of crossing that distance to advise the away team."

The android looked toward the subterranean opening. "I can make it." He put his palms against the sloping surface.

Adams shifted, "We'll cover you, sir."

Renckly bolted up with incredible speed, bounding from one rock to another. Weapon bursts erupted from the surrounding hills, followed by a response from the StarFleet phasers. Seconds later, the android leapt into the cavern opening, disappearing from sight.

"We outnumber them, captain," the security officer remarked. "I only saw four positions fire." He adjusted his rifle.

"I concur, Mr. Adams," the Vulcan responded. "Have two of your men..."

The captain's intended order never came, drowned out by a high-pitched whine.

A brilliant sphere of light expanded, rippling out from underground. Some of the men threw their hands in front of their faces, vainly. The sphere washed over them, continuing out into the far reaches of space. As it dissociated their bodies, it felt like nothing they'd ever experienced before.

This was hardly surprising. It was, after all, their first time being wiped out of existence.

[Drankum, Colonial Minister of Finance]

Drankum glanced around the Aegis Command Center, "Can't you humons move any faster! Those are civilian vessels out there! I can already hear the words 'lawsuit' being uttered."

Commander Bulloc was already ignoring him, listening to the onscreen image of a starship from the nearby battle. The Ferengi shook his head and started to walk towards the nearby turbo lift. Before arriving, he felt an odd vibration in the deckplates. A Klingon midshipman blurted a report from his sensor station, "Some sort of energy wave originating from surface." A spherical shape was blossoming on the console.

Behind them, Bulloc was addressing the screen, "We read you, **Victory**. We'll be..."

Drankum saw the energy wave pass through the Command Center and over him. "This can't be good...", he managed to utter.

A moment later, not even the memory of StarBase Aegis was there.

The affects of Awi's temporal meddlings reach out across the distances of space.

[Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

Captain Jansen stood at the center of the bridge on the Galaxy-class starship **Victory**. He watched the viewer, listening to verbal updates from his crew.

"Enemy ships have broken off their attack on **Armstrong**," Lieutenant (j.g.) Marx reported. "**tarDuq** and **Perseus** are pursuing them. The fighter wing has disabled the lead Cardassian, and the freighters are nearing the system perimeter."

Behind him, second officer Fujimoto passed on new information from engineering. "Sarpek reports comm systems restored, and the port coupling has been stabilized."

"Alright, then." Jansen smiled. "Let's get on with it. Raise the starbase." A second later, the tall frame of Commander Stephen Bulloc appeared onscreen. The captain stepped closer. "Aegis, get ready. We're going to try and bring some of them your way."

The image nodded. "We read you, **Victory**. We'll be..." Without warning, the image went black. Not even static replaced it.

Jansen frowned in irritation at having lost communications again. He turned to his helmsman. "Gaant, do a fast pass by the closest Jem'Hadar wing, then lay in a course back..." He paused, still studying the screen as a bright, spherical wave surged toward them from the Canar system. As it swept over the battle, he watched **Perseus** and the fighters disappear, other ships change. He opened his mouth, "Sh..."

The wave swept over the **Victory**.

"...ields!" shouted Captain Thomas Halloway from his stance at the center of the bridge aboard the starship **Victory**. "Bork, get us closer to the Romulan ship! Dolen, try and raise **Odyssey**!"

The first line of defense outside the Canar system had held firmer than believed. The Dominion had held the system for nearly eight months now. Halloway watched the swarm of Jem'Hadar fighters buzz across the viewer. *If we can't cut their supply line here, he reminded himself, we'll never retake Andor.*

"Message from Varon's ship. K'Vorlag's task force is on its way," his first officer informed him. Halloway turned, ready to resume the center chair beside her.

He never made it.

"Incoming fighter!" shouted Minsen from Ops. It was unusual to hear such alarm in her voice.

The portside explosion blew debris across the bridge, throwing several officers to the deck. Flames surged in briefly, before being snuffed by the suppression systems. Halloway was catapulted through the air, slamming hard against the tactical arch. He slumped back, draped across the center chair as others fell around him. He looked up, his eyes fluttering.

"Captain!" Betile shouted. "Medical alert! Bork, full evasive!"

Dr. Hashbaz dropped down beside her, vaulting over the tactical arch. His tricorder was already out. Betile watched him feel the captain's neck as she called out more orders. Blood trickled down the doctor's fingers. He looked up at her, shaking his head. "He's gone."

The Bajoran woman grit her teeth, seeing the other dead and injured as they lay on the bridge. They'd survived so many other close calls together. He couldn't die, he shouldn't die... not like this. "Move us in with the others," she managed. The assault to retake Canar would go on without Thomas Halloway.

In the altered reality, the former denizens of Aegis live different lives.

[Sergeant Charlie Smith (alternate), Marine]

The turbolift stopped and the doors opened. "Sergeant, I have been looking for you," the Lieutenant Colonel said as he was passing by Charlie. "I need to tell you we are almost at the assembly site. The USS **Odyssey** and the others are ready to make the insertion. I need you and you men ready soon. I will go and talk with the others."

"Aye, sir. My group will be ready. We are ready to win!"

"That's what I like to hear, Sergeant."

Charlie continued down the hallway, thinking of his family on Andor. His adoptive family was all he had left. The Dominion must pay, he thought. He and his troops, carried here on the Marine transport ship **Semper Fi** would surely retake this Canar system. He turned the corner and found his section of men. They would be ready.

[Drankum (alternate), civilian barkeep]

"Let's go, barkeep! This is no time to be sleeping!" the Cardassian bellowed. "More kanar for me and my friend here!"

Drankum touched his head and felt blood. *I knew I should have had Sandy clean that up*, he thought. He'd gotten a glass smashed against his head for the trouble. The Ferengi turned and placed two tall blue glasses on the bar, "Enjoy, gentleman."

Drankum shook his head and glanced at Alexsis, "Take care of this. I'm going to walk over to the medical compound." The Andorian woman nodded as the Ferengi exited the service area.

Drankum had spent the last three years on Canar II. With his original plans for political retirement on the humon station destroyed, he had settled for the nearby planet. Nearly a year later, Cardassian and Dominion forces had moved into the system unopposed. Drankum's Bar stood within the main complex of what had been the government center of Canar. Now, the facility was the center of the Dominion P.O.W. strip mining facility. The section he was located in had turned into a shopping and entertainment complex, via the demands of the Cardassian officers.

The Ferengi walked down the large mall type hallways and entered a lift. Already standing there were two Jem'Hadar, beasts which Drankum considered very unprofitable. Drankum stepped back, turned, and walked away to look for another lift. He gave up, deciding to get back to the bar. He could tend himself. As the lift started to move, Drankum thought back.

Patty, the businessman's only true friend, had been killed in a bar fight six months earlier. The Jem'Hadar had believed she was protesting Dominion rule when she bet against one of the species in a fight with a Klingon. The lack of discipline by the supervisors of the complex left the Ferengi outraged, swearing to seek revenge. That revenge had turned into assistance of the Federation, revealing what information he could gather about occupation forces within the system. He had done an agreeable job. He had been investigated several times by the Cardassian administration, but ignored for the sake of being their sole source of good kanar.

Drankum re-entered and glanced around. Loud Cardassian music played as several Dabo girls hung on the broad shoulders of several Cardassian officers. He activated his forced smile and went back to the day's work, playing the good barkeep to Cardassians that will spill their guts after twenty or so drinks.

Unchanged, the Aegis team assesses their situation in the caverns below Canar II.

[Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

Dr. Alex Miller scanned the Caitan with his tricorder as Lieutenant Logan Chekov gently lifted another small boulder off her legs. The movement displaced more dust into the subterranean passage, making them cough. Miller looked under the rock, managing to contain a sympathetic wince. "Compound fracture," he diagnosed. "Extended laceration."

Chekov hefted the rock, tossing it aside. He looked down at the slender bone protruding from Kyrios' leg; he was grateful she was unconscious. "How much blood loss?"

"Not too bad," Miller advised. He knelt by the fallen security officer's feet, ready to begin setting the fracture.

The sound of running feet distracted them. It was coming closer. Chekov snatched the phaser rifle hanging from his shoulder. Miller aimed his tricorder. "I think it's Renckly," he offered. The beacon from Chekov's weapon illuminated the chief of operations as he ran toward them, impossibly fast.

Renckly came to a stop in front of them. "Where's the others?"

"Gone ahead," Chekov answered. "We stopped to help wounded. What's happening, anyway?"
"Something bad," the android replied. He looked down at Kyrios. "Get her ready to move. We've got to get to Muldoon. Fast."

With his foot, Sergeant Fritz Vogel pushed one of the dead guards away from the massive metallic door. He sensed movement in the darkness and raised his weapon, moving out of the open. "Marshall," he called into the vault, "we've got company." Vogel lit up the corridor with his floodlight. "This is a secure area! Identify yourselves!"

Three figures stepped into the light. "Lieutenant Richard Shield, from Aegis!" one replied.
"About damn time!" groused a familiar voice. Muldoon strode out from the vaulted area, tugging at the buckle of his protective vest. He looked at the three junior officers and spit the cigar from his mouth. "You're supposed to be the cavalry?" he asked, incredulously. He lowered his voice. "Idiot Vulcan sends doctors and engineers into a gunfight."

Dr. Robin shot a glance at Shield, then at Savros.
Muldoon was looking at the Vulcan, too. "And who the hell are you? Sorehl, Jr.?"
The midshipman blinked and met him with an even stare. "I have no kinship to the captain."
Vogel patted the Marshall on the arm. "The doc should look at Shoewater and that Vervpipe guy."
Muldoon nodded. "You folks missed all the action, but we've got a couple wounded in there you can look at." He pointed a thumb toward the open door. Robin left the group, going in.

"Missed all the action?" Shield asked. He looked around at several fallen bodies. "Where's Awi?"
"Gone," the Marshall explained. "He already went through the thing."
"Thing?" Savros inquired. "To what object do you refer?"

Muldoon shook his head. "You guys don't even know what just happened, do you?"
Another voice answered from down the corridor. "There wasn't time to explain." Renckly trotted out of the darkness carrying Lieutenant Kyrios. Chekov and Miller were right behind. The android came up to the group, setting the still-unconscious Caitan down.

"It doesn't matter, anyway," Muldoon insisted. "We're all still here talking about it, so nothing has changed."

Savros tilted his head, taking in the statement. "Sir, what are you implying?"
The chief of operations offered to fill in the blanks. "The archeological dig at this site uncovered a temporal portal," Renckly began. Several in the group exchanged looks. "That's why the captain acted so urgently to protect it. That's why its existence was classified."

"I'm telling you," Muldoon related, "Awi went through the thing and we're still here. Whatever he was planning didn't happen."

"You're wrong," Renckly shook his head. "I saw something on my way in. This wave washed over the captain and a whole security team. They were just... erased. I haven't been able to raise Aegis since."

It got quiet. Sergeant Vogel frowned. "Why didn't something happen to us?"
Savros spoke next. "Perhaps something did. Or perhaps the portal has a radius of null effect - a region within which the space-time continuum remains unchanged. There are precedents for such a thing."

Renckly nodded, familiar with one similar circumstance. "Whatever the reason, we're still here, which means we're the only ones who can figure out what Awi did and undo it..."

[Midshipman Robin Kethryveris, medical officer]

Time travel! Now, she had seen everything. Robin had never been sure whether or not she actually believed that temporal displacement really worked. It was an intriguing concept, to be sure, and she had made it a point to attend whenever Admiral Saylek had been a guest lecturer. If you followed the admiral's career, it might seem that temporal dislocation was a common occurrence. Even worse, he had theorized that once you had experienced any displacement, you were more likely to encounter more of them, further along. Robin had made a note to herself to avoid multi-temporal experiences, just in case. She sighed, and muttered, "There goes another year-end resolution!"

Now, they were in an untidy, organic chamber underground on Canar II, apparently three years before they had left. Three years ago, Robin had been finishing her first year at the Academy, adjusting to all the so-young idealists that wanted to save the galaxy, or at least this corner of it. Three years was a lot of time to live over. What if they were unable to reactivate the portal from this end?

For that matter, how were they to accomplish their mission in the first place? They were searching for an assassin who had already evaded them several times, and apparently knew how the portal worked. They didn't even know what his objective was. Had he sabotaged the station? Had he murdered Sorehl in his sleep?

Further, they would have to avoid their earlier selves, the ones that belonged here. And Awi had been a colonist all this time. They would have to distinguish between the Awi that was rightfully a part of this time stream, and the one that was not. The more she thought about it, the more it seemed like a surgery - excise the unnatural member and leave the proper components undisturbed. Thinking of it in that way made it easier to accept.

She checked her medkit and tricorder, and adjusted to the still-unfamiliar weight of the phaser. It wasn't that she minded using it, only she knew she was no more than an adequate shot. She had no objection to violence per se, and wouldn't have entered Starfleet if she had, but there were others better suited to combat. Her job was to put them all back together when it was all done. If anyone was left when it was done.

Enough, she chided herself. There was a job to do, and it seemed as if there was no one else to do it.

Back in the altered reality, some evidence remains of the temporal incursion.

[Commander Michael O'Connor (alternate), tactical coordinator, USS **Odyssey**]

Mike worked quickly, his hand flying over the tactical console as he attempted to organize the fleet for the assault on Canar. Just seconds after the first ships began thorough scans on Canar's surface, an urgent message popped up in the corner of his display. He tapped it to expand it, his mind taking a moment to realize what it was. He was viewing a tactical readout of a firefight on Canar's surface. His first thought was indignation. *Those stupid Marines*, he thought angrily, *they're so far off from the drop point that they'll never take the capital*. Silently, he wondered how they'd managed to get into position already. The fleet hadn't even finished orbital bombardment. Mike moved the window aside and brought up one showing the status of the drop ships. Every single one was still in its designated bay.

"What in the name of..." he was cut-off mid-thought as sensor data appeared on the tactical console. *Those aren't Marine weapons*, he realized, registering Type III phaser rifles and some heavier artillery. *An intelligence insertion*, he considered. He quickly dismissed that thought. Intelligence wasn't stupid enough to get in a firefight. "But, if they're not Intel, who could they be?" he said aloud. He would know soon enough. His hand quickly tapped out the order to divert a drop ship to the site of the firefight. As he finalized the command, he turned to his other side, looking straight at the square-jawed Texan commanding the ship, "Captain Bulloc, we may have a problem."

Need a log detailing some of the events in the past.

Oddly, Savros did not remember the portal. The memory of his experience inside the archaeological site was clouded at best. Yet, he watched most members of the away team pass through it's shimmering light and enter another time. When his turn came, he hesitated entering, noticing a trembling in his trigger hand. He'd been aware of weapons fire behind him. He'd heard Muldoon shouting.

Reaching slowly he holstered his phaser in the same box as his tricorder. There was not any immediate need for it. It could be redrawn at an instant. Besides it made him feel more comfortable to have it holstered. But feeling was not what a Vulcan was to do. The sudden awareness tugged at the fragile string initiated by the Betazoid healing ritual.

"Alex Miller to Savros, please respond."

Gently he pressed the insignia on his chest, "Savros here. Go ahead Doctor."

"You are overdue on your physical," reminded the Doctor.

Momentarily out of sorts, Savros did not respond. Instead he shuffled through his fragmented mind searching for the appointment. He found it and noticed he was already 15 minutes late. How long had he been in meditation?

"How have you been holding up?" Alex inquired. Doctors, for all their good, seem to be less effective when examining Vulcans. Much of their work of examination and diagnosis was done by observation. Vulcans defied this technique, seeking to rid themselves of unwanted emotions.

"Holding up?" the ensign raised his eyebrows in an uncharacteristic show of Vulcan heritage.

The doctor passed his flashing wand over the ensign. "Breathe deeply." Savros gave the appropriate response, not wishing to spend any more time than necessary.

"I see that your blood type is T positive, much more available than T negative." Savros did not look up. He knew that doctors tried to get their patients to talk. This was no time to put down his guard, the ritual made him vulnerable.

"You were with the away team that entered the classified site?"

"I am unable to discuss it." Savros looked up this time, noticing a phaser in the doctor's hand. "Doctor, is it your usual practice to allow weapons in sickbay?"

The Lieutenant (j.g.) moved to a near by counter. "This thing? Well with the war I thought it prudent." With as much equanimity as he could muster, he managed, "You should reconsider it."

FEDERATION NEWS WIRE

Henri Le Grand, War correspondent

Among my recent voyages I was able to visit StarBase Aegis, a relatively small remote outpost that has had seen it's fair share of action these past years. The starbase's name has reference to early Terran mythology, Greek specifically, from the shield of Zeus loaned to certain heroes as a way of showing favor. It was a gift to those considered under the god's protection. Certainly it has lived up to its name.

Approximately the size of a Galaxy-class starship, Aegis has state-of-the-art shielding. I am told that this is due to a unique mix of independent power generators which make it difficult to take down it's shielding for long. Although it does not seem plausible, sources tell me that the shields have held out through the massive explosion of a star going nova. It was even extended to protect the colony below.

My visit to Aegis

I stopped by expecting to see the typical chaos associated with war. There had recently been a battle with a Dominion task force, and I thought that tension would be very high. My suspicions were not that far removed.

Shortly after disembarking, I asked to speak with the captain, but that was not possible. There was a drill in progress. Their exercise was accompanied with the usual red lights and ushering of civilians to designated areas. I was grouped in with some colonists and led to the local Ferengi bar. It wasn't much of a safe haven. As we waited wondering when the bombs were going to hit, some of the others helped themselves to the replicators. An hour later, it was all finished. The station had passed its drill. All in all, from where I was, not that eventful.

Aftermath

I had occasion to speak with Ensigns Savros and Robin Kethryveris afterward. Ensign Keth, as she likes to be called, had run sickbay during the drill. She pointed out that "half the time you are expected to play babysitter, and the other half you're in up to your neck in patients."

Ensign Savros, it seemed, had served as acting captain during the drill. Despite some complaints about his resolution of the staged conflict, he asserted his actions were "the logical conclusion." He said that a few times. He apparently is saving his livelier vocabulary for another occasion.

Enter the Breen

*On a raiding mission, the USS **Perseus** salvages the cargo of a disabled Cardassian freighter. Suddenly, a previously undetected warship exits the Badlands. As it approaches, it's intentions become clear. The large vessel opens fire on the **Perseus**.*

[Commander Stephen Bulloc, executive officer]

"Sir," Ensign Savros stood at the operations station relaying information to the commanding officer, "a Sovereign-class has responded to our distress call. It has opened fire on the alien aggressor."

Commander Bulloc sat at the helm, silently wondering why he had not requested more crew. The Texan thought he had prepared for everything. Who could have guessed an unknown assailant would come to the rescue of a Cardassian freighter, during the biggest war the Alpha Quadrant had known in hundreds of years?

The ship rocked again with disruptor fire. Momentarily losing helm control, the *Perseus* spun sixty degrees in the direction of the alien ship. Bull watched his Stetson teeter on the deck where it had dropped earlier.

Savros pressed the operations console, changing the viewer. He adjusted his console. "It's the **Yorktown**, sir." Onscreen, the unknown alien starship was centered in a spectacular display of pyrotechnics as **Yorktown** unloaded torpedo after torpedo. It pivoted, starting to accelerate back into the Badlands. "They're moving off," Savros reported.

"Damage report," Bulloc ordered.

The Vulcan tapped the console sending a request to all areas of the ship. "Reports coming in now, sir. Decks 12 through 14 register inner hull breaches. Engineering reports warp power is offline, impulse engines are functioning normally, life support power has been rerouted to engines, and damage control efforts are being hampered by erratic power fluctuations." The turbolift opened revealing the arrival of six engineering personnel. Bull quickly took advantage of them, ordering one to replace him at helm as Savros continued. "Security reports shields at 30%, torpedo launchers offline, phasers uncharged, and the seized cargo intact." The commander stood grateful to be returning to the command chair. "Sensors are functional, but unreliable. Ensign Panther in sickbay has failed to respond." The Vulcan paused to take a breath. "Mr. Shield is requesting priority on repairs."

Bull grinned, "at least the communicators are working. Hail the **Yorktown**. We can at least give them some thanks."

[Captain Thomas Halloway, commanding officer **Yorktown**]

Commander Stephen J. Bulloc coughed at the acrid smoke that hung on the bridge of the starship **Perseus**. That smoke, coupled with a viewscreen showing more static than it should, underscored the damage they had just taken. Despite the interference, he could still resolve the image of Captain Thomas Halloway onscreen.

"What the hell were the Breen on you for, anyway?" the captain of the **Yorktown** asked pointedly.

Bull pushed back his Stetson and noted an inquisitive look from Ensign Savros, still manning the Ops station. "Breen?" he replied. He shook his head. "I have no idea. They came out of the Badlands right at us; our sensors were so rattled we couldn't even make out who was hitting us."

"I was not aware the Breen even operated vessels in this area," Savros commented.

"Damn peculiar," Halloway responded. "I'd hoped this little raid would flush out a Cardassian patrol, not some wild card." His face showed pained irritation. "Still, it's not a good idea to sit out here. I'll have Chandler get a team..."

"Sir," Savros interrupted, responding to a tone on his console.

Bulloc noted the captain onscreen had diverted his attention, also. "What is it, Ensign?" Bull asked.

"The fighters Aegis was sending us are reporting an incoming task force of enemy ships, headed for Canar." Savros looked up, well aware they were in no condition to respond.

The image of Halloway looked concerned. "We'll never get there before them," he observed. "We're too far out of position."

"And wounded," Bull added. He wondered who had flushed out who...

"A combination of at least eight mid-sized Cardassian and Jem'Hadar ships, sir," Lieutenant Hartle recounted. The chief engineer was still pinch-hitting at the Admin console on Aegis.

The Command Center grew quiet as Captain Sorehl stared up at the overlay of their positions. "Tell those fighters to get back here. They'd never get through that to the **Perseus** anyway." The Vulcan strode toward the tactical console, invoking Red Alert. Behind him, Lieutenant (j.g.) Smith and Lieutenant Kyrios hastened to action. Sorehl turned to Hartle, "And tell Muldoon his civil alert drill just became the real thing."

[Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

Lieutenant Commander Patrick Renckly, artificial life form and second officer of StarBase Aegis, allowed the doors to slide open before he stepped into the private hospital room. Captain Sorehl sat

shirtless on the biobed as Dr. Sabin waved a diagnostic sensor in front of him. Mottled patches of dark green discoloration marked the Vulcan's neck and torso, a distinctive sign of the mild plasma burns he had suffered. Beside the biobed, his wife T'Salik held his damaged garments.

Dr. Sabin shot a glance toward the android as he entered, but didn't convey irritation at the intrusion, even if she felt it. She merely nodded, as if giving him permission.

"Captain," Renckly announced himself.

Sorehl turned his head, but did not look directly at the second officer. "Mr. Renckly, good. What do you have to report?"

He stepped forward, offering a PADD. "I don't want to intrude. It's all here, sir."

Sabin glanced up again, flashing a brief frown. She gave a short, discreet shake of her head.

"I'm afraid you shall have to read it to me, Commander," the captain advised. Although he tilted his head toward the android, he did not move his eyes. "Doctor Sabin is about to begin repair of my corneal tissue. Until then, I require the services of... a narrator."

The doctor snapped the diagnostic tool into her tricorder. "I'll get out of your way and start on the regen sequencing," Sabin said, excusing herself.

Renckly commenced. "The Jem'Hadar troops on the surface are being subdued," he reported. "Orbital bombardment did the trick; broke up their positions. That ought to teach them not to invade planets under a Federation starbase."

The captain leaned forward as he nodded. "Excellent." He was undoubtedly pleased that the defense grid had kept the enemy troops from gaining support from space. "What is the station's status?"

"The plasma fire gutted some corridors on Deck 20, and the EPS tap to the dorsal phaser array is totally fried." He paused. "That power dump wasn't exactly by the book, was it, sir?"

"It served the purpose at hand. If I did not know otherwise," Sorehl chided, "I would suspect you were jealous that I had never ordered you to perform one."

Renckly was about to respond when a tone sounded, cutting him off.

"Command Center to Sorehl," came the voice of the chief of operations.

The Vulcan straightened, still seated. "This is the captain. Go ahead, Mr. O'Connor."

"Sir, we've got a report about Earth," he explained. There was a pause. "A fleet of Breen ships launched some sort of surprise attack on StarFleet Headquarters. Damaged the city. A lot of casualties among the Admirals - a'Tullorax and Surzok have been confirmed. There was no warning. They think the attack on us may have been a diversion to let the Breen slip in."

Renckly doubted there were many in the crew who could have detected the change in expression that descended on the captain. He noticed T'Salik step closer, as well.

"Understood," came the terse reply. "Transmit this to all hands. Some may have family to contact."

"Of course," answered O'Connor. "Sir, there's an advisory of possible enemy action against the Chin'toka system. Intelligence is requesting a report of our response readiness."

Sorehl stared ahead, unblinking. **Perseus**, having saved the colony at the cost of her own life, had burned up in the atmosphere and lay scattered across the desert plains of Canar II. **Yorktown** foundered in drydock, having also borne the brunt of the recent attack. "Advise them we cannot respond, but we stand ready to support. Sorehl out."

The room remained quiet for a few moments longer.

"Hamstrung," Renckly said aloud.

"TSara would never have allowed it," the captain mused. "Perhaps it is time to consider matters with her eyes."

[Captain Thomas Halloway, commanding officer **Yorktown**]

Sitting in the center chair of the Sovereign-class starship **Yorktown**, Thomas Halloway absently tapped a closed fist against the armrest. News of the Second Battle of Chin'toka hung heavy on the bridge. The Breen, now in open league with the Dominion, had overwhelmed the Allied fleet. Armed with energy dissipators, they had disarmed, then blasted apart ship after ship. Casualties were still filtering out.

And **Yorktown** could not even help them.

During their abortive attack on Canar, the Cardassian vessels had concentrated on his ship. *I've earned their wrath*, he supposed. As a younger captain aboard the earlier Ambassador-class **Yorktown**, he had built his career defying their intrusions into Federation space. The very name of his ship had become something of a deterrent.

But not today.

Yorktown foundered beside StarBase Aegis, connected by rigid umbilical. There was no drydock big enough to hold them; indeed, the Sovereign-class vessel was nearly as large as the station itself. But Captain Sorehl had said repair of the **Yorktown** would take priority, even over damage to the starbase itself. True to his word, Aegis engineers were scurrying about the bowels of the ship, augmenting his own teams. Even with that, the estimate was ten days before they would be warp-capable.

Halloway swiveled his chair toward the helm. "Sabrina," he queried, "any update on **Redemption**?" He'd barely had time to greet Betile by subspace before her ship had been called off.

Ensign Tracey turned, sending her blonde ponytail swinging. "Already on return route, sir. They transferred about sixty Federation officers recovered from the Chin'toka battlespace. With other ships reporting in, Fleet estimates put the number of survivors..."

"Skipper," interrupted a deep voice behind him. Halloway spun the chair to make eye contact with Commander T'Binadi, his XO. The Andorian leaned forward over his console. "You've got to see this."

Halloway cued him to put in on the main viewer. The image of a Cardassian coalesced onscreen. Legate Damar, he recognized. "...instead, our brave soldiers have died by the millions," the legate was already saying. Halloway blinked at the image, uncertain what he was hearing. Damar had never looked like an impressive leader. He bore little resemblance to the crafty soldiers Halloway had met in battle. He'd been a successful guerilla against the Klingons, but hadn't even made Gul before being thrust into the supreme role Dukat had vacated.

But look at him now, Halloway mused. With bold words and earnest tone, Damar spoke of loyal units destroying a cloning facility in the Rondak system. Continuing, he denounced the alliance, passionately calling on the peoples of the Cardassian Union to rise up against the Dominion. "Resist," he urged. "Resist now. Resist tomorrow. Resist until the last Dominion soldier is driven from our soil..." Moments later, the transmission ended.

Once again, silence hung over the bridge.

The captain leaned back slowly into his chair. "What the devil was that?" he whispered.

"Our break in the ice flow," T'Binadi offered, behind him.

A lucky break at that, Halloway reflected. He wanted desperately to be the one to exploit it.

[Lieutenant L'Hona Amnor, security chief]

Mike was at the Ops console, when Amnor exited the turbolift onto the Command Center. Her uniform was ripped, dirty, and bloody as she walked to the security console. He was happy to see her. The special assignment had taken her off station for nearly a month. "Welcome back," he ventured.

She couldn't help but grin, "Thanks. It's good to be back, but I didn't expect such a... warm welcome." Her runabout had returned amid the battle. "Did they plan the fight just for me?"

Mike smiled, "Why yes. They worked out a special schedule for the occasion."

"I heard we lost Perseus. Too bad, she was a tough old ship." Mike nodded, agreeing with her. Amnor suddenly noticed an awkward look sent her way by a passing ensign. She looked down, noticing her appearance for the first time, "I look pretty awful, don't I?"

Mike grinned at her, "No comment."

Amnor looked over at Mike, "If the crisis is over, you think I can clean up?"

Mike agreed, and walked over to the turbolift with her. "You alright?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she answered quietly. "There's not a lot I can say about the mission, but we succeeded, I can tell you that. We proved the Cardassians aren't exactly in solidarity behind the Dominion."

[Governor Joseph Briel, Colonial Governor of Canar]

The yellow star Sol was not as bright now as Briel had remembered it. Perhaps his eyes were not what they used to be. Perhaps it was the general gloom that had been spreading over the planet for the past number of days. Earth, the heart of the Federation, had become a victim of war. The Klingons and Romulan had never been able to reach here, the Dominion tried and failed, even the Borg, who had taken EI-Auria from him, had never scarred the surface of the Terran homeworld. Yet, this new enemy... the Breen, long isolated from mainstream galactic society, had appeared with more than a few dangerous surprises.

The ambassador turned-governour leaned heavily on a metallic walker which supported his weight. The illness which had removed him from active duty had struck him down in the most inopportune of moments. Canar II had also been attacked, it's location near the border made it a sought after target. A

few weeks earlier he had returned to Earth for treatment. Never in his wildest imagination did he believe something like this would happen.

Gazing out at the damage he allowed himself a tear. The Academy grounds showed visible scorch marks. One span of ancient Golden Gate Bridge hung lifelessly, swaying into the open sea. This world had been his favorite location to see and learn about. So diverse. The people had the greatest potential. If this war persisted, they would be curtailed.

"Governour Briel," came a light voice to his ears.

"Yes, Lieutenant, I am ready. Please lead me to the shuttle," he said turning to gaze knowingly into her surprised eyes. A smile crossed his face for the first time in months. They still had potential.

[Lieutenant (j.g.) Robin Kethryveris, medical officer]

Keth took the PADD from her pocket, glad to have another moment's brief respite from the continuous stream of wounded in need of attention. The influx slowed sometimes, but never seemed to stop. At least she had another chance to work on her letter. Her brother was the only family she had.

"In any case," she dictated, "I wouldn't let it bother me. You know how Galandorians are. All bluster, no bite. Next time one tries to pick a fight, just ignore him." She sighed. Telling her brother Sem to ignore a fight was like telling a Cardassian to lighten up. It just wasn't going to happen. She continued.

"Yes, things have really been busy around here. When I said I wanted someplace where I could do something useful, I wasn't thinking of doing it 24/7. They say things are finally turning around, that this war may be over soon. You couldn't tell by how busy we are. If this goes on much longer without a break, we may start running short of important supplies. Some of the littler stuff has already run dry, but we've been able to substitute alternative items. Who'd've thought we'd be treating so many Klingons? I need to take a refresher course, or at least update my Klingonaase with medical terms. You know, 'Be still!' and 'I will cut here' and 'You will die unless you let me treat you!'. All the important stuff."

"The station has been almost deserted by the crew. Everyone's out in the midst of things. If they're not in one of our ships, they're in a Klingon or another allied ship. I'd almost wish I could be out there with them. Still, I'd be doing exactly the same thing I'm doing here, with even fewer supplies."

She paused in her dictation, setting the PADD aside to tend to a patient. At least this one would live, if they kept monitoring him. Too many hadn't. She rubbed her eyes and picked up the letter again. She looked at her wrist chrono. Almost the end of her shift, unless something happened again. She sent a silent plea to the Powers that nothing would happen again.

"I'm going to finish this off now. I think something major is going to happen soon, and Aegis may be in the middle of it. They don't tell junior lieutenants everything that's going down, especially medical people like me. Keep safe, and I'll talk to you when I can."

She punched the "end message" and "send" keys, and hoped that it would get through. Not all messages did these days. Then she looked up, scanning the room for Dr. Sabin. She looked as tired as Keth did, but then again, they were always tired now. Keth motioned with her head. "I'm going off now. You going to be okay?" Cara nodded, and shifted in her seat. "I'll see you tomorrow, then. I hope. I hope it's not until tomorrow." Keth put the PADD back in the rack by her work station and headed to her quarters. Maybe they were right. Maybe it would be over with soon. Maybe.

[HoD Gorkel, Klingon commander]

Sparks rained from the destroyed panel. The bridge of the small Klingon scout shook from another blast. "Weapons out! Breen cruiser closing at 228 by 137."

"And the **Portash**?!" The Klingon in the command chair held fast as the ship jolted again.

"On visual now." The moving side of a Jem'Hadar battleship filled the screen. As its aft edge cleared, the burning hulk of a Klingon attack cruiser came into view. Pulling the dead comm officer from her station, another Klingon shouted, "HoD! We're ordered to fall back!"

Gorkel ordered, "Close in on the **Portash**."

G'Mok shouted in response, "HoD! The fleet is moving out and the enemy is encircling us. This battle cannot be won!"

"Do it!"

"Sir! Your father is dead!"

Smashing his fists into the chair console, the Klingon captain relented. "Return course." Gorkel's eyes remained fixed on the viewscreen ahead. The small ship turned sharply and danced its way between two Jem'Hadar attack ships. Once in the open, it jumped to warp.

"HoD." The engineering officer waited for a response. Nothing. He looked to the other bridge crew. Stepping forward, "Sir?" Gorkel let out only a small grunt. "Warp crystals are damaged. We have to make port soon or lose all power."

Eyes still focused on the viewscreen, "Navigations, nearest friendly harbor?"

Looking at the panel, "The StarFleet station in the Canar system."

"Alter our course."

CAPTAIN'S LOG

Aegis remains in a tenuous position. Although Klingon ships have effected a countermeasure to the new Breen energy dissipating weaponry, neither the Federation or the Romulans have been unable to adapt this to work with their own technology. The Imperial High Command, now under direct leadership of Chancellor Gowron, outright refused my request for Klingon ships to augment defenses at Canar. Recent intelligence indicates that the ill-advised offensive against the enemy is taking a heavy toll on the Klingons. In light of this focus on aggression, I have offered Aegis as a fallback haven for damaged Klingon ships and their injured warriors. A number of such vessels are already enroute. Although this will tax our already strained medical and engineering staffs, I believe this will afford the system some protection. The **Yorktown** continues to offer support from its own crew, as well.

To further cement this bargain, I have proposed a mission I suspect will gain favor with the High Command. To succeed, I will need the support of a skilled warrior...

[Lieutenant Cara Sabin, chief medical officer]

Cara tried to ignore the shaking, but it was making her headache worse so she opened one eye and found herself staring at her daughter. "Aya, what do you want?"

"Momma, momma, get up! Grandpa wans ta talk!"

Cara frowned. Sighing, she flung the covers back and swung her legs over the side of the bed, immediately sorry for the sudden movement. "What do you mean your grandfather wants to talk?" He had to be on a comm channel, but why?

"I'm here, I'm here," Cara said as she slid into the chair in front of her comm unit, shooping Aya off as she did. "What in the Pleasures is going on?"

Cara's father, his hair suitably and attractively silver at the temples, peered at his daughter. "Cara Thalia Sabin, what is going on? You mean you haven't heard?"

"Heard what?"

Her father shushed her mother, then turned back to the screen. "The Dominion has fallen back behind Cardassian lines, Cara. Betazed is free."

"Free? You mean...they're gone?" If Cara hadn't been sitting down, she would have collapsed. Her home was free again. No more Jem'Hadar. No more Dominion. Freed! "Oh my stars. How? When?"

Her father was shaking his head. "There's a lot of speculation. Truth is, we don't know. Just be thankful. Your mother and I are leaving Risa. I'll be needed to sort things out on Betazed. We're catching a ride with a transport headed that way. We just wanted you to know where we were so you wouldn't worry if you tried to contact us."

Cara was still trying to absorb the news. "Do you need me? I could take some time..."

Her father shook his head. "No. You're needed where you are. I've been keeping up with what's going on in your part of the galaxy. When this is over, then you'll come home. Right now you do your duty and make us proud."

After saying good-bye, Cara got up and headed immediately for her medkit. "I think this calls for a celebration. How about breakfast on the Promenade?" Aya smiled sweetly and ran off, probably about to get into mischief in her closet. Cara was too happy to care. Her home was free finally.

A Last, Desperate Mission

[Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

It had been many months since her liberation from a Dominion prison. She had spent over a year there following the battle of Toras II. Within the privacy of Sorehl's office, HoD TSara eyed the Vulcan captain with reserved skepticism. In their years of service together, she had come to depend on his

diplomatic insights and scientific analyses. Seeing him draw up battle plans, however, was a new experience. War changed everything.

"Although there is considerable risk, we stand to make a major gain with minimal losses," Sorehl concluded. He turned from facing the viewer to her, "What is your assessment of the plan?"

TSara remained quiet for a moment, then leaned back. "As expected, needlessly complex," she taunted. "Still, I always knew you were hiding a certain shrewdness." Her eyes narrowed even as they twinkled.

"All the more reason to enlist your aid," the Vulcan admitted. "Who better to blend cunning and boldness than a person of your unrivaled heritage?"

TSara leaned forward in the chair. "Who can argue logic like that?"

A tone at the door interrupted the exchange.

"Enter," Sorehl instructed.

The doors parted. Lieutenant Commander Mike O'Connor stepped in through the open frame. "Sir," he began, "sorry to interrupt, but you should see this right away." He thrust out a PADD he clenched in one hand.

The captain accepted the offered item and perused its contents. Midway through, he glanced up at Mike, then TSara, and returned to reading.

TSara, rising from her seat, rightly recognized this reaction from her former first officer - whatever Sorehl was reading would affect her. "What is it?" she demanded.

The Vulcan tilted the PADD to allow her to see it. "Gowron," he stated flatly, "is dead."

"What?" she blurted, scanning the words. She felt a twinge of relief and jealousy. Someone had challenged and beaten the self-serving leader of the Klingon Empire, seeking to end the series of useless attacks on the Dominion. She recognized the name at once.

"I spoke with the Klingon who did this less than two weeks ago," Sorehl remarked. "He is a StarFleet officer at Deep Space Nine."

"But General Martok is the one ascending to the chancellorship," Mike noted.

"Intriguing..." the captain trailed off.

TSara wondered if the Vulcan realized the double meaning of his comment. "This is good news," she concluded. "Martok is no fool. He will not squander our few defenses. We may not need this desperate mission of yours, after all."

Sorehl looked to the chief of operations. "Thank you, Mr. O'Connor. Dismissed."

Mike nodded and left, letting the doors slide shut behind him.

Again, in the privacy of his office, Sorehl spoke in muted tones. "I should like to proceed with the mission."

"nuq?" the HoD queried. "Martok will let his ships defend Aegis without holding you to your bargain with Gowron."

The Vulcan paced slowly toward a table behind his desk. "It is true this mission was conceived in an effort to appease the late chancellor," he spoke slowly. Sorehl lifted a glass game piece from the kotra board arrayed there, touching it to his beard. "I believe it yet has a chance of real success. Unless you believe we face an unwarranted risk, I should like to proceed."

TSara found herself searching his face again. There were new aspects to the cautious Vulcan she had known while commanding this station. Inwardly, she wondered how much was the influence of herself and those like K'Cavok and Dakla. She wondered if the months of imprisonment under the Dominion had caused this change. *No matter*, she concluded. "Far be it from me to debate the captain of StarBase Aegis."

Sorehl nodded. He set the piece down. "Thank you. I shall inform the crew of open positions on your ship. We should commence at once."

TSara put her hands on her hips. "My ship will be ready long before your people will be." With that taunt, she strode out of the office. Destiny awaited.

[Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

Captain Sorehl strode into the cramped bridge of this latest incarnation of the bird of prey **naS SuS'a'**. With HoD TSara still in triage, he was temporarily in command of the Klingon bird of prey. One of his officers sat in the center chair, surveying the Breen warship which hung on the main viewer. "Status report, Mr. Hartle," the Vulcan ordered, announcing his return.

Lieutenant Commander Sam Hartle swiveled the chair and hopped to his feet. "We're in position, still cloaked," the chief engineer answered. "Amnor and her team are just beaming over."

"Outstanding," the captain praised.

"The **Hey'chu** was detected and led the remaining four Jem'Hadar fighters away from the planet," Hartle continued, stepping aside. "At least one has been destroyed already."

Sorehl nodded. He wondered if the bird of prey would be forced to turn and attack or be able to lead the Dominion ships further away. The away team they had secretly placed on the Breen leadship would need time. "And the Cardassians?"

"Savros reported a huge contingent on the surface and enough fighters, tenders, and warships to outnumber us 200 to 1," Hartle replied. Maintaining protocol, his comment nonetheless stressed the hazard of their position. It was a dangerous place to be.

Sarpeidon V, a burned out remnant of a century-old supernova, had once ruled the night for the inhabitants of a technologically advanced, but doomed, world. In the cataclysm, this outermost moon had been thrown clear of its orbit and become a class-D rogue, moving away from the growing Beta Niobe nebula. The Cardassians had found it an exploitable waypoint, its gravity well a useful place for anchoring ships and drydocks. Annexed by them over twenty years ago, it had served as the base for their entire 12th Brigade since. It remained one of the most heavily defended sites in the Cardassian Union. And they were floating in the middle of it.

"Understood," Sorehl declared, settling into the center chair. He thumbed the control to open ship-wide communication. "All hands," he spoke loudly. "As you are aware, enemy forces have fallen back to positions inside Cardassian borders. While this move has liberated much of our lost territory, it presents a stronger front behind which the Dominion can rebuild." He paused. "I have received word that our forces are preparing to launch an offensive to deny the Dominion that entrenchment. Even now, Allied forces are gathering at starbases along the border to bolster the main thrust from Deep Space Nine.

"There is little time to complete our objective. The Jem'Hadar and Breen ships which oversee the allegiance of this far-flung brigade are being diverted or impaired. We will proceed with our plan to offer these Cardassians a chance to join the resistance to free their homeland. In this, we must not fail." The Vulcan closed the channel. "Mr. Shield, plot us a course toward the main surface emplacement."

"Aye, sir," the lieutenant answered from the helm.

Sorehl leaned back in the chair. In his mind, he envisioned the moving of pieces on the kotra gameboard beside his Aegis desk. A game of bold strategies, a Cardassian had once explained to him. It was time to show how boldly a Vulcan could wage war.

[Captain Thomas Halloway, commanding officer **Yorktown**]

Captain Thomas Halloway paced his ready room with nervous anticipation. Battle was almost at hand. Not a desperate, flailing defense, this was a chance to strike deep and hasten the end of the war.

It was this same border he'd earned his rank defending. From here, he'd humbled many a Cardassian gul who'd tried to oppose his first command, the Ambassador-class **Yorktown**. Now, he was master of an even sturdier steed. The Sovereign-class **Yorktown**, already a formidable weapon in its own right, had been retrofitted with the new countermeasures developed for the Breen energy dissipators. She was more than ready to lead the Sixth Fleet on its foray against the Dominion.

The main thrust would commence from elsewhere, at Deep Space Nine. But the enemy could not be allowed to concentrate its defense along a single front. **Yorktown** would lead just one of several fleets, hitting the enemy to keep their forces dispersed. **Enterprise** would lead another from StarBase 211. If the Dominion ignored the two sister ships, they would pay a heavy toll.

"Skipper," announced his Andorian first officer over the link, "ETA to StarBase Aegis is fifteen minutes."

"Acknowledged, T'Binadi," Halloway answered. "Any word on the others?"

"The warbird **Genevex** is heading the Romulan column," the commander replied, "and General Chuvak has promised his best troops are manning the Klingon detachment."

It would be a miracle of logistics to get the fleet underway as soon as possible. Some fifty ships, Romulan, Klingon, and Federation were converging on the starbase. They would stay only long enough to restock weaponry, fill in personnel needs, and establish formation for launch. Aegis had come through for him in the past - he had little doubt that would do so again.

"Let's get on with it, then," Halloway responded. With a bold stride, he left behind the ready room, intent on the task at hand.

[Lieutenant Sam Hartle, chief engineer]

Sam lay on the cold, marbled floor of the Cardassian meeting room. Minutes earlier, Captain Sorehl had offered the commanding Gul a chance to rebel against the Dominion. Sam had been surprised to hear her accept.

That's when the fight started.

The second Gul had apparently objected. Phaser fire erupted. And for the first time in his career, Sam had gotten hit. It was a blast to the left shoulder. He was in a considerable amount of pain, but not to the point where he was incapacitated. Still, the noise seem distant.

Before going down on this mission to influence the Cardassians, the captain had given Sam a choice, of either staying on the **naS SuS'a'**, or coming with he and Shield to the surface. Sorehl had said:

"I estimate greater risk in the away mission."

Sam had replied to the warning with a rather gutsy retort:

"I estimate greater satisfaction in the away mission as well, with that in mind, and your permission, I will assist you and Shield..."

The three had beamed down to begin an important mission that would be vital to the success of the new Federation offensive.

Sam shook himself into the present, getting his bearings. Options were running out. The opposing Gul had brought in other armed guards. He could see Shield dash to a computer interface, dodging several blasts. The other Gul, herself badly wounded, kept rallying her troops to join the uprising.

A phaser, on overload, clattered into the room. Sam strained to get up; pain rippled down his torso, forcing him back. He saw the captain vault over a table, then stretch out, leaping for the weapon.

The brief surge of light didn't really surprise him.

The smells and sounds of the Klingon transporter room did.

He blinked again, realizing he must now be aboard the **naS SuS'a'**. He looked up, seeing Shield also standing beside him. But the rest of the pad was empty.

[Ensign Savros, science officer]

"We got two of them," Savros reported. He leveled a gaze toward the center chair of the **naS SuS'a'**. "Not the captain."

Amnor shifted, gritting her teeth. Onscreen, the viewer showed the chamber explode outward from the force of the discharged overload.

Savros looked back to his console. "Definitely other transporter traces. I can't tell who else got out of there."

"legh!" cried out the Klingon at tactical.

The viewer shifted. A pair of Galor-class cruisers had opened fire on each other. Another distant pair joined in. Others followed.

"Are we still cloaked?" Amnor demanded.

"Aye," Savros confirmed, "but that may be little help if all the ships in orbit start exchanging hostilities." She'd never expected to be in the midst of Cardassians going at each other. This could be very bad.

Back at Aegis, the fleet gets ready to launch its border attack.

[Captain Thomas Halloway, commanding officer **Yorktown**]

In his ready room aboard the starship **Yorktown**, Captain Thomas Halloway leaned one elbow against his desktop. "This is a curious one."

"Yes, AR-558 intercepted it within the hour," Commander T'Binadi noted.

"Orders to reinforce Sarpeidon V from ships at Quatal Prime," Halloway read aloud. "Interesting timing."

T'Binadi interlocked the fingers of his blue-skinned hands. "Allied operations have already entered enemy space. They could just be shoring up the front."

"Their lines are already solid; they've been expecting attack for days. And there are closer systems to Sarpeidon. This is something else," the captain retorted. He leaned back, running a hand through his dark hair. His frown shifted. "The Cardassians don't have ships at Quatal anymore, do they?"

The Andorian XO tilted his head downward. "No. Not since the Maquis seeded the system with cobalt diselenide. It's poison to Cardassians; they had to abandon the whole colony two years ago."

"But the Jem'Hadar and the Breen could still operate ships from there," Halloway observed. "The stuff's harmless to them."

T'Binadi squinted, tilting his antennae down. "I'm not sure I follow, captain."

"The Dominion is sending reinforcements from the only nearby system without Cardassian ships."

The first officer blinked. "Why not send Cardassians? An uprising?"

"Can you imagine it?" Halloway proffered. "There's a whole brigade stationed at Sarpeidon." He sprang from his chair, bounding toward the door. "Relay new orders to the fleet. Let's get underway. We're going to intercept those reinforcements."

*Onboard the Klingon bird of prey **Hey'chu**.*

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

"Gorkel, ETA on arrival to the **Yorktown**."

"Ten minutes."

"Has the **naS' SuS'a'** arrived yet?"

"Reports are still a little shaky but it looks like it."

"Helm, is the Cardassians still in front of us?"

"Yes, sir. We are still bringing up the backside."

"OK, pick up the speed a little but don't get too far ahead," then giving a tap onto the communicator, "engineering, are torpedo's reloaded and Phasers back on-line yet."

An answer comes through, "Momentarily, sir," in the background comes a loud explosion, "Well, make that 5," comes another answer from the Starfleet engineer.

"Just make it fast, battle will be upon us shortly. I would like to go into battle with a fighting chance."

"Aye, sir. Engineering out."

After some dramatically moments Charle reluctantly takes his position beside the HoD's chair, which at the moment sat a Commander.

"Everything on schedule, Charle?"

"Slightly behind, but we will be ready for anything, sir"

*The **naS SuS'a'**, **Hey'chu**, and the remaining Cardassian 12th Brigade (some eighty ships) are enroute to help **Yorktown** and the Allied fleet as they clash with a Dominion/Breen force outside Sarpeidon.*

Lieutenant Commander Patrick Renckly grasped onto the Operations console as the starship **Yorktown** was flung end-over-end by the torpedo impact at aft. Damage alerts registered across the board. Only his android strength kept him from being tossed aside like other officers on the bridge.

Captain Thomas Halloway, hurled from his command stance, crashed hard onto the deck. His body rolled further, stopping awkwardly near Renckly's feet. The android swung the console away, kneeling beside the captain. His left hand still tapping commands, he felt for vital signs with the right. A pool of blood was blossoming on the carpet. "Not good," he muttered. His left hand opened a channel to sickbay. "Medteam to the bridge," he ordered. "Halloway's been injured." He searched the captain's damp, matted hair, looking for a place to apply pressure.

Other officers struggled to regain their posts. Commander T'Binadi had bolted to the helm, putting the ship in a wicked spin. A Romulan warbird and a Defiant-class escort spun across the viewer until **Yorktown** faced its assailant, a Breen warship. "Full quantum spread, burst fire!" the Andorian shouted. At aft, the Deltan tactical officer complied. A young human got up from her knees, climbing back into the seat beside the helm.

The ship rocked hard to port. Another torpedo.

"Warning," the computer cautioned. "Hull integrity compromised." Klaxons sounded.

Still kneeling, Renckly turned his full attention to Ops, registering a breach in the saucer section. A quick check confirmed shields were strained, but preventing decompression. He heard lift doors open and glanced up, seeing Dr. Robin Kethryveris hurrying to the fallen captain. "Take care of him," Renc charged her, getting back in his seat.

As the doctor commenced her scans, Yorktown lurched again. The first officer stumbled, shaken off balance. Shields were buckling. Making a command decision, Renckly began closing bulkheads in the saucer. "Helm!" the android ordered, "Get us out of here!" He might regain shield power, if he could stall long enough to isolate the hull breach...

"Sickbay," Robin called out, "we're coming to you. Have a bed ready!"

"You got it!" came the reply from Dr. Sabin. Second later, the doctor and captain shimmered away.

From across the bridge, Ensign Sabrina Tracey reported her lack of progress. "Helm non-responsive!" she called out. T'Binadi steadied himself against her chair.

The Ops console registered incoming transporter traces. It might be too late, Renckly realized. "Intruder alert!" Renckly shouted. The battle was about to take another form.

[Lieutenant Commander Michael O'Connor, chief of operations]

Mike's body was flung against the wall of the Jefferies Tube as the **Yorktown** rocked with the impact of another shot. He fell out onto the engineering deck. Getting up, he rushed to the situation panel. Even from several feet away, he could see the blinking red diagrams depicting damage aboard the Sovereign-class ship. The hull breach stood out most prominently. Working quickly, Mike diverted secondary systems to maintain the environmental force field in that area. Once he was sure it would hold, he activated depressurization systems. From that moment on, the computer ran the show. It redirected turbolifts, sealed Jefferies Tubes, and locked hatches. Scanning the deck for life signs, it automatically beamed them either to duty stations or Sickbay, depending on their physical condition. Once the deck was clear, bulkheads dropped into place, and the environmental forcefield went down. Mike smiled. The efficiency of the Sovereign class vessels was amazing.

But he didn't have much time for admiration. The warp engines would be toast with another hit, and the **Yorktown** really had to pull back. "Computer, reactivate navigational shielding." The computer automatically replied, "Navigational shielding is not recommended in battle conditions." Mike knew the computer would object, and his response was quick, "Computer, override. As soon as navigational shields are in place, activate shielding protocol Alpha-3-2."

"Warning: Protocol Alpha-3-2 is untested and should not used under battle conditions."

Mike grinned. "Don't worry, computer, it'll work. Override and activate."

"Acknowledged. Protocol Alpha-3-2 engaged. Sensors online and mapped to shield preprocessors. Shield preprocessors. Program loaded and running. Reinitializing primary deflector array. Complete. Differential shielding activated."

As Mike moved on, he muttered a quick prayer that the shielding would work. It was the latest to come out of the Corps of Engineers. Sensors read enemy weapons status, calculated point and time of impact and redirected shields accordingly. As Mike crossed Engineering to work on the warp engines, though, he was flung head-over-heels by another blow to the **Yorktown**.

"Warning: Maximum differential tolerance exceeded. Navigational shields compromised. Warp engines offline." A moment later, one of the more unusual warning klaxons began to sound--intruder alert. Mike dragged himself to his feet, his focus still locked on the ring of panels surrounding the warp core. The computer had already calculated the required redirections to bring the warp engines back online, it just needed authorization to perform them. Mike's focus was locked on the blinking red control that would give it that authorization.

Out of the corner of his eye, Mike saw something that immediately diverted his attention. A Cardassian stood in the door to Engineering, a phaser rifle leveled at Mike. Although Mike's eyes were locked on that rifle, Mike's mind remained focused on that control, and he flung himself into the air for one last desperate leap. His left hand brushed the control, then made solid contact, activating it. Mike watched with appreciation as the core pulsed back to life, though he was nowhere near it. A disruptor beam caught him on the side, dropping him to the ground. As Mike's eyes fluttered shut, he could see the Cardassian aim the disruptor to finish the job.

*Captain Sorehl, aboard the **naS SuS'a'**, sends his officers to the transporter room to beam over to the besieged **Yorktown**.*

[Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

The Klingon bridge cleared as StarFleet officers filtered toward the transporter room. Their captain had bid them to help prevent the starship **Yorktown** from falling to hostile boarding parties.

TSara watched them pass their posts to her other officers. "You're certain you don't want to go with these Cardassians you've turned," she asked the Vulcan captain, "and finish this out?"

Sorehl shook his head. He still bore a bloodied lip from the earlier battle. "I have crew on that ship," he replied, jutting his chin toward the **Yorktown** onscreen. "And a debt to its captain." He cast a glance, seeing Savros depart. Lowering his voice, he added, "It is not logical, but it is..."

"The honorable thing, yes," she concluded. It was nice to finish his sentences for once. "Sometimes I think you listened to me too much."

Sorehl gave a deferential tilt of his head. "And what will you do?"

"I'll wait until the **Hey'chu** catches up, let them know you've gone over to the **Yorktown**," she related. "Then maybe I'll try my hand at being the first Klingon to lead a Cardassian brigade to victory..."

The Vulcan pursed his lips, giving a slow nod. "K'Cavok would find that a fitting turn of events."

"That he would," she smiled thinly, turning away. "Now get down to the transporter room before the Breen on that ship figure out how to make Sovereign-class phasers work."

By the time she looked back, he was already gone. True to form, he'd already anticipated her command.

The battle ends suddenly with a pronouncement from Cardassia Prime.

[Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

Captain Sorehl stood quietly by an equipment tray in sickbay, watching the doctors tend the many wounded. He had moved from the biobed to make room for more. It was a strangely detached, almost ethereal, experience to see the hurried movement without the corresponding sounds. His hearing loss from the concussion grenade, although temporary, had not yet faded.

He had not heard the statement made by the Founder on Cardassia Prime with his own ears, but his eyes had seen the impact. Fighting had stopped. The soldiers and warriors on the **Yorktown** were a microcosm of the entire front. The fighting was stopping everywhere.

It looked as if the war with the Dominion might finally be at an end.

It had not come soon enough for some. He watched as Dr. Sabin pulled a sheet over the newest member of her own staff. After the cease fire, several Breen soldiers refused to yield. Midshipman Panther had been there, tending a fallen security officer, when she had been cut down by stray fire.

Sorehl had seen other injured - Hartle, Miller, Amnor. He wondered how the rest of his crew had fared. As he stood there in continued silence, the captain could feel subtle vibrations in the deckplate. Warp power had been restored. Like some of the crew, the ship would limp its way back to Aegis.

*The starship **Yorktown** limps its way back to Aegis, after the announced cease fire with the Dominion. Captain Halloway considers recent events and the future.*

"He died for nothing," she said softly.

"Sabrina, no," Thomas Halloway assured her. In the confines of his ready room, his helmsman had related the events that had led to the XO's death. "He knew, we all know the risks."

"It sounds so hollow," Ensign Tracey replied morosely. "The fighting was all over ten minutes later."

"He couldn't have known that," the captain reasoned with her. "With the command codes, they could have killed every one of us by then." And for denying them those codes, the Jem'Hadar had executed Commander T'Binadi right in front of her.

"All a waste," she repeated, not looking at him.

Halloway breathed in deeply, unable to summon the words to debate her. He leaned forward to give her shoulder a reassuring touch, but hesitated. "Get some rest," he offered, instead. "We all deserve it."

She looked up at him. "Aye, aye, skipper." She got up from the chair and left the ready room.

He watched her go. She stopped for a moment in the bridge, looking aft to where the first officer had been slain. She glanced back at the captain, then moved away as the doors hissed closed.

Halloway closed his eyes, rubbing his face. He'd lost people under his command before; it was never easy. He remembered coming onto the bridge, seeing T'Binadi. His own thoughts had echoed the ensign's. And to hear it from that man, Muldoon. He had been outright flippant, "I hope you weren't too fond of your XO." The android had more feeling.

Then, when he'd heard Muldoon and openly consider executing one of the surrendered prisoners, he'd felt all his indignation rise up. He'd thrown the man off his bridge. *Melodramatic*, he agreed, *but what else was being captain good for?*

He wondered, *did this man represent the Federation he'd bled for, ordered men in to die for?* The scope of this war had been like nothing ever seen before in the Quadrant. *How have we changed? Are we now as ruthless as the Jem'Hadar, as brutal as the Cardassians? What will happen now that our common enemy is gone?*

He opened his eyes. Inside the aquarium that dominated an entire wall, fish floated in their tranquility, oblivious to the intrigue beyond their transparent enclosure. Was there such a place left where he could go?

A half-memory nagged at him. He touched his lips, absently. The war was over; his ship was smashed. *What would he do now?*

[Drankum, Colonial Minister of Finance]

Drankum continued to lean on the bar as he glanced at the computer monitor on the wall. The majority of the people assembled were all present for one thing, to observe history. The Ferengi didn't mind. They were buying drinks. However, for the first time in his existence, he actually had no idea what would come next.

"In the past I've always known that this species will attack that one, sell goods to this group but not that one. However....now...everything has changed.", he recalled saying thirty minutes prior to Patty.

"Raise the volume, Drankum!" a lieutenant in the back screamed. The Ferengi nodded, walked over a few feet and pressed the console under the monitor.

On the monitor a female Andorian reporter was seated behind a circular desk. In the background was a blue background, bearing the words "Federation News Network." The Andorian's reporter smiled at the camera, "With ten minutes left until the live feed from Deep Space Nine is brought online, we go now to this commentary from correspondent Peter Icmán."

The screen changed moments later to a middle aged human, one who looked like he hadn't slept in days. He cocked his head slightly at the camera and spoke the following:

"With the Dominion War now minutes away from termination, we must all take time to review the lessons we all should take from this disastrous ordeal.

"The Dominion War ended with a betrayal of the people who had helped to start it. The Cardassian people, lead by the late Legate Demar, stood up against an oppressive government and realized that what had been occurring was wrong. Instead of becoming rulers of the galaxy, they had become their own enemy, their own oppressors. According to many, the defection came too late, with too many lives lost. However, as generations upon generations have discovered, war is indeed hell.

"The Federation Alliance's total count of dead currently holds near one hundred and seventy-eight million, with a StarFleet slightly less than half its original size. The Klingon Empire's forces, in the end, remain at thirty-two percent of what they once were. The Romulan Empire, with their late entry into the war, suffered losses making their fleet slightly above half its former size...with over forty percent of those losses suffered during the invasion of Cardassia Prime alone.

"The count for wounded personnel has yet to be completely calculated, although is estimated near three hundred million. The figure, notably, includes all officers, marines, and civilians from all three governments. The attack for Cardassia created twenty-five percent of the above figures. Nearly three hundred vessels were destroyed or severely damaged.

"Information on Dominion and Breen casualties are not known. Cardassian casualties are still being calculated. The civilian death count is expected to be astronomical, with over thirty percent of the population of Cardassia Prime exterminated. The Cardassian Fleet has less than a hundred starships in operational condition."

"The Dominion War was started as a result of a lack of communication. The mistrust of the unknown and the lack of understanding created a chasm that ended with the death of millions. The key, with almost anything, remains communication. Let us hope this lesson does not go unheeded."

[The crew of StarBase Aegis]

On the Command Center of StarBase Aegis, the main viewer swelled with the view of dignitaries, broadcast live via subspace from Deep Space Nine. Setting down her stylus, the female changling stood onscreen and extended her hand. "The war between the Dominion and the Federation Alliance is over."

"Yes!" came a shout from behind Captain Sorehl. The exult brought a round of spontaneous applause and cheering from the officers crowded within. In celebration, they turned to each other, shaking hands vigorously, pumping fists into the air, embracing, even kissing. Over the cacophany, Sorehl merely squinted, trying to hear what Admiral Ross was saying onscreen.

A hand clapped him loudly on the back.

He turned away from the screen to see his first officer. Bulloc let out a whoop. "I'd think even you'd have somethin' to smile about, captain!" he howled. He smiled broadly.

Beside them, O'Connor witnessed the exchange. He felt his smile freeze awkwardly. "Mr. Bulloc," the captain spoke evenly. "You may rejoice for both of us. With my blessing."

Raised glasses spilled their contents all over Drankum's Bar. The crowd extended out into the Promenade. Confetti swirled. The Ferengi covered his ears as noisemakers started blaring. Ordinarily, he'd have cause to complain for such a ruckus. But today, he stood to make a favorable profit from all the revelry. Truth be told, he'd always favored the 35th Rule of Acquisition over the 34th...

In sickbay, Dr. Robin paused as she listened to the closing remarks of Admiral Ross over the channel. With a silent prayer of thanks, she exchanged a wistful nod with Cara, who stood in the doorway of her office. It was finally over...

In the privacy of the **Yorktown** ready room, Captain Halloway raised a glass of Chateau Picard to the reflection in the viewport. "To lost comrades," he toasted. He drained the glass and found that, despite the excellence of the vintage, the aftertaste in his mouth was ever so bitter...

From his balcony, Governor Joseph Briel watched the colonists rush into the streets. He gripped his cane tighter, feeling their joy sweep through him. He turned, knowing he could not be content to stand afar, merely watching. He must be out there, among them. For Canar, the Golden Age was about to begin...

The Vulcan pushed his way through the still-celebrating throng down to the Admin console. Stepping up next to the acting science chief, he tapped the shiny surface, then pulled himself up to stand atop it. Charlie reached up to steady him as heads started to turn. "All hands, this is your captain," he began. A hurried silence fell on the Command Center.

Throughout the station, the Vulcan's voice continued, "This is an historic occasion. In its honor, I am granting shore leave to all personnel. Let us never forget this day."

The resounding cheer was heard even up on the Command Center.

Peace

In the twilight, father and daughter sat against the rocky outcropping, looking skyward.

"What is it?" the four year old wondered aloud.

"That," her father replied, matter-of-factly, "is where we live."

"Up in space?" the girl asked, her voice full of astonishment.

"Yes, Aegis orbits in space above this planet," Sorehl explained. He lifted her onto his lap. "Canar has no moon, so the starbase is the brightest object at night. Can you see it move?"

T'Kel nodded her head slowly, but repeatedly. "Yes," she whispered, drawing out her answer.

Sorehl couldn't tell if her answer was sincere, but continued, "It holds a 'geosynchronous' orbit. That means it stays above the same spot. It will not move across the sky. What you are seeing is the apparent motion of the stars, as the planet rotates."

T'Kel just kept staring at the sky.

"Aegis is very far away," Sorehl noted. "Why can we see it?"

The Vulcan girl looked at him. "We left all the lights on," she explained.

Sorehl pursed his lips. "That is true," he remarked, "but they are not bright enough to see from here. Would you like to know why we can see it?"

"Uh-huh." The four year old nodded.

"Aegis reflects the sunlight that hits it." He gestured toward where the sunset had been an hour earlier. "That makes it light up so we can see it." He watched for signs of understanding from her developing mind. She seemed to be thinking about his explanation. He glanced down at his chronometer, waiting for the right moment to press on. "Every night, the sunlight hits a particularly shiny part in the right manner, and..."

The spot in the sky flared up, casting a pale light on his daughter's face. Her young eyes seemed to sparkle as they watched.

Eight seconds later, the point dimmed to its original brightness.

"Wow," she said, tensing her arms in excitement.

Sorehl let an eyebrow drift upward. "'Wow,' indeed," he repeated, opting not to inquire where she had learned the human expression. They sat in silence for a moment. "Let us go see if your mother has succeeded in putting T'Ael down," he finally suggested. He put her down on her own feet, and she scampered down the rocks toward the tent.

The Vulcan glanced up at the light in the sky. They would go back tomorrow. The new starship **Reliant** was due to arrive soon. *Another light to share the heavens*, he mused. Chiding himself for the romanticism, he turned away from the sky and followed down the path after his older daughter.

[Lieutenant Sam Hartle, engineer]

Sam sat in the pilot's seat of the shuttlecraft, monitoring a majority of the systems while his copilot, a fellow engineer, took a break in the back room. It had been a while since Sam had time to get behind the controls of a vessel, albeit a meager shuttlecraft. He remembered the dangerous days back when he was in the StarFleet Test Pilot Program. He got to take a look at some of the cutting edge technology, some of the most radical designs, and took control of some of the most powerful and efficient engines StarFleet had ever managed to procure.

That was then. This was now. In the now, Sam was going to a shipyard to retrieve the newest support ship for StarBase Aegis - the starship **Reliant**. The Defiant-class escort had been retrofitted with all of the latest technology StarFleet could legally offer.

After the destruction of **Perseus**, a committee was formed to look into the viability of selecting a ship more tailored to the individual needs of the StarBase. With such heavy losses from the war, it was out of the question to think the Admiralty would commission an entirely new ship just for Aegis. Other priorities stood out further. The decision had been to repair and retrofit a ship that had been damaged in the war. **Reliant** fit the bill. The ship had served in the war effort right up to the final battle above Cardassia Prime. Sadly, most of her crew had been killed when inertial systems had failed.

The ship was ready to be transferred to Aegis. It was Sam's job to get her to her new home. He was looking forward to meeting a new friend. Hopefully, the meeting would begin a long lasting friendship not only between the ship and the engineers, but with the crew that would undoubtedly use it, abuse it, toss it around like a pillow, then praise its accomplishments when all would be said and done.

"Estimated time of arrival is now two hours," the computer's human voice chimed.

Sam put his feet up on the chair opposite him, and began to twiddle his thumbs in anticipation.

[Lieutenant (j.g) Robin Kethryveris, medical officer]

Robin paused, readjusting her carisak strap. It wasn't going to be easy, but she had known that before she started. Revisiting old memories rarely was. Not too much further. She sighed, waiting for the shuttle to finish docking.

It was ironic, really, to be coming here from Starbase Aegis. It was Aegis that had launched the task force that had been involved in Operation viSo'be, led by the **Victory**, that had fought in the Battle of Toras II. She smiled inwardly at her elaborate train of thought. He would have liked that. He had always liked a good chain of logic, almost like a Vulcan in that way. Not that she was being particularly logical at the moment. Just looking for closure.

Not many people would have understood their relationship. It certainly wasn't physical, it wasn't really even emotional. It had just been a meeting of minds, something rare enough in her gypsy-like career. She could make him laugh, which was unusual with StarFleet types. At least, with Starfleet types before she had been posted aboard Aegis. She grinned, thinking of the new friendships she'd made. She wondered if any other StarBase had such an interesting crew.

Now, she was the one in Starfleet. She'd even been aboard the **Victory**, something he'd always aspired to. *Would he have been proud*, she wondered. He'd enjoyed his work, loving his engineering duties, but had also encouraged her efforts. He'd even suggested that she consider StarFleet as a career, but she had laughed him off. Had it only been to balance his death that she had continued? To somehow put back what had been lost? She bowed her head, feeling a sense of loss and futility.

Enough. She tried to order her thoughts, as he had taught her. Calmly, she considered her choices, finding good reason for most of them. Total justification was probably too much to hope for. Regardless of why she had joined StarFleet, it seemed to have been a good decision. There were certainly many

injured who would have died had she not been on Aegis, although they might have done as well with any other doctor. There was still so much to do.

The shuttle came to a stop, startling her from her thoughts. She stepped forward, ready at last to bring her errand to a close. Heading away from the landing site, she looked for the memorial gardens. There, under the flowering tree, was the tribute altar. It had taken considerable research to pinpoint the exact site from the planetary records. She supposed his family must be maintaining the "resting place". She hadn't contacted them, knowing that they wouldn't have known of her, nor of her friendship with him. This was a private matter. Moving carefully, she made her way up the low steps, ducking under the curtain of overhanging branches. Shrugging off her carisak, she pulled out the gift she had crafted. "Time of making, part of gift", he'd always said. This one she had begun when she heard of his death. The hand-spun remembrance crystals, which could only be produced beyond a planet's gravity well, had been a tradition with her spacefaring family. Softly placing it on the altar, she bowed her head in memory, invoking her gods as well as his. "It's over, friend." she murmured. "We won." She stayed there, keeping vigil, until the suns had set and only the soft glow of the crystals on top of the altar shone through the trailing branches.

[Midshipman Meri Kythe, science officer]

Midshipman Meri Alama Kythe tapped the astrogation console of the long range shuttle as it sped towards Starbase Aegis. She swiveled around, lifted her slight frame out of the chair, and meandered about. Thirty-one more hours until she arrived. The command staff had sent ahead their welcomes and descriptions of the starbase and her new department. There was time for a long nap before she arrived, and she didn't really have to be in uniform until she was in communication range. Of course, she'd have to read through regulations once more before arriving. No doubt medical would want to see her almost immediately for a physical.

She brushed her long dark hair back, braiding it loosely. The necessary PADDs were lying on the cot that was provided for long trips. Introduction to StarBase Aegis. Introduction to the crew. Introduction to the science department. Introduction to this, introduction to that. A request to report to security for phaser recertification. Room assignment. A dozen files with the essentials of starbase life. Layout of the station. Emergency procedures. Many of it was similiar to examples she'd seen at the Academy.

Looking around the shuttle one more time to make sure all was in readiness, she lay down and drifted off to sleep.

The Subsuming

*The starship **Reliant** embarks on its first scientific mission: to study the expansion of the central star in the nearby Korat system.*

[Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

As **Reliant** dropped from warp and entered the Korat system, Captain Sorehl watched the stellar spectacle onscreen. The surface of the expanding red giant, dominating the view, drifted ever closer to the gas planet which orbited it. The dense solar wind clashed iridescently on the radiation belts which surrounded the planet.

Sorehl stood, folding his arms as he approached the screen. Over the past millenia, three inner planets had been subsumed in the dying star. With hydrogen stores depleted, the nuclear reaction at the star's core now fueled itself on denser elements, causing both a cooling and the tell-tale expansion. The fourth planet would soon join its sisters.

With typical Vulcan curiosity, the captain stared ahead, postulating what sights they would see. The impact would no doubt be spectacular, throwing solar prominences in its wake. **Reliant** would steer well clear of such disturbances, but the added angular momentum and heavier elements of the gas planet would forever alter the star. Despite himself, he was anxious to see it.

"Inspiring," he whispered.

MEDICAL LOG

Dr. Cara Sabin, reporting

Has this entire place gone mad? I've got reports from all over the station of coughs, fevers, chills, and dizziness. This in itself wouldn't be too surprising if it was a virus I could identify, but along with these normal symptoms I've got a range of bizarre ones. Behavioral changes, tending toward the aggressive,

wild antics reminiscent of the original **Enterprise** virus from a hundred years or more ago, and that's not the end of it.

I've got telepaths with reduced or absent abilities, including myself. I'm even had some waning vision problems. Hopefully in a few hours it will clear and I can get back to work. But work on what? So far those of Klingon ancestry seem to be the most sensitive to... whatever this is. I haven't heard from **Reliant**. I hope they are faring better than we. We have to figure out what is causing this and how our biofilters missed it. I would have thought the transporters would have caught it. That leaves the docking bays. Anyone moving directly from a ship to the station would bypass the transporters and thus the biofilters. But I can't do anything much to help until my vision is back to something resembling normal. At the moment everything is in shadows. End log.

[Lieutenant Commander Patrick Renckly, second officer
Captain Sorehl, commanding officer]

A planet was dying.

Colossal forces clashed. Completing its death spiral, the orbital speed of the gas giant scoured the surface of the dying star. Friction and gravity tore wounds in both - ripping away atmosphere, igniting huge plumes of gas, stewing the teneous photosphere even further. Finally overtaken by the inexorable pull of its bloated sun, Korat IV at last plunged into the seething inferno with a final burst of electrical discharge and gamma rays. The star, spinning faster and off-center with its new mass, belched a conflagration of solar prominences.

As this latest round of cosmic billiards illuminated the ablative surface of the starship **Reliant**, forces inside had begun a clash of their own.

Lieutenant Commander Patrick Renckly reasoned it out within his positronic matrix.

It had started with Charlie's curt responses to Captain Sorehl, he recalled. Or had it? Dr. Robin had shown some aberrant behavior before the mission had even commenced. Amnor had taken her to sickbay. When the security chief had returned and heard Smith's defiance of the captain, her reaction was an unusually strong backlash.

And the captain had proven unsteady, as well. At first it had been a few oddly placed comments. Sorehl had seemed distracted by the spectacle of the stellar collision. But his hostility toward Charlie and Amnor had been all too wrong. Renckly had intervened then. The captain seemed to return to reason. But then came confused commands and a furious attempt to oust Amnor from the bridge.

He still had one arm wrapped around the captain. Sorehl struggled vainly against the one person on the bridge whom Vulcan strength had no bearing. There was no logic to it at all. What was going on?

[Lieutenant Commander Cara Sabin, chief medical officer]

Logan slowly walked into the main room of his quarters. He'd left Drankum's several hours before and come back here to rest, but couldn't sleep. Anyone looking at him would realize he was sick, his complexion was pale, he was unshaven and generally looked unwell. He heard his door chime. Hoarsely he called, "Enter."

Cara walked through the door. "Logan?" She saw him standing off to one side of the room and was aghast at his appearance. "Logan!"

He looked at her. She was the last person he'd expected to walk through his door. "Cara... what are you doing here?"

She brushed off his question. "Nevermind. Logan, you look horrible."

He coughed, trying to clear his throat. When he spoke again his voice was less hoarse. "I'm fine. Now what did you want?"

"You are not fine!" she insisted, hurrying over to him.

He frowned. "I said, I'm fine!"

She put her hands on her hips and looked up at him. "Logan Chekov, don't tell me you're fine." She lifted one hand from a hip and reached up to feel his forehead. "Dammit, I wish I'd brought my medkit with me." His forehead was very hot and she wanted a better reading than her touch could give her.

He pushed her hand away. "Why are you here?"

"You're sick. There's something going around the station. I need to check you out." She reached for his arm. "Sit down!" Surprised when he complied, she frowned and touched his forehead again. "You're burning up."

He frowned again and started to stand. "This is pointless. I need to get to work."

Cara pushed down on his shoulder. "You are not going anywhere. I said sit and that's an order."

He looked at her, irritation in his eyes, but Cara still couldn't sense his emotions. "Says who?"

"Last time I checked I was still chief medical officer around here."

He pushed himself to his feet, putting his hand on the chair for balance. "So?"

"So you're going to sit back down... now!" She raised her voice so rarely that he stepped back in surprise and lost his balance. Cara reached for him as he started to fall. "Logan!"

He grabbed her and regained his balance. "Whoa."

She softened her voice, entreating him, "Logan, please." He nodded and sat down; the frown was still plastered on his face. Cara walked over to where Logan's medkit sat on a countertop. Her vision clouded a bit as she crossed the room. He didn't need to know she was sick too. Retrieving the kit, she turned back to him, "I'm going to check you over."

He sat there, unmoving. She removed the scanner from the kit and set it, glancing at him from the corner of her eye. Logan sighed, then began coughing again. Cara bit her lip until the coughing fit passed. She raised the sensor and tried not to squint at the readout. "Damn. Everyone's symptoms are different. You've got it in your lungs. You need to be in bed," she said quietly, sitting down next to him.

He stood. "Why should I?"

"Because I care about you, that's why. Please, please get in bed." There had been no fatalities yet from whatever this was, but she didn't want to take chances. She needed to get him into bed, get herself down to sickbay, and work on a cure. Relief washed over her when Logan nodded and started to walk slowly to his bedroom. Cara walked alongside him, hands ready to steady him.

"I'll see you later?"

She didn't want to leave him, especially not now. "Yes, you will. As soon as I check on the others and try to figure out what's going on." She leaned over and kissed his cheek. He grinned and watched her head for the door. She stopped and turned back to take one last look at him. "Stay in that bed," she admonished and vanished out the door.

He rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah," he said to the empty doorway.

[Commander Stephen Bulloc, executive officer
Lieutenant Commander Cara Sabin, chief medical officer]

This was insane. She was on her way to sickbay, but realized that not everyone who needed treating would be there. They might just as well be in their quarters or on duty. She tapped her commbadge. "Sabin to Bulloc," she called out. She waited for the response, then continued, "Commander, I have a medical directive for you. Everyone exhibiting symptoms should be guided, dragged, or beamed down to sickbay. And I mean everyone."

Still up on the Command Center, Bull took a moment to consider. "Doc, I don't know what's got into these folks, but they actin like they ain't got a brain in their head. Is that part of this virus thing?" He didn't realize he wasn't pausing between sentences. "And have ya heard any word from the mushrooms? We're still in the dark up here... hmm.. guess that makes us mushrooms, too. I'm sure we'll be sendin' some more down ta ya. All I kin say is good luck, Doc. I know y'all are busy."

Cara waited through the lengthy reply, giving her time to step off the turbolift. "Yes, Commander. Odd, extreme, or even outright insane behavior are all symptoms of the virus. Anyone displaying such symptoms should be relieved of duty and sent immediately to sickbay. Also, the virus can manifest itself with other symptoms - headaches, loss of vision, things like that." The she frowned. *Mushrooms?* "Commander, just what mushrooms are you referring to?" Cara finally entered sickbay. Miller and Keth both lay prone on separate biobeds. Kyrios and O'Connor were sitting up, but didn't look well. Amnor was nowhere to be seen.

Bulloc's voice answered her question. "Doc, it seems like Mr. Shield'll be takin' a visit ta ya. I'm removin him from duty now. Delusions of grandure. The mushrooms I'm referin' to are Dr. Miller and company. Seems they didn't know nothin' 'bout no virus till I asked 'em 'bout it. I was tryin ta get science and medical ta tell me somethin', anythang about this virus but they just didn't seem ta know nothin bout it. That's what they was tellin me. So, I dubbed 'em 'mushrooms,' since it seemed they was in the dark and being fed garbage. Seems like some folk thank I'm effected too talkin bout mushrooms.. maybe they need ta review their biology of how mushrooms grow."

Cara listened. Despite the gravity of the situation, she found herself trying not to laugh. So *that* was *what he was talking about*, she realized. "Well, Miller isn't available to help," she answered, looking over to the biobed. The virus reached stage three. We came close to losing him. Renckly and Ensign Salia are trying to devise a cure. I'll make sure your included in the briefing when they give me an update."

Bull still was feeling like the preverbal mushroom, "Ok, Doc. I ain't even gonna ask what a stage three. I just hope it's nothin like part of them stages on a rocket."

THE END OF AEGIS HISTORY, VOLUME II

Reunion

I particularly enjoyed writing this next section, but it didn't realize affect the plot, so I may delete it from the Aegis history unless anyone thinks it should be preserved. It's here for your consideration. It takes place during the Dominion War, prior to the liberation of Betazed.

The pleasant tone roused Captain Sorehl from sleep, and he opened his eyes to the darkness. His mind soon grasped the nature of the summons, prompting him to sit up. The comm tone was that for a previously recorded, but priority, personal communication. The sand-mattress shifted as he drew back the covers and swung his legs out. There was no one to disturb with his movement.

The Vulcan placed his bare feet against the cool deck and stood. Walking a few short paces toward his desk, he took a robe to wrap around his modest undergarments. He spun the viewer toward him, pressing the retrieval button.

The introductory screen bore a Klingon insignia. *Odd*, he thought. He had no personal associations left within the Empire. The seal was replaced by the image of a youthful, fair-haired humanoid.

"Captain," the unfamiliar man began, "you will not recognize this face, nor should you. By the time you see this, I'll have traded it for another."

Sorehl raised a curious eyebrow. He knew the voice.

"You are a Vulcan who has served Klingons. I have faced you before; you know our ways." The face onscreen took on a harsh glare. "Varon told me you delivered the death blow to our captor." Sorehl fought down the shame the statement brought. "You acted that day as a true Klingon. My honor-debt was clear. I now repay it..."

"I regret taking leave of Aegis at such a time, but an urgent personal matter intrudes," Sorehl explained, still gathering items into his carry-all.

"Well, yes, of course, Captain," Lieutenant Commander Ramson answered over the comm, still sounding like a man who'd been asleep moments earlier. Bulloc was still in sickbay. Neither of them intended to disturb the recovering first officer. "We'll do fine, sir," the second officer observed. "You go. Is there anything you need before you leave?" Ramson exercised the empathy characteristic of his race.

"Not at this time, D'Mysus. Advise engineering to focus on external repairs to the starship Victory. And inform Lieutenant Amnor that I suggest her training courses begin at once. I shall return with all due haste." He folded an overcoat over one arm. He was ready.

"Understood, captain. Good luck."

Qapla might be more appropriate, he reflected as he exited the cabin. Stepping onto the turbolift, Sorehl smoothed the wrinkles from the denim tunic he wore. His civilian clothes had seen so little wear, they were almost new. His departure, during gamma shift, meant few of the crew would see him in such attire. It would also reduce the security risk. Amnor would be displeased to hear of him leaving the station without escort, especially after the incident with Gar Awi, but the message from K'Vorlag has been clear. He must come alone.

The lift opened into the landing bay that held the runabout Jordan. Though the Colorado was the official "captain's gig," Sorehl did not wish to broadcast his departure to unintended parties. Heading toward the craft, he wondered if this trip would bring the resolution it promised...

The runabout computer interrupted a Vulcan rendition of the Terran opera *La Boheme* with its announcement, "Now clearing Umoth system; setting course for Tohvun waypoint."

Sorehl glanced up, hearing the report from his seat at the Jordan's helm. This remainder of the flight plan to Torman V would require 14.62 hours, by his calculations.

He made no plans to rest.

While he did not doubt the reliability of the craft or its ability to rouse him in the event of danger, it seemed unwise to reduce his alertness when alone and so close to the enemy border.

The computer resumed the music. Sorehl returned to perusing charts of the surrounding systems. *Curious*, he mused, *to have dwelled in this region of space over three years and yet know only a handful of nearby planets*. Aside from early surveys conducted when he was chief science officer, his ventures had been limited to starbases and tactical conferences. A proverb of Surak cautioned against such purposeful haste, chiding those who "moved swiftly upon the current, whilst the inhabitants on either side perished in chaos."

Such a saying might well apply to Torman V. A neutral shipping world, the planet had nearly starved amidst the clashes of opposing fleets that had wrecked their trade routes. Well-armed Ferengi convoys arrived to avert disaster, but at no small price to the inhabitants.

It was here K'Vorlag directed him. It was here, the Klingon claimed, that the fruits of his labor would fulfil his self-imposed honor-debt. 14.58 hours from now, Sorehl would judge for himself the veracity of that claim.

The opera swelled with the sounds of the tenor/soprano duet. Had he not been Intent on his star charts, the captain might have noticed himself quietly humming along...

Wet and cold - two of the most adverse planetary conditions a Vulcan would want to endure. *This particular part of Torman V*, Sorehl observed, *seemed to have both in abundance*.

He clutched the collar of his trenchcoat tightly to keep out the rain. With his other hand, he tilted his hat down, letting the water run off the brim. Thick clouds hung low in the sky, casting a pall of darkness on the damp streets of the spaceport. A well-dressed Ferengi passed by, seemingly undaunted by the weather.

Thunder rumbled in the distance. Turning to look before he stepped out, Sorehl leaned back to avoid the whisk of a one-man hovercraft as it jetted down the narrow lane. A hail of fine droplets drenched him in its wake. He shook the water off his clothes as he hurried across the street and stepped into the lobby of a modest hotel.

The warmth of the fireplace greeted his senses at once. The interior of the structure was natural-looking, almost Neo-Transcendental. He took off his hat, approaching the front desk.

"Nice fedora," the caretaker commented. "Didn't know it was a Vulcan thing to wear 'em."

"Thank you," he answered evenly, "it was a gift." Sorehl recalled procuring it to participate in one of Blair's "archeological fiction" programs on the holodeck. He sorted through his next possible comment. He must find a discreet way to determine if the group he sought...

"Daddy!"

The shout of the tiny voice completely broke his concentration.

He heard the feet run across the floor. He turned. The small child rushed to him, her fair hair bounding behind her. She collided into him, clutching at his legs. He blinked, tossing the hat aside, and lifted her to his chest.

"Daddy! Daddy, you found us!" she blurted. "We missed you!"

"T'Kel," he spoke, almost inaudibly, letting her little hands touch his face. Correcting her for her display did not concern him. Youth could not be expected to contain its joys.

He searched the room with his eyes. T'Salik stood in an open archway, as cool and composed as the day he'd met her.

K'Vorlag's debt to him was fulfilled.