

STAR TREK: PIONEER



**BOOK 4—
THE TILIKAAL SAGA**

SEO4EP10
"JOY'S SOUL
LIES IN THE DOING"

PROLOGUE

Captain's Log—January 21, 2386 (0800 hours)

“We have been back in the Shackleton Expanse for five days now. I have the ship on yellow alert. There is still no sign of Lieutenant Desmond Trask, his copilot Badvin, or their ship, the Obelisk. The hearts of our crew are heavy with worry and dread. Commander Nalanid has taken it upon himself to lead the search using any and every iota of know-how and technology Pioneer has to offer to locate our missing crew member. And, yet, this is only one of many problems.

“The extreme damage we suffered while in and while exiting the Tilikaal's other-dimensional prison has left our power systems strained and transporters nonfunctional. We must, therefore, conserve our energy and diminish our travel through this sector of space for fear of running into a spatial anomaly that might completely destroy our power network. We cannot simply repair the systems as some of their components cannot be replicated. I have ordered Lieutenant Commander Madrek assemble a team and take a shuttle to locate and mine rubindium, a key component to constructing and repairing essential transporter components and EPS power conduits.

“The plight of Ash'Tamalia and her people still linger on everyone's mind. We're gathering evidence to support a theory our science team has cooked up revolving around harnessing the energy from powerful bursts of EM radiation to burn a hole through subspace in order to 'tunnel' to the Tilikaal pocket universe. Of course, all of this will be exponentially harder without a functioning galaxium device. Our brilliant Ops manager, Lieutenant James is leading the effort to repair the device.

“In the meantime, I have ordered our crew to learn as much as possible about the Tilikaal. As such, I have asked Celivol of the Zed Med Romulans to prepare a report for delivery to senior staff about everything they know about these ancient beings, the Confederation of United Worlds, and the circumstances around the ZMR arriving in the Centaurus-A galaxy. Perhaps we can glean some details we overlooked before and find a way to save Romulus and Remus before we reestablish communications with Starfleet...”

Senior staff gathered in the starboard lounge on deck 4. Commander suggested a roomier meeting location than the main conference room on deck 1. Even though Chief Madrek was on an away mission to collect rubindium, the addition of Captain Nic van Asch and two of the ZMR, Advi and Celivol, to the meeting called for a less cramped space.

Celivol stood at the far wall, a large display screen behind him. The other senior staff members had their choices of tabled seating, couches, or chairs at which to place themselves.

Nic chose to stand. His arms were crossed. He hadn't spoken much, except brief conversations with Lieutenant Chad Simon, the ship's counselor. He was due an in-depth counseling session to see to his fitness for duty, standard procedure after a commanding officer experiences a traumatic

event. Nic had spent most of the last five days hidden in his quarters on deck 2 reviewing years of data on the Centaurus A galaxy and the civilizations therein that were in the ship's database. When asked by Jilel, he had not drawn any conclusions nor did he voice an opinion.

Advi watched as the last two officers came into the room—Nalanid and Issus. Both regretted being torn away from their search and rescue operation. Neither had slept much. Still, Jilel ordered the meeting.

Commander Sanada stood next to Celivol. “Thank you all for coming. Any questions before we have Administrator Celivol proceed?”

Nalanid had never dealt with losing friends or family in a way that he, as a trained therapist, would ever recommend to others. ‘Sleep was for the content’ was an old Tellarite saying, and Tellarites were rarely content. Thankfully, the past months have had Kalani along with him, and her mere presence had helped him recenter and prioritize his drive to figure out the Mull, crack the problem of warp travel there and in the Expanse, and find Latha and Trask. While he still didn’t get as much sleep as he should have, at least Kalani was there to cajole him to bed where other times he would have fallen asleep in the lounge with three PADDs in front of him and multiple notebooks. Nalanid took a seat on a chair after removing the cushion then sipped on his herbal tea. He shook his head, determined to not think about subspace energy fluxes and simple harmonics for a time, and listened fully to Administrator Celivol.

Ship’s Counselor Chad Simon waited for the administrator to begin. While waiting he began to ruminate, an unhealthy habit to do. The rumination was usually regulated to his daily golf game. His golf game was a place where such thoughts could be tended to properly, even if it was a few practice techniques with a five iron. However, with power systems on the fritz, his holodeck golf game had to be suspended. *This ship and its crew have been through so much trauma, he thought. I know they are made of stern stuff, but I hope the next bit of information we are about to receive will not bring anyone close to their tipping point.*

Entering this space, Issus stretched out her long tail along a wall, rather than curling it under herself like she normally did.

Jilel waited for a good five-count, then nodded to Celivol. “Whenever you’re ready, Celivol.” He said softly.

The aged Romulan stood at the end of the room. He resembled a storyteller of old. His gaze drifted into the distance, the past, as he summoned forth the tales he had heard for 190 years. These stories had entranced him since he was a young man forcefully thrust across space and into a new galaxy by forces beyond his comprehension.

“What I tell now is a brief summation of chronicles passed on from the remnant of peoples who took to memorialize the events that occurred in the Centaurus-A galaxy, from its inception to the fear-inspiring Hehdi-Tilikaal War to the birth of the Confederation of Worlds. Billions of years ago, two galaxies collided. This event created a subspace disturbance of immeasurable proportion wreaking havoc through time and space, squeezing subspace realms into our own, and setting off a chain reaction that would alter the evolution of thousands of species. Strange radiations, altered physical concepts, and inexplicable phenomena inundated the galaxy creating perilous regions of space, temporal distortions, and mind-boggling anomalies like the quantum-split Mull/Shackleton Expanse Complex or the intergalactic network of the Celestial Prophets.

“Millions of years ago, one civilization advanced quicker than all others. As stories will tell it, their world was seeded with an element that had been pushed from the depths of subspace and into the very strata of their world. Whereas some species would construct mighty starships to explore the sea of space, these people would develop and master the science of space folding fueled by the manipulation of an element that became sacred to them. They looked into the stars and used their knowledge of astronomy and planetary sciences to jump to alien worlds to study them, to help guide them. This generation of scientists became known as the Hehdi and those that traveled the stars gave up their singular names and took on the mantle representative of their species. Unified in purpose and unified in name. They traveled and observed other species clandestinely, watching as some achieved space travel and eventually came into conflict with other spacefaring races. Their philosophy drove them to believe that—just as the Great Collision disrupted the natural order of our universe—it was against the natural order for species from different worlds to intermingle. They came to view the sacred element as divine proof that they, and they alone, were given a Supreme Mandate to maintain this separation between species. And like self-appointed deities did they take it upon themselves to remain unseen to these alien worlds while clandestinely thwarting their attempts to travel the stars. Their consciences allowed them to do this, as they used their amazing technology to make these worlds into paradise planets, eliminating sickness and hunger with unseen technology and sciences and inhibiting natural disasters—the things that cause the lack of resources from which war springs.

“The Hehdi took the mantle of overseers adding world after world to their secret collection of governed planets. But, as with many species, there were those who did not agree with the Supreme Mandate. They wanted to bathe in shared knowledge between species. They wanted to use their awesome space folding technology to not just travel the galaxy, but the multiverse. These rebels became known as the Tilikaal, the Hehdi term for 'they who cause divisions'. The war started as a philosophical one, debated in the great halls of their homeworld, each side arguing their case with analytical data and scientific assumptions. But when words did not win the day, the Tilikaal took to action.

“First, the rebel Hehdi violated the mandate to not appear to alien races and introduced themselves to a race of telepathic and telekinetic aliens who were masters of genetic engineering. They formed a union with these beings offering access to the sacred element in exchange for mental enhancements that would give them an advantage over their brethren. Those that would be added to the order of Tilikaal agreed. We have already met some of them like Ash'Tamalia. Hence, on that day was born the order of the Assessors. No longer calling themselves Hehdi, each Assessor took their own name and began the process of judging which worlds would be included in the Great Exit.”

Sanada stopped Celivol for a moment. There was a lot to take in but she had to make a guess. “The Great Exit? Is this leading to the collection of worlds that were transported into the Shackleton Expanse?”

“Indeed,” the aged Romulan responded. “The Assessors assessed which unsuspecting worlds would have world engines constructed around their cores. The Tilikaal used a combination of space folding technology and psionics to build these engines without the denizens of the planet being aware.”

“I'm surprised that a society as powerful and culturally advanced as the Hehdi would wage a philosophical war and not come to the conclusion that—since neither side could convince the

other—perhaps both were wrong. Tellar Prime became unified through ‘philosophical conflicts’ that were waged with words. If neither side could convince the other of any logical points they were attempting to make, then both sides were seen as losing the debate and a general quorum would be formed to unify both failed philosophies under a new banner. Other societies may call such a thing ‘negotiation’, but it seemed like the ancient and wise civilization of the Hehdi and Tilikaal had never considered such a course. And there lay the bones of so many beings that were cast aside in their conflict.”

Sanada remarked, “Not everyone is as advanced as the Tellerites I suppose.”

“The fundamentals of the conflict sound distressingly familiar to me. Humanity. The Vulcans and Romulans. The Andorians and Vulcans,” Jilel remarked.

“Conflict is the nature of the universe, is it not,” Celivol said. “But this conflict would reach intergalactic proportions and cost billions of lives. Once the world engines were installed in these worlds—Orgun, Toryuui, Seku, Qofuari, and dozens of others—the Great Exit began. First, they scanned space for young galaxies that could host their new civilization. The Milky Way Galaxy, along with some others, came to their attention. Utilizing tetryon filaments left over from the Great Collision, the Tilikaal sent obelisks to these galaxies in search of ‘dead zones’, large swaths of space absent of populated planets, perfect grounds to plant these worlds. However, the world’s home star would be sacrificed to fuel the transport of the planet to what the Romulans would eventually call the Forbidden Expanse and that you refer to as the Shackleton Expanse. Cosmic upheaval occurred on two accounts:

“For one, the Hehdi would be outraged by such a destructive rebellion simply to flaunt the Supreme Mandate. Secondly, the self-serving Tilikaal made a grave miscalculation. They had no knowledge of the quantum-split Mull/Shackleton Expanse Complex. The obelisk’s reported areas of space without populated planets. However, such was not the case. World engines propelled populated worlds into active solar systems with planets that had not been detected due to the tetryonic eddies and gravimetric disturbances that infect the Expanse like cancer in a body. Some planets were transported near or into stars; others collided with populated and unpopulated moons and worlds; some were lost in subspace; others arrived but not without severe damage to their ecosystems. Even some of Tilikaal themselves were cast into other universes. Ravaged by storms and geotectonic cataclysms, the Assessors, guilty of catastrophe on a galactic level, set out to save the worlds they could.

“But they would not set out to correct their error without the judgment of the Hehdi upon them. The Hehdi hunted down Assessors and executed them for their arrogance and impudence. And the Tilikaal would share their fate. The Hehdi jumped from world to world, hunting down the Tilikaal and eradicating them. The Tilikaal fought back using their psionic abilities and any kind of space folding technology they could scavenge.”

Jilel shook his head sadly. Both the Hehdi and the Tilikaal had the blood of billions on their hands with this war they had waged, and now it appeared as if it was degenerating into outright genocide on the part of the Hehdi. He secretly wished he’d never heard of either of them or their technology; but fate or chance had decided that it was *Pioneer* that would take the lead in these events regardless of personal feelings on the matter.

“The Assessors could not hope to correct the damage caused by the Great Exit while simultaneously warring with the Hehdi. They convinced the Tilikaal to go into stasis. The

Assessors would hide the dormant Tilikaal remnant on planets in the Expanse utilizing the tetryon disturbances to hide from Hehdi detection. The Assessors would dedicate themselves to trying to rebuild world engines or to stabilize worlds that had been thrust into catastrophe.”

Jilel and Franklin glanced at each other. They had set foot on some of those worlds, like Orgun III, or seen the final death throes of others. They had witnessed the Tilikaal technology reworked into weapons of mass destruction. And now the pieces were coming together.

“The Assessors even returned to the Centaurus-A galaxy to rescue the last of the Tilikaal, building large stasis chambers to try and preserve them. A small faction of Tilikaal resisted. They wanted to continue the war against the Hehdi. Some claim that the Tilikaal began to in-fight but on the psychic plane. Based on the events that recently happened to us, it seems that those aligned with the Assessors were somehow imprisoned in a pocket universe composed of EM radiation and psionic energy. Sadly, the Tilikaal that chose to not go into stasis were summarily wiped out by the Hehdi. That is where the Confederation of Worlds comes in.” Celivol paused to let the group breathe and ruminate on all that he said thus far.

“If I’m hearing this correctly, the Tilikaal in the Expanse and in the EM pocket universe are the last survivors of the race, correct?” Jilel asked, feeling a bit like a cadet at a lecture.

Celivol sighed. He seemed hesitant to respond but came forth with it. “That is with the exception of the Repentant.”

“The Repentant?” Jilel echoed.

“Tilikaal on two worlds that had been transported to the Expanse who, tired of war and eager to save that which they could, managed to rebuild their world engines. They departed from their brethren and transported the two worlds into a neutrino nebula located within the Romulan Star Empire. The ancestors of those who were the first line of ZMR inhabited a colony planet on the edges of the nebula. They investigated the appearance of the two new gravimetric anomalies that suddenly appeared and found two worlds exhausted by war and desiring only peace. The true Star Empire was informed. The decision was made to keep the appearance of these two worlds a secret as long as the Repentant, who now saw the value of the Supreme Mandate, swore to never oppose Romulus. They agreed. Using their miraculous knowledge of psionics and their incredible technology, the Repentant reworked the machinery to project a systems-wide cloaking field, even sacrificing their own bodies to become one with the machines. This allowed them to project a psionic field to enhance this massive cloaking field, hiding the presence of these worlds from even telepathic intrusion. The initial pulse to create this psykotetryonic neutrino field worked, though it has some unexpected side effects. Our vessel’s singularity drive, which was positioned outside of the nebula to observe, somehow interacted with the field. We were ejected into a tetryon filament that deposited us in the Centaurus-A galaxy. Until *Pioneer* arrived, we had no way of knowing if the Repentant had maintained their secret existence. You confirm that their plan succeeded. The Star Empire has preserved the secret. The Repentant may have found peace for few know of their true location.”

Nalanid nodded. “The fractures through the layers of subspace of which I theorized would be likely to manifest as tetryon filaments in near-space layers. It would make sense that if you were pushed into the filament, without a way to properly navigate it, that you would travel down the path of least resistance towards the origin point of the fracture.” He gestured with his mug, “They

may be at peace for now, but it is possible the upcoming supernova is an indication that they will not remain so.”

“That is just one of our fears, Commander Nalanid,” Advi said.

“Before we get to that, young Advi, we should explain why the Confederation of Worlds was formed to provide some context as to what ended the Hehdi-Tilikaal War,” Celivol said.

“It doesn’t sound very over to me,” van Asch said. “Sounds like a pause in the action since the Assessors did a pretty good job hiding the Tilikaal.”

Celivol took a step forward with his arms open. “Yes. And no. You see, for thousands of years, great minds on dozens of worlds in the Centaurus-A galaxy peered into the night sky. They witnessed the death of stars from afar—stars that were consumed as the Tilikaal performed the Great Exit over thousands of years. These stargazers wondered what great power could snuff out a star. They feared for their own suns. These civilizations traveled into the stars to investigate and found unity in a shared mission. In time, they came to learn of the war. A delegation—the first Confederation—was sent to the borders of the Hehdi Empire to sue for peace. At first, the Hehdi resisted, not even wanting to dialog with other species for sake of the Supreme Mandate. But then the Confederation was forced to give the Hehdi an ultimatum: end their pursuit of the Tilikaal or else the Confederation of United Worlds would muster every starship they could build, invade the worlds subjugated by the Hehdi, and reveal the secret behind their paradise planets. The Hehdi reacted viscerally to such an idea; the idea of even one of their worlds being infected by an interspecies invasionary force. The Confederation felt that it was a war they wanted to fight now—if the Hehdi forced their hands—as opposed to waiting for a cosmic event that could prematurely end one of their planets. The Hehdi acquiesced. The War ended.

“The Confederation took it upon themselves to create the Elevated Edict. While the Hehdi would continue their clandestine quest to subjugate unknowing worlds, the Confederation would reach out to worlds with sentient species and slowly introduce them to the galactic community, thereby subtracting those worlds from the Hehdi equation. This Confederation has lasted for over one thousand years and even includes remnants of worlds long lost to the War, like the Cal-Mirrans and Qofuari. They even welcome our remnant of lost Romulans.” He paused. He took in a breath, having spoken at length. He felt the weight in the room. “There are, of course, more details in the comprehensive report I will distribute to your senior staff members. All of this information is provided to you to provide context to our situation and to make our ask easier to comprehend.”

Issus nodded, “You can see this in the stories of my people too. While a few of those of Naga’Shun might relate, many of them don’t. It’s fascinating to hear the true history of the things in our ancient lore.”

Nalanid huffed and closed his eyes, thinking to himself and fitting pieces together in his mind.

Franklin whistled. “Does it work?” he asked. “Do the Hehdi stay away once a world comes under the Elevated Edict?”

Advi nodded in the affirmative. “There has not been a breach of the treaty since its inception.”

“And that is quite surprising from what we’ve just heard.” Nalanid opened his eyes. “We know the Hehdi have the ability to cause stars to explode, and have used this capability multiple times in

their conflict with the Tilikaal. In matters of diplomacy, one attempts to negotiate from a position of power. The Confederation had none and merely threatened the use of power through building more starships while the Hehdi had power in their ability to destroy the stars of the Confederation members. Yet a treaty was signed. This simple fact is suggestive that certain aspects of this entire conflict that we've held as facts are not so, and the players in the game may be in different places of control than was possible before."

Dr. Ga had kept his peace during the briefing, but something about the tale was not sitting well with him. A civil war among an extremely advanced race seemed illogical to him, considering the possibility of mutual destruction with such technology. To have that war take place because a segment of the population didn't adhere to the majority's philosophy seemed extreme. Why not simply leave and establish your own civilization as the Romulans had done? He responded to his query in his own mind. It seemed that the Tilikaal were trying to do just that; leave the galaxy to escape the Supreme Mandate.

Jilel thought about that. "You're thinking there's more to this conflict than even the Confederation knows, Talak?"

Nalanid nodded. "That much is now certain. The Hehdi were either manipulated into signing a treaty with a polity much less powerful than it—that stands at odds with its own policies and even stands in its way of its war with its mortal enemy—or the Hehdi are manipulating the Confederation into a false sense of peace for their own ends. The possibility of the Hehdi manipulating the Confederation seems unlikely as what benefit could a group of mere mortals like us pose to beings that exist outside of standard space time? The tale as told by Celivol suggests far more than what I've already said, but I'd like to hear my colleagues before I sway opinions further."

"I agree with Dr Nalanid," Ga finally said. "While I have no doubt that our esteemed guest is sharing what information and knowledge the Confederation possesses, I am inclined to believe there is far more to the history than they have been told."

"I am sure there is," Advi, the younger Romulan, said. "The Hehdi-Tilikaal problem is hundreds of thousands of years old. We may never understand the intricacies of their hatred. However, we can take a hand in altering the destiny of the Romulan people—a way to save Romulus and Remus."

Ga inclined his head. "A goal that should be at the fore of our efforts with regard to this knowledge and technology."

"Excuse me," Captain van Asch said. "A Starfleet vessel and its crew are beholden to uphold the Federation's missions first and foremost. Just as you suggest we stay out of Hehdi-Tilikaal affairs, what gives us the right to intercede on behalf of the Romulans without Starfleet directives—" he asked pointedly and then added, "—Captain?"

Jilel smiled. "Starfleet and the Federation had massed an evacuation flotilla at Mars before the recent attack. If there was no intention to intercede on behalf of the Romulan people, why have the flotilla in the first place? As for duty, I would argue that our duty is to the ideals of the Federation, which haven't changed since we aided the Klingons after Praxis. Or aren't the Romulan people as worthy of help as the Klingons were?" he asked mildly.

Nic offered no response. Not even an emotional reaction.

“If we wish to debate upon intercession of other cultures, we should first look at the Confederation and the Hehdi. As Celivol says, both polities interfere with cultures that would typically fall under some interpretation of the Prime Directive: the Hehdi to prevent cultures from developing space travel, perhaps to act as a threat to them; the Confederation in order to somehow prevent the Hehdi from interdicting these worlds.” Nalanid shook his head. “The balance of power is entirely wrong for this sort of conflict. The Hehdi, with ‘divine proof’ that they, and they alone, were given a Supreme Mandate to maintain this separation between species, should have continued to perform their actions as before, confident in their own justifications that they still seemingly believe in.” Nalanid waved his mug of tea. “Again, I have no doubt that our guests are telling us the full truth as they understand it. But this imbalance of power suggests to me that the Confederation, the Hehdi, and the Tilikaal are not the true powers in what is occurring. The real story lies under these events, and we’ve already seen proof of this.”

Celivol nodded his head. “I appreciate your opinion, though I am afraid you are unpacking a lot from what little you have studied on this matter. I have had nearly two centuries to observe the Confederation in action. They do not revere the Hehdi as gods. And they have made significant technological advances in their own right. The Hehdi do not presume to wage war against other starfaring races. They feel their Mandate applies to worlds that have not yet discovered space travel. They do not presume to invoke their rule of law on the rest of the galaxy. The Confederation likewise does not seek war. Yet, they were very clear with the Hehdi that, if they felt threatened in the least, they would throw their full force at them to deconstruct their empire. After all, when someone can merely destroy your sun one has no choice but to commit to extreme actions in response. The Confederation members figured that either way is assured destruction. They preferred to go down fighting.”

Advi held up a hand. “We have plenty of time to talk about politics. Right now, the pressing problem is the fate of Romulus. We have a plan.”

“How do we do it?” pressed Franklin. His thoughts were full of the time they’d lost, the broken galaxium device, Trask’s disappearance, and the perils of working with Tilikaal technology.

Celivol gave Advi a glance then expounded on their plan. “The Repentant are grateful to the Star Empire for what we did to preserve them and the civilizations that lived on the two worlds. Those two worlds still have world engine technology. Distance is meaningless to these beings. Their telekinetic powers are remarkable. I believe we could convince them to help us dismantle the world engines and transport the components to Romulus and Remus where they could be rebuilt. Since we know the exact date and time the star in the Hobus system will go supernova, we can harness that power to translocate the planets and their inhabitants to a safe star system. We can create a miracle from catastrophe.”

“My God,” Sanada gasped at the enormity of the proposed project.

Franklin sank back in his seat, a wave of relief washing over him despite his skepticism. He thought back to his out-of-body stint aboard the Romulan *Razorcrest* during which they’d learned of these two worlds. That they would be inhabited by Tilikaal who might be made sympathetic to their cause was almost too good to believe. But then, these Repentant had clearly had a close relationship with the Romulans for generations. Maybe this could work...

Jilel was taken aback. The fact that these beings possessed psionic abilities on that magnitude was nothing short of mind-boggling, though the fear tickled the back of his mind when he thought back to the beings of the Mull. Who was to say these beings wouldn't evolve to become the Milky Way's godlings. The plan, however, was direct and made sense, though he was curious to see how it could be brought about with the current situation on Romulus and Remus. 'True Empire' or not, he had no illusions that there would be strong suspicion and resistance to anyone outside of the Romulan people or even their own faction within the people.

Captain van Asch stepped close to Jilel. He spoke in practically a whisper to the captain of the *Pioneer*. "This decision is way above our pay grade, Jilel. You'd be giving the Romulan military access to technology that could be easily weaponized. We need Starfleet's big brains to chime in. You know this."

Jilel thought for a moment. "The plan would be able to proceed with or without the *Pioneer* from the sound of it, though I agree that it's a monumental risk under normal circumstances. That being said, we're talking about the near-extinction of two entire races of people within a year and a half. I plan on contacting Starfleet as soon as possible. I will speak with Admiral Janeway about this then."

"Just don't make any promises to these people," Nic advised as he moved Jilel to the far corner of the room to confer. "If what we just learned gets out to this supposed puppet Romulan Empire—the one that the Federation has wrangled with since its inception—they will do everything in their power to nab these people and get their hands on this Tilikaal technology. They cannot make contact. As long as we have them here, we have control of the situation."

Issus considered for a long moment, listening to everything that was being said. The thing she would have done before she joined Starfleet would have been to keep it a secret. She might try to rescue the Romulans through conventional means, but the power to destroy entire systems was too much to allow to fall into the hands of your enemies. However, now she was less certain. Being in Starfleet, this idealistic part of it, was changing her thinking. Starfleet, at least the part that she belonged to, did things because they were the right thing to do. They stuck to their principles as best as they could, because a principle you threw away when convenient wasn't a principle. "Captain, their plan does have merit. Installing and using the world engine to move Romulus will grant us a lot of practical understanding of it's workings. It has an excellent chance of succeeding. Regardless of if Starfleet approves, I think we might have to try," Issus summarized.

van Asch had turned his head to hear the Separa female speak. When she was done, he focused his attention on Jilel once more. He was obviously interested in how his fellow captain would respond.

Jilel looked at Issus. "Right now we're not going to go it on our own when we haven't even spoken to Starfleet yet. I have to believe the Federation still intends to help the Romulan people." He didn't voice the fears that were in the back of his mind.

"Yes. Let's hope that the mutual goodwill *Pioneer* has extended to the ZMR is reflective of the spirit of the Federation." Celivol's statement landed in the room but transformed into a question in everyone's mind.

Chapter 1

Chief Engineer's—January 21, 2386 (0530 hours)

“The ship’s in shambles. Crew stretched to the breaking point. The galaxium device—our singular tool for playing with the likes of the Hehdi and the Tilikaal—lies defunct. And here I am, Chief Engineer, halfway across the sector in a Type 6.

“Perhaps it’s just as well. Our recent deliverance from dimensional imprisonment has pushed my body and mind to a limit of sorts—or beyond. A break is a good thing. Aside from the occasional fight for our lives through the 23rd century, I can’t recall the last time I set foot outside the Pioneer. Karnax will see things done right, in my absence.

“And now to the task. It’s ironic. In a world ruled by tetryons, galaxium, megastructures, and post-materialist civilizations, we Pioneers are faced with...mining rubindium. It would seem we Federation starfarers are still constrained by the mundane needs of—

“Yes, I am nearly done, Dr. Dregg! I realize we find ourselves in close quarters, but mission logs are required of me per Starfleet protocol.

“Where was I?

“It took some time to locate a target site. It helped to venture clear of the Pioneer, our flight controller Moshe Ginoss speeding us along while I sounded the area with parallaxing long range scans. It heartens me to sit beside a colleague from whom, had I not followed my path into Starfleet, I might well have found myself across the battlefield. Not since Latha, have I—

“Yes, Dr. Dregg, presently. I need only one more minute.

“We’ve identified a concentration of rubindium more than sufficient for our needs a day’s warp transit away. We shall have our work cut out for us. It’s deposited on a Class K world, with deadly temperature and atmosphere and trace signals indicative of hazardous radiation. Fortunately, we’ve had the foresight to bring—

“Dr. Dregg, I will attend to you shortly! You may be a Horta, but I cannot put stock in one’s bodily sensation that you “feel one coming on” when the shuttle’s gravitonic data shows no indication of—”

The entire craft rumbled, Madrek practically falling from his seat.

“Computer, end log!” He barked. “Yes, Dr. Dregg. Blazes, you’re right.” He crept his way to the front of the craft next to Ginoss.

“Sorry about that,” the Bajoran officer said as she frantically worked the navigational controls. “I thought I had mapped all the graviton eddies. That one popped out of nowhere.”

“No no, I hadn’t noticed this either,” he assured her. “Fortunately, Dr. Dregg’s natural instincts appear to be providing us with an early warning system or sorts. Head into the waves if you can,

Ms. Ginoss. It will be easier to preserve a course. But the question is, can we stomach the voyage? My thoughts would naturally turn to the main deflector, but in a tiny vessel like the *Chariot*...” Madrek bit his knuckle. “The inertial dampening field,” he suggested. “Its radius is normally aligned with the extent of the craft, but there’s no reason we might not extend it a bit...” He called-up controls and slid an indicator icon. “That should smooth out the ride even if the local increase makes us feel a bit numb. Doing okay back there, Dr. Dregg?” he called.

The Horta rumbled in a tone that sounded like gravel being poured into a clay bucket.

The *Chariot*’s flight smoothed out.

“That did it.” Moshe touched several controls that ran an automatic diagnostic on the propulsion system to make sure nothing was damaged. She then swiveled her chair to face Madrek. “Lieutenant Commander, may I make an observation?”

“By all means,” said Madrek, settling into his seat.

“Ever since your...aunt came on board *Pioneer*, you have been...well—“ She hesitated.

Madrek’s eyes boggled a bit. “Continue,” he huffed.

She blurted it out. “Nicer. You’ve been nicer. Everyone is talking about it. I mean, it’s not a problem, of course, sir. It’s actually quite...pleasant. Surprisingly so. I mean—I’m not saying it’s surprising because you’re a Cardassian. I’m sure there are a lot of nice Cardassians. I know this sounds strange coming from a Bajoran. My point is, your personality before was very demanding. I mean, that was your reputation. Now you’re—“. She stopped. “Just nicer.” She swiveled back to her normal piloting position. Her face was red with embarrassment. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything. I meant it to be a compliment and it just came out wrong.”

The Horta rumbled. The universal translator indicated that it agreed.

Madrek frowned and turned to look out at the starfield. He felt the warmth of the compliment, then the cold rebuke that lay beneath it. He let that part pass over him.

“You know, Ms. Ginoss—and I say this as a Cardassian—it is quite a thing to despise one’s family. To carry that through life and, by extension, to judge and find fault in everyone’s failings. Yet, somehow, meeting this ancestor has lightened that weight. On paper it’s all wrong. I make no bones about this,” he said, looking Ginoss in the eye. “She had no scruples. She aided and enabled the worst of them. But somehow knowing her makes me feel... I suppose like Dr. Dregg, I ‘feel something coming on.’” He shrugged slightly.

She swiveled back to face Madrek, seeing that he was interested in engaging in the conversation. “You know, I had an uncle who was not very well liked. When I think back to my childhood, I recall him being rude, abrupt, demanding, and curt with everyone he came across. People tended to avoid him. I, unfortunately, had to work with him on a regular basis since I was conscripted to help him with his vole extermination business every summer. He put me through the wringer. Never said thank you. Never was kind to his customers. But, he was the best in the business. I mean, people tried to use other contractors but no one could kill a vole like Uncle Maloss. I grew up and joined Starfleet. Yet, almost everyday when I’m doing my work, I think of Uncle Maloss. I hear his voice in my head. Telling me how to work efficiently, pay attention to details,

double-check my work. I have to wonder if I would be as good a flight controller serving on a Starfleet ship if not for old Maloss. Do you get what I'm saying?"

Madrek nodded, his eyes sparkling. "Isn't that the truth? Some of them light our way," he said, thinking of his mother, "while some of them drive us on, almost as only an adversary can. When it's our turn, can we hope to give the next generation something better?" he asked. As the words escaped his lips, he thought of Ginoss's compliment. "But it's too late," he said with sudden insight. "Be honest...how many Pioneers view me as 'Mean Old Uncle Madrek'?"

Moshe gulped and turned back to her station. "I invoke the The Seventh Guarantee," she said as she clenched her teeth hoping her citing of the Constitution of the United Federation of Planets that protected all citizens from being compelled to give self-incriminating testimony in legal proceedings would work.

The *Chariot's* sensors beeped. Moshe silently thanks the Prophets. "We've arrived at the coordinates. We are dropping out of warp. Beginning orbital scans."

Madrek sighed, and ran his hands through his thinning hair.

Scans popped onto the screen between Madrek and Moshe's positions. The transjovian planet was confirmed. This type of planet was composed of cold gaseous hydrogen and carbon compounds, fast-moving winds and storms, tornadoes and energy storms. A vein of rubindium was highlighted on the sensor scan.

"Alright then. Dr. Dregg, while Ms. Ginoss completes local scans, I require assistance with the operational preparations. I want to be ready to commence mining in three hours," he barked. "Please."

The Horta geologist responded with a volcanic throb and moved to a rear station modified for Horta tactile response and guttural commands.

"Orbital scans complete." Moshe brought the planetary survey sensor array online and modified the forward suite to compensate for the radiation differentials. "Atmospheric conditions are within a tolerable range to effect a safe landing in zone seven. Dr. Dregg should be okay but I definitely recommend an EV suit for you, Commander. Hydrogen levels will make breathing impossible for humanoids. Never thought I would wish to be a Horta." She toggled through suggested landing procedures in the procedural database and prepped the thrusters to compensate for the dense particle environment. She verified sensor, propulsion, and communications functions then rerouted power from warp and impulse engines to the thruster assembly. "No signs of life. Nominal tectonic activity. Winds clocked at 55 KPH SSW. Approach vector confirmed. I can initiate entry and landing on your orders, sir." The Bajoran was efficient and exact in her routine.

"Excellent," replied Madrek. "Dr. Dregg, I will be counting upon your training and instincts," he commented. He cast his eyes over the Horta's body trying to find a purchase for eye contact, then settled for an awkward pat against the stone hide. "I won't make the mistake of discounting them again. Proceed with entry, Ms. Ginoss!"

Lieutenant Mendon, the assistant chief science officer, was working in the astrometrics lab with Lieutenant Taitt. Both had been tasked to work on the team to set up a search for the *Obelisk*. Mendon had an expertise with efficiency analysis, his eye for detail and vast knowledge of sensor operations would benefit the team. Taitt was an expert on probes, buoys, and sensor arrays. Two other science officers and one member of the operations team worked at tertiary stations that lined the wall.

Nalanid and Issus entered the lab fresh from the senior staff meeting as another science officer exited.

Mendon and Taitt were working behind the main control station examining a 3D projection of their region of space. The Shackleton Pinwheel filled the screen.

One of the other science officers, a cadet of Andorian heritage, Vryvih sh'Thenehr, herself an expert in planetary surveys, sensor systems, and computers moved from a tertiary station to observe the holoprojection. She spotted her department head and reported before the Tellerite could ask. "I've set up the planetary scans compensating for the tetryonic interference as best as possible. We could use more power to the lateral and central sensor arrays if we have any chance of scanning the interior of the Pinwheel. What is the probability of finding them in this mess?"

Nalanid huffed, "In this regard, I would defer to your expertise, Ms. sh'Thenehr. I had an idea that we could use that would amplify our range quite a bit." He moved to the holoprojection and tapped some controls. Waves of energy rippled from the location of *Pioneer*. "In order to detect Mr. Trask—if he is in this time and place—our signal would need to emanate outwards, its strength dropping off with the cube of distance. Then what energy hit Mr Trask's shuttle would then need to return to us, again falling off with the cube of distance." Another blip appeared and dim waves echoed back to *Pioneer*. We know the specifications for the shuttle's subspace communications transceiver, so instead of watching for a subspace return, why don't we simply attempt to set up a resonance frequency in Mr. Trask's equipment. We would not get a signal return, but like a tuning fork vibrating at a distance—"

"—a simple subspace harmonic could reach far further in real space than a complex sensor beam," Issus completed Nalanid's sentence. She had been doing her homework on sensors, a requirement for any tactical officer.

"We may be able to set up some sensor buoys," Taitt said as she worked the main station next to her Benzite team member. "Set up a subspace resonance feed. Use them to boost our initial pulse."

"That is a good idea, Lieutenant. However I must point out that this will require us to reroute power to our main sensor batteries. Given the current state of our EPS network, we might experience total system failure." Mendon highlighted the power network on the screen near his right hand.

Vryvih's antennae curled. "This is such a horrible situation."

The Tellerite looked to everyone in the room and nodded. "I know. Losing a colleague is always difficult, especially when we don't know any details. We all feel lost in a way. But think of how Mr. Trask feels. And Badvin. They might think we're all lost. That would weigh heavily on their minds.

So, as terrible as this is, we should feel the pain and anxiety that comes. It's natural and normal. It drives us to succeed so others may not feel that despair in the future."

Everyone nodded in agreement.

Nalanid paced. "If we are worried about the EPS conduits, why couldn't we use the ship's shuttles as power sources for probes to help set up a resonance field?"

"Everyone always asks that," Taitt said. "The problem is that *Pioneer's* power systems are interlinked with our sensor and deflector array. Even if we found a way to transfer power to the shuttles, *Pioneer's* power network couldn't sustain regulating the energy flow. Like trying to reroute a bust pipe using leaky hoses. Too many potentials for failure."

"We could launch a fleet of shuttles to expand our coverage area," Mendon proposed. "Otherwise, we must wait for *Pioneer's* power network to be repaired."

Issus said, "Shuttles might not be able to withstand the rigors of the Shackleton Expanse. It is bad enough we were forced to send Chief Madrek on a resource recovery mission in this maelstrom."

Nalanid nodded and thought for a time. "Putting more crew at risk would be unacceptable for this project, agreed. If I could speak with Grandmother a'Costalu, I could ask her how to boost signals using transtators and gunpowder, but as she's three hundred and eighteen lightyears away as the tachyon flies, that's also out of the question. Besides relying on *Pioneer's* broken EPS grid, is there anything else anyone can think of to boost a resonance pulse out to as far as possible?"

"We could—" Taitt hesitated to say. "We could cannibalize another system in order to construct a temporary grid. Jury-rigs aren't totally reliable. They can end up causing more complications than the solution. But, when times are desperate..."

"We should have all options on the table to make an informed decision. Lieutenant Taitt, if there is one thing you should never hesitate to do it is to bring an option to the table. Just always serve it with the risks that are involved."

"I'll put together a proposal for you to review, sir." Taitt turned back to her station to start compiling options.

"Excellent work. We'll get in touch with Lieutenant Trask in no time." Nalanid smiled. One pleasant change to operating on his own as a therapist was having people on a team that he knew he could rely on.

Nic had asked to meet with Jilel as a follow up to the early morning conference. They were in the captain's ready room. Two men of equal rank. Dozens of years of command experience. Trained officers. And, yet, they had never been in such a situation.

Nic didn't hesitate to take a seat on the couch in Jilel's private office. "What are you thinking, Jilel? Give it to me raw. No use mincing words."

Jilel smiled sadly. "Honestly? That no matter what I do in this situation, I'm going to be viewed as a traitor by someone. If I go to Starfleet, the Romulan people will call me a sell-out. If I don't go to

Starfleet and try to save Romulus and Remus alone, I'll be called a traitor to the Federation." He caught the look in Nic's eyes and held up a hand. "I've already decided to go to Starfleet; but the pull to do what I can immediately is still there. I wouldn't be a Romulan if it wasn't."

Nic took in what the Captain said. He looked around the room. "You got anything stiff to drink in here? Not something from a replicator?"

Jilel grinned and pulled a decanter out of the drawer on his desk. "I developed a taste for whiskey when I was at the Academy," he explained, fishing out two glasses. "This is from a distillery on Earth in a place called Kentucky." He poured them each two fingers' worth and handed one to Nic.

Nic took a sip and smacked his lips. "Good stuff." He crossed his legs and took one more sip. "I do not envy you, Jilel. I've followed your career since you hit the Academy. Hell. Who hasn't? Most of us laid bets that you were a traitor. Some are still waiting to see the payoff. I'm not going to lie to you. I'm sure there was a big sigh of relief from some in Starfleet Command when *Pioneer* was lost. They figured it removed you from the field of play—too far to be a threat. Then this whole affair with the Hehdi and Methra and Celestial Prophets and Sisko and you've managed to become one of the most intriguing and potent influencers alive. People are intimidated. Hell, I am. Things are moving. Fast. Faster than time. Literally. We jumped eight months. This is all a lot to swallow." He followed the statement with another gulp of whiskey, holding his glass out for another double.

Jilel obliged him, taking in what Nic was saying and digesting it. He knew there were many that wanted to see his head on a pike, but to hear it so plainly put was a bit unnerving.

"All my life I've only ever tried to do the right thing, to live up to the expectations of my father or others that took his place. I never let the bigotry and hatred change who I was; never lashed out at them." The red-uniformed Romulan swirled the liquid in his glass thoughtfully. "I'm not going to stop doing the right thing, Nic. I took an oath. I'll abide by my word. I've got a son that I need to set an example for."

"You know, there's no way in hell that Starfleet is going to allow you to tell the current Romulan Senate about the world engines. If what the ZMRs say is true, the Romulan empire has more layers than an onion. They keep themselves in the dark because they can't even trust each other. Your problem is how to get this tech under the control and supervision of the Federation when it lies in the deepest regions of their territory. I don't even know where to start."

Jilel shook his head. "Neither do I." He sighed, feeling his spirits sink even lower. "The only hope I have is that the Federation does the right thing and saves billions of lives. My God, Nic! What if it was Earth?" His voice betrayed the conflict and pain he was feeling as his steely resolve buckled a little.

"Seems to me like the Romulans made the bed they lie in. Humanity learned from our mistakes," he said with a confident swig of his whiskey. "Still, things will work out. Starfleet will make the right decision in the end. We just need to support them. And you'll do fine. You've always been a good boy." Nic held the glass up and winked just as the chime to the ready room signaled that someone was wanting to speak to the Captain.

Jilel gave Nic a lopsided smirk. "You're probably right," he said, then, "Come."

Torpon paused when he saw the two captains. "I'm sorry, sirs. Is this a bad time?"

Nic sat back and held his empty glass. He offered a polite smile to the engineering technician and let Jilel have the floor. It was his ship after all.

“Just trying to solve the universe’s problems over a drink. What can I do for you, Torpon?” Jilel asked lightly.

“Sadly, there are more problems than glasses for drinks, but there is one at our fingertips that I’d like to offer some help with. Finding Mr. Trask,” the Romulan acting ensign said.

“By all means, Torpon. We can use every hand to help. Did you have an idea for Commander Nalanid and his team?” the captain asked.

“That’s why I came to you first, sir.” Torpon began. “I’d like to request a 9a to conduct some scans by myself.”

The request for one of *Pioneer’s* shuttle was interesting, Jilel thought. He knew that Torpon sometimes relied on instincts as well as knowledge. “You have a hunch?”

“Let’s just say,” Torpon side-eyed Nic, “There might be a way to locate a Romulan craft that the Empire would rather the Federation not know about.”

“Well, thank god you’re Starfleet now then,” Nic said to the ensign.

“Sounds like everyone is wanting to keep secrets lately,” Jilel said, smile vanishing. “That’s going to get a lot of people killed. If we’re ever going to save our home, we’ve got to start trusting each other,” he said with a sharp look toward Nic.

Torpon stayed stoic. “I trust you, Captain, just as I do Mr. Trask. I’m just cautious. I’d hate to save our people only for the Federation to have a tool to subdue them later.”

Nic uncrossed his legs and leaned forward in his chair eager to measure Jilel’s response.

Jilel shook his head. “And the Federation doesn’t want Romulus to have the upper hand technologically. History is going to judge us very harshly if we don’t stop this pointless bickering. What did you think was going to happen with the Federation evacuating Romulus and Remus, Torpon? Did you think there would be no concessions asked for or given? The secrecy is over. Survival is the objective here. Take one of Commander Nalanid’s people with you if you’re still serious about this so you’ve got a second pair of eyes. And, yes, I intend to tell Starfleet the same damned thing I’m telling you.”

“For the sake of Trask, I’d be willing to take Commander Nalanid along. His judgment has proven adequate in the past,” Torpon said. “And, Captain, there’s no guarantee that Starfleet or the Federation will approve this rescue mission. Not since Mars.”

Nic let out a scoffing chuckle and shook his head but said nothing. His eyes stayed on Torpon.

“I know,” Jilel nodded. “Tell Commander Nalanid to contact me if he has any questions.” He then turned to Nic. “Speak freely, Captain. What’s on your mind?”

“I prefer to keep my thoughts to myself until all subordinates have cleared the room, Captain.”

Nic got up and poured himself another drink.

“Thank you, Captain. I hope that this works. *Pioneer* isn’t the same without Desmond around nagging me,” Torpon said. “He accepted me as one of the crew without question or hesitation. I wish others had similar insight.”

Jilel stood, straightening his uniform. He set his drink on the desk. “On second thought, I’ll go with you and speak with Commander Nalanid.” Without another word, he strode out of his ready room.

Nic was left alone. He took a sip of his whiskey, his eyes locked on the doors that closed after the two Romulans left the room.

Chapter 2

Captain Jilel and Torpon entered astrometrics where Commander Nalanid and Ensign Issus were still working.

“Maybe we could use the magnetic field of a gas giant to act as a subspace resonator...” Nalanid waved his hand, dismissing his own idea. “No, we’d have to enter the planet’s magnetic field ourselves and be bombarded with enough high energy particles to give us all radiation sickness again.” He noticed the captain and Torpon come in and he stood up and away from the console he was working at with Issus. “We’re still working on multiple ideas, sir. We have a few, but most have some serious problems themselves.”

“Due respect, but there may be an idea you hadn’t thought of,” Torpon said walking toward the Tellarite. “There are certain Empire safety protocols that go into effect when a ship goes missing that Starfleet has no knowledge of. It is possible that the *Obelisk*—being of Romulan design—has those safeguards built into it.”

“I trust you to be discreet with this information,” Jilel instructed. “Captain vanAsch seems to think that we’re trying to keep secrets from Starfleet. There’s nothing in the book that says I have to broadcast our findings on the subspace network though.”

Nalanid looked between them and nodded slowly. “I understand, sir. Officially, we’d have to report this once we’re back in contact with Starfleet, but sensitive information like this falls under Starfleet’s Foreign Technology Research and Acquisition protocols.” He paused, thinking. “Section 11F. “Intelligence gathered by Starfleet personnel on previously unknown capabilities of technology already known by Federation member worlds will be classified and reported to Starfleet Research and Development on physical media at the earliest possible time.””

Torpon paused, then looked to the captain. “Very well. The fate of our friends may well depend on this technology.” The acting ensign glanced around the room. “Your team should continue their search, Mr. Nalanid, but the captain has approved of you and I taking a shuttle to pursue the Romulan safety protocol of which I speak.”

Jilel turned to Torpon. “Godspeed the both of you. Bring them home,” he said, looking between him and Nalanid.

Talak could see the guilt on the captain’s face, but only because his long experience taught him to read physical cues others would miss. He was holding up under the pressure, but cracks were starting to show if you knew where to look.

“Of course, sir.” Nalanid smiled. “Well then, Torpon, what can you teach me about Romulan technologies that won’t get you shot should you return to your home world?”

“We can discuss once we’re on the shuttle. Trust me, I think you’re going to love the technology’s elegance,” Torpon grinned.

Nalanid nodded and gave a smile to the rest of the team in astrometrics. “Continue working on the EPS grid solution while we’re gone. It’s the one with the least risks we’ve figured out so far. Always best to be prepared. Ensign Issus, you’re in charge.”

Jilel gave the pair a final nod and smile, then turned and walked to the turbolift, his next destination already in mind. “Deck Five,” he instructed.

The turbolift on deck five opened. Ship’s Counselor Chad Simon was there waiting. Chad was going to enter the turbolift to go to his next destination, the mess hall, but decided against it. “Captain, do you have a moment? I wanted to discuss how my therapy sessions are going with Captain van Asch.”

“I was just coming to see you about that, Doctor. Let’s go into your office and discuss them.” Jilel replied.

The pair walked into Doctor Simon’s office and sat down. “You go first, Captain.”

There was a sigh. “Nic is quite biased against Romulans—not that he doesn’t have reason to be—but he’s basically come out and said that Romulus and Remus won’t be saved because of the past history with the Federation and that it will have been their own fault. To be that flippant about the deaths of billions disturbs me.”

Chad brought to the fore his conversations with the former captain of the *Elon Musk*. “His Starfleet profile would not suggest that type of behavior. However, he has been alone in a pocket dimension. My initial tests indicate that he may have been in isolation varying amounts of times according to his self-perception. Sometimes, he may have felt isolated for up to three years without any type of outside contact in the dimension. At other times, he existed as a disembodied consciousness.” The counselor paused for a moment. “During this time, he was alone with his thoughts and his own ruminations. This turned any feelings he might have had even so slightly beforehand into an enormous echo chamber of thought and ideas. Remember how he told us about using our thoughts in that dimension to turn them into a tangible reality for ourselves? Well, he lived through the battle of Candidate Three with the Romulans many times.”

“Tragic,” Jilel said.

Chad continued. “These events made him indifferent to life. Instead of being helpful or suppressing his feelings, he is going to lash out at anyone who needs help because—in his mind—no one was there to help him and his crew. Right now, Romulus and Remus are an all too easy target for his anger.”

“So what are you saying?”

“This point brings me to my recommendation about Captain van Asch. We need to monitor him. While I do not think he is an outward threat to himself or others, he may display actions that will show indifference towards life and the wellbeing of others. As long as he is compliant with the therapy and medications I have prescribed, we should not see a tipping point, even under a moderately stressful situation. However, if those things do change, we may have to reduce Captain van Asch’ access to the general population until he can be brought to a starbase.”

Jilel nodded. “I agree, Doctor. I want to give him every opportunity to become a part of the whole; but, if I see him becoming a liability or a danger to this ship or crew, I will have you take immediate action to restrict him and limit the damage he can inflict.”

“Oh, and Captain, just a reminder. Your therapy session is next week,” The ship's counselor added in.

Karnax worked in science lab three. The galaxium device had been disconnected from the warp core. It now sat on a work table. It seemed dead. Multiple sensor scans failed to reveal the failure. The Bolian woman stared at the metallic device that was roughly the size of a pineapple. Blue energy lines etched into the structure indicated Tilikaal design.

“No wonder you received the Cochrane Award,” the assistant chief engineer said. “Your work on this device—the tetryon-based technology—is groundbreaking. I’ll give you that. But days examining this thing in one of Starfleet’s best mobile science labs and we are coming up with nothing, Lieutenant.”

“Nothing,” echoed Franklin. He left his console and paced the floor. “We’ve done LIDAR contouring of the exterior. Aside from a nasty dent, it hasn’t shown us anything big. Problem’s got to be deeper inside.” He circled the device staring at its inert form. “But we can’t see inside. Residual tetryonic radiation is washing out everything from X-rays to subspace sounding.” He strode idly back to the console. “Can’t even predict when it’ll burn off, since that thing’s the only tool we have for seeing tetryons.”

He pulled up the most recent tricorder imaging. He stared at the device’s representation on the scan: a fuzzy mess of negative space. He held a beat, then turned to Karnax with a huge grin. “What do you see, Lieutenant?”

“A stressed out Ops manager who could use a *glipnar*,” she said.

“*Glipnar*, yes,” said Franklin, “we’re going to deserve them after this. But I’m not stressed out anymore.” He minimized the fuzzy image and started to type. Lines of code spouted forth on the console. “Every second this thing loses tetryons, right?” he mused. “We can’t measure ‘em. But we can measure image clarity. We’re going to run a continuous, progressive scan. Each time we get one new pixel of clarity? We run a fresh diagnostic.” He turned to Karnax. “It’s like a time-lapse. Like a camera slowly coming into focus. We can actually predict when the tetryons will clear, by comparing the fuzziness of snapshots over time.”

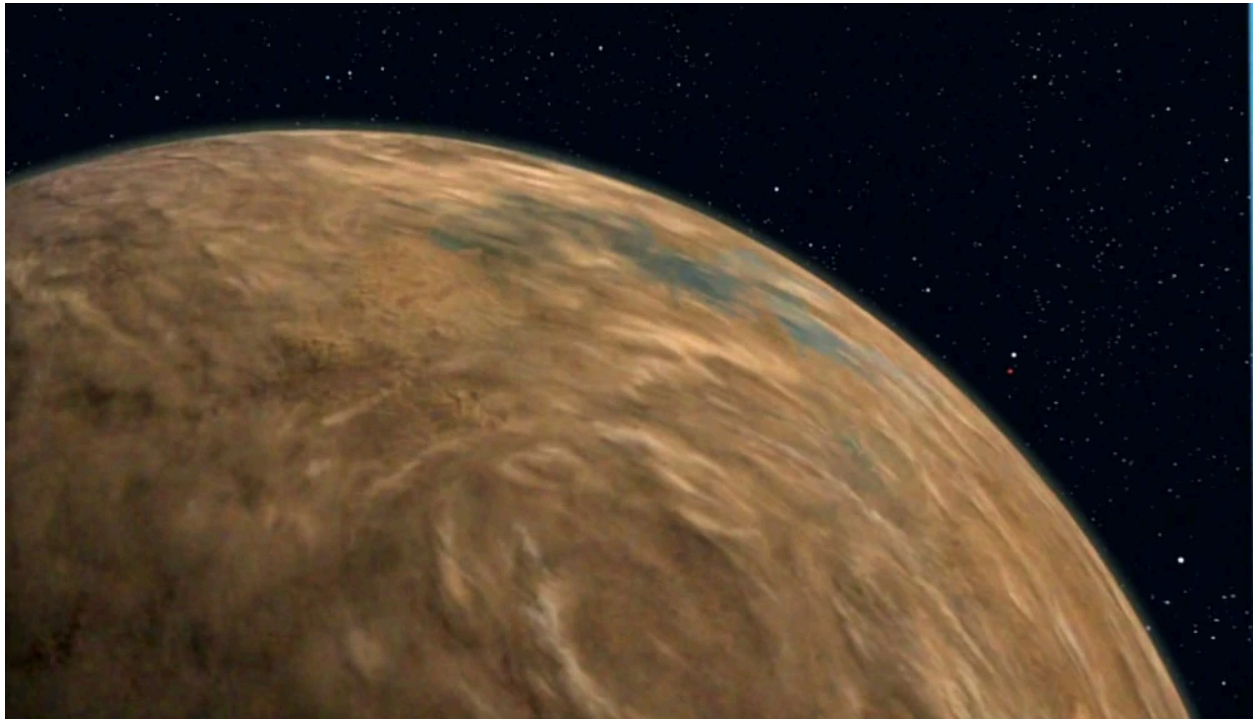
“Not bad. Maybe we can squeeze a few projection models out of the computer. I thought you had a team member with modeling and design skills? Ensign Thime Zh'zynnol, the Andorian, if I’m correct. She might help speed up the work.” Before Franklin could respond, Karnak asked, “How worried are you about Lieutenant Trask?”

Franklin blew out a breath. “I’m scared as hell.” It wasn’t just the prospect of Trask and the *Obelisk* being smashed to oblivion. Franklin thought of Nic and Admiral Stoker. The workings of the Tilikaal had a way of inflicting fates worse than death. “But I’m choosing to believe that we’re going to find him,” he added. “If anyone can, it’s Nalanid.”

“You sell yourself short. I read the report on how you first came across this tech aboard the *Mupwl*. You figured out how to use it. You even managed to jury-rig it to create tetryon shielding in the battle of the yellow star. And you were part of the boarding party on the *Star Ravager*, which means you laid eyes on a galaxium engine and studied Hehdi tech up close, even if for a few minutes. That's just mentioning a few things I've read in your reports. You have had quite a life aboard *Pioneer* and I think you need to come to the realization that you may be the Federation's leading expert on tetryon radiation and Tilikaal technology. You're not just the handsome playboy some try to make you out to be, Lieutenant.”

Franklin grinned sheepishly, and looked again at the device. “Ok, so you know my secret. Now I've got two reputations to live up to,” he said. Then he grew serious. “But it's true. I do know a thing or two about tetryons and the Tilikaal.” He gazed at her. “I'm gonna share everything I know with you. And we're going to get this thing back online.”

The blue-skinned woman grinned. “Let's do it.”



Moshe had set the *Chariot* down on the hardest surface she could find. The shuttle still settled in one half meter depth of sand. It had been four hours since touchdown.

Madrek and Moshe wore EV suits to protect from the harsh winds and cold. If they didn't have the protection it would have felt like being shot with bullet fast, yellow and brown ice crystals. Fortunately, Moshe thought to herself, she was assigned to stay inside the shuttle to work flight and phaser controls, though she still wore the suit for good measure.

“You would think that in three hundred years Starfleet could have designed a better EV suit, one that sets comfortably into flight chairs. I feel as graceful as a toddler in this thing. It's a wonder I don't consistently hit the wrong button.” Moshe monitored the activity outside. Dr. Dregg and

Chief Madrek were fuzzy yellow blurs. “Are you both okay out there? How long before the magnetic assembly belt is set up?”

Madrek’s hard boots crunched on the alien surface.

“Doing alright so far,” he replied, pausing amidst the foul weather to check tricorder readings. Dr. Dregg shambled easily across the rough ground, wayfinding.

“Yes, of course I’m watching my step!” he replied to the Horta’s translated rumblings through his suit’s comms. “Fine. If it will make you happy, I won’t scan and walk at the same time. Just a few steps further,” he added, carefully following the Horta into a quarry-like ravine, “and we should be out of the tricorder shadow.

The sounds of the device could now be faintly heard amidst the wind and crackle of debris against his suit. “Access to the deposit confirmed. You should have a clear shot for coarse cutting with phasers, Ms. Ginoss! Less than half a meter of igneous quartz and you’ve hit the motherlode. Dr. Dregg and I should have that magnetic assembly belt ready in twenty five minutes.” He holstered the tricorder, taking careful, sinking steps towards the rock wall.

“Be careful out there,” the flight controller said. *“Atmospheric sensors just detected a pretty major shift in the weather pattern and a pretty sizable phosphine eddy 40 kilometers out to the north.”*

Madrek could hear the whirr of the shuttle’s thrusters as it moved into position somewhere up ahead in the hazy brown sky. A sudden gust of wind nearly bowled the Cardassian over. Dr. Dregg’s formidable form was there to keep him from toppling over a slight ravine.

Dr. Dregg garbled something out indicating that the ravine has plenty of cave structures to shield them from a storm...temporarily.

Madrek sighed, struggling to regain his balance.

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that. Ms. Ginoss, I must trust your eyes—and. Dr. Dregg. your...sense of things—as to when the going gets too rough. In the meantime, I propose we set to work without delay.”

“I’ll have a nice, warm Night Glipnar waiting for you when you get back to the shuttle, Chief,” Moshe said over the comm channel.

“Not much of a *glipnar* man, Ms. Ginoss,” said Madrek, struggling against the wind. “But I confess that sounds most welcome.”

Pioneer continued its patrols using the sensor array to scan the sector while dealing with powerful cosmic energies being thrown off by the Pinwheel and a fragile power system.

The bridge was strangely quiet. Captain Jilel and Commander Sanada sat at their command chairs performing routine supervisory duties. Ensign Issus was at tactical and a few other officers worked the other stations. The turbolift doors opened and Captain van Asch entered the bridge just in time to see the *Tuxedo* leave the shuttle bay and jump to warp.

Chief Rome was at the helm. “*Tuxedo* has cleared the launch bay and gone to warp.”

van Asch moved center deck, smiled softly, and gave Jilel an even softer head nod.

Jilel returned the smile and the nod, then returned his attention to Chief Rome. “Very good, Chief. Issus, make sure we maintain constant communication with them. I don’t want to lose them in here.”

“Aye, sir,” Issus responded, setting an alert if the signal went beyond expected parameters.

Sanada scanned the Pinwheel. “Have you ever seen anything like it?”

Located on the far side of the Expanse, the Shackleton Pinwheel was a phenomenon that has yet to be studied in detail due to its location in the far side of the Expanse. The Pinwheel itself could only be seen by the naked eye from a dozen light-years away. It resembled its name, a multi-armed spiral of red and orange ionized hydrogen and helium, stretching nearly a light-year in diameter before the gasses cool and dim. At the center of this Pinwheel were two red giant stars circling close enough to each other that their photospheres nearly merged as the gasses were ripped away by the gravitational forces of the other and flung outward to form the spiral arms surrounding them. The two central stars had their interiors churned up, allowing fresh hydrogen to enter their core regions and giving these stars a longer life span, but also causing nova events that could be seen lighting up the surrounding pinwheel for years afterward from its light echo as well as further ionization. Orbiting these two stars in eccentric and highly inclined orbits were five gas giants ranging in mass from five to twenty times that of Jupiter in the Sol system, each with numerous moons that had yet to be surveyed. Starfleet believed these planets to be originally from the Centaurus-A galaxy, the remains of the planetary system that once circled these stars when they were on the main sequence. Now they gathered ejected stellar gasses and cut paths through the ejecta, giving the arms of the Shackleton Pinwheel intricate grooves and whorls.

“No, nothing quite like it. It is beautiful from here. Dangerous, certainly. But many beautiful things are dangerous,” Issus commented.

“Dangerous, sure. Still, the colors. The energy. It is perfect.” Sanada was in awe.

“One of the basic rules of the universe is that nothing is perfect. Perfection simply doesn’t exist....Without imperfection, neither you nor I would exist’.” Nic made the statement not tearing his eyes from the screen until he felt the bridge crew looking at him. He looked at Issus and shrugged. “What? Earth physicist. Stephen Hawking. He said that.”

“He was right.” Jilel said thoughtfully, “Without imperfection and conflict we can’t grow and adapt to the world around us. The challenges of the imperfect universe are what shape and mold us into the people we are and hope to become.”

“Indeed.” Nic asked, “Do you need me for anything, Captain? If not, I’ll retire to my quarters. I know it’s early in the day, but I have some reading to catch up on.”

“I think we’re alright for the moment, Captain. I’ll call if we find anything or if anything pops up in the meantime,” Jilel replied.

Nic bowed out of the bridge.

“I abhor the idea of a perfect world. It would bore me to tears,” Jilel murmured, then caught Sanada looking at him quizzically. “A quote from a human author from the mid-twentieth century, Shelby Foote.”

“I have to admit, Jilel. I have never met a more well-read man than you,” Kotaru admitted. “Do you generally stick with Human literature?”

“I admit that I never really got into literature until I came into the Federation. Of course I read ‘Wings of the Raptors’ by T’Dak growing up, but Romulan literature is very much edited by those in power. I read Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* just for something to do after studying and was hooked. It was charming but made good points about good character and loyalty to one’s friends.”

“My father got me into reading spiritual texts from a dozen Federation species,” Sanada recalled. “I became obsessed with end of the world prophecies. In some cases, the end of the universe.” She paused to think for a moment. “Our trips through the Mull made me think a lot about those stories.” She took in Jilel and asked, “Does Romulus have an end of the world story or are we the harbingers of doom?”

Jilel thought for a moment. “Romulans don’t have any specific apocalyptic stories or prophecies per se; but there are some who believe that we were created by the Elements and they will eventually consume us again.”

“There are a lot of Separa apocalypse stories. My favorite one was about what might be translated as ‘the war in heaven’. One ended when the victorious side pressed the losers so far that they unleashed a great and terrible power that devastated both sides, leaving a faithful remnant.” Issus paused, considering. “I suppose that’s history now.”

Kotaru was intensely enjoying the conversation, catastrophism being a special area of interest of hers. “Fascinating. I would love to learn more about those Separa stories sometime, Issus. Jilel, you just said something that strikes a chord. You said some believed the Elements would consume your people again. As we know, we are the stuff made from stars. Do you think that they could have been referring to the supernova?”

“I’d never thought of it until now, but it makes you wonder,” Jilel admitted.

After launching from *Pioneer*, Nalanid had spent much of the brief time aboard the type-9 *Tuxedo* inspecting different systems, pulling access hatches off walls, and peering inside. “I’ve never seen this shuttle out of the docking bay. My initial suspicion was there was some critical flaw in its systems, so I thought we should take her out on this project to...shake her down.” He gestured at the inner workings of a panel before replacing the access cover. “But I can’t find anything wrong.”

“In my experience, Mr. Trask wouldn’t allow one of the shuttles to have an issue. He and his men take great care and run an exhausting number of diagnostics,” Torpon replied. “Wasting time, if I’m using a Romulan lens.”

“I know Mr. Trask would leave no screw unturned inside one of these shuttles, and now I can debate a contrary stance from any other person on board.” He sat back down in the co-pilot’s seat and patted the console in front of him.

“It took me a long time to appreciate the to-the-point systems Starfleet has installed on their crafts. Honestly, I don’t know how stations wouldn’t be exploding with just the inkling of a power surge,” the Romulan said with an almost smile.

“Starfleet has a long tradition of having systems that fail in such a way as to continue working rather than having whole systems go offline during critical moments. As an example, the fusion reactor behind us could go critical and explode. If we somehow survived, we’d find the consoles still functioning due to multiple redundancies like EPS system breaks, dilithium enhanced capacitors to store emergency power, and the tertiary network nodes.” Nalanid chuckled. “You probably know better than I do. All I know is how to repair my cursed science station that catches fire nearly every week.”

“Safety measures are taken throughout Romulan ships too,” Torpon laughed. “Half the galaxy thinks that having a singularity for a power source automatically means a black hole forms when our ships begin to fail.”

“Oh, the amount of time the singularity would be exposed would be nearly immeasurable before it evaporated in a burst of gamma rays. As my son would say, ‘It would disappear in a puff of logic’ rather than making a black hole for all to worry about.”

“And, theoretically, what if those gamma rays couldn’t be detected? Or any radiation from the drive at all for that matter?” Torpon probed to see what Nalanid could piece together.

Nalanid tapped his fingers slowly on the console as he thought. “Masking radiation from a cloaking device is already an existing capability. The real technological feat is baffling the gravitational waves or the well itself, and as I’ve never had the opportunity to examine a singularity drive, my knowledge of how it’s done is limited to theory.”

“You are a clever one, Mr. Nalanid,” Torpon complimented. “But a baffle to subspace would still be detectable by a Starfleet scan, correct?”

Nalanid considered that and nodded. “It should be. It would cause some interesting subspace effects that should be detectable out to at least a few light years.” He paused and looked over at Torpon. “So are you saying there is a way to detect a singularity drive at a distance?”

“Were we piloting a Romulan ship, I’d almost guarantee it,” Torpon said. “It would assume that Badvin activated the baffle modulator. But if we can adjust the rudimentary Starfleet scans to pick up polarized particles in subspace rather than unpolarized then we’ve got a great chance of locating the *Obelisk*.”

The Tellarite nodded and started typing on the shuttles sensor controls. “I think it is safe to assume that the shuttle’s records of this technique should be erased. Poor *Tuxedo*, this mission is not going to be remembered by anyone but Torpon and me.”

“Mr. Nalanid, I appreciate your confidence in this. But you did promise a written log. You should take notes. We can determine what to do with the information once we understand the bigger picture of what comes next.”

Nalanid reached down into his tricorder holster and drew out a small paper notebook and pencil he usually carried with him. “I did promise, as that’s what my oath as a Starfleet officer requires of me. But my oath also allows me to make ethical determinations of standing orders, hence, me

pointing out the need for security in new information being transmitted across subspace where others may hear. If we were in Centaurus A still, that argument would be meaningless as there would be no chance of being able to hand it off in person, but, here...?" Nalanid shrugged before writing down 'Polarized Subspace Particle Scans - Application on Detecting Romulan Vessels in Distress'.

"Make sure to include that the baffle modulator can send as little as one polarized particle at a time into subspace," Torpon added. "Which may well be what we're looking for if Trask and Badvin are trying to conserve energy. I'd say 'needle in a haystack' but I never really understood Earth idioms."

"Hm. An appropriate idiom to be sure." The Tellarite chief science officer wrote down the note. "I'm sure the onboard neutrino detectors can be reconfigured to detect particles at that low of a rate. Far more of them to be sure, but they interact weakly, so you need sensitive detection systems." He stopped writing and started typing in commands with the eraser of his pencil, bringing up the neutrino amplification chamber on the display.

"He is alive out there, Mr. Nalanid. And I'm sure you're going to be the first face he'll want to see. He talked about you often."

Nalanid scowled and looked out the window. "We work well together. I miss bouncing ideas off of him. I'm positive that he's alive somewhere and somewhen. I can only hope that he's close enough to us now that he won't think we're all dead and gone. That would be too heavy a burden for anyone to shoulder for long."

Chapter 3

Dr. Subok, Mivak, Celivol, and Advi had been sitting in the mess hall for hours. Dr. Ga entered the area and noticed the dining hall was sparse. Science and engineering teams were spread thin working on multiple crucial projects. A few red-uniformed officers sat at the bar. Dr. Ga took notice that Vicki Halsey sat alone and sat very close to the four Romulans who were speaking at a low volume in their native tongue.

Orim was aware that Halsey spoke fluent Romulan and that she was part of the security team. He sensed a sudden wave of emotion from her. A hint of surprise perhaps.

Dr. Ga approached the table where Halsey was seated after selecting a mint tea from the replicator. "May I join you?"

"Of course, sir." She took a sip of her own drink. It looked like orange juice. "This is a first. You're usually not the type to fraternize."

Ga sat and sipped his tea for a moment. "If there is one thing that I have learned aboard this ship is that I must reach out more to those in this crew. We are all we have for each other in the end after all."

"Reach out, huh? Are you reaching out right now? With your empathic abilities?" Vicki smiled and took another sip of her juice.

"If only it were possible not to do so," Ga confirmed. "There are times it has been a liability to me."

"Really? In my line of work I imagine it would be a great asset."

He nodded. "As it can be in mine as well. If I may be so bold, you seem to be agitated somehow."

"Agitated? Why would you say that?"

Orim could feel her guard go up. She was a trained individual and he could sense the switch.

"When I entered, your sense was very strong and took me off guard. You were surprised about something. I am merely curious," Ga said quietly. "You need not be concerned by me."

Vicki paused for a moment and scanned Orim's face. Her eyebrows furrowed as if she was trying to read his mind. The encryption specialist was trying to decrypt his statement. Suddenly, she went from scrutinizing the doctor to smiling. She nodded toward the table of Romulans and perked her eyebrows up. "I sat here first."

Ga deliberately kept his gaze away from the Romulans, but his eyebrow lifted. "Indeed. They seem to be in a deep discussion about something."

The senior chief petty officer's expression took on that of a mother scolding a child. Her jaw dropped open in surprise. "Now, Doctor. You wouldn't be asking me to eavesdrop on our guests and fellow officers just because I happen to be very fluent in Romulan, would you? I mean, it

would be very rude of me to just go around gossiping about every conversation I happen to be within earshot of, don't you think?"

She was enjoying this.

"I would not dream of asking you to do such a thing. That would be...unethical." His mouth curled into the hint of a smile at her reaction. He was willing to play the game for the moment.

She grabbed the orange juice glass and swirled it around as she spoke of the past. "Do you know how I learned fluent Romulan?"

Orim was aware that the petty officer had served four years at a Starfleet listening post along the Neutral Zone.

"I do, yes."

"In that time, I not only learned the language. I learned about the culture. And I can say I actually fell in love with it. The Romulans are superior in many ways to other species." She paused to gauge Orim's reaction. They were now studying each other.

"I can understand why there are those who think so. They have embraced their passions and are a major power in the galaxy. It would seem that they have grown beyond their origins on Vulcan," Ga replied, letting his senses open to her emotions.

"Do you fear that we have the Romulans pegged wrong?"

Ga cocked his head. "I believe there are good and bad among all species. The Romulans are no exception. There are, however, too many that judge the entire race by the actions of their government."

"Isn't that the truth? I'm not an empath, but I sense something is unsettling you. What?"

"I fear there are those in our crew that have no desire to save the Romulan people and believe that those that are on board are a danger. I believe they view the captain as a traitor and plan to turn against him when the opportunity arises," he replied.

"You can bet your butt that's true. Pardon my language." She laughed softly. "You're a Vulcan. Well, part. How does it make you feel that your people may have spun a different narrative all this time? They helped form the Federation, after all?"

"I would say that the truth lies somewhere in the middle of the two tales we have been told. There are close-minded Vulcans just as there are close-minded Romulans. It is not logical, but it is how things are." Ga took another sip of his tea.

She let his statement linger for a good while. Then, "Bet you thought when you sat down you were going to hear something juicy," Vicki said with a wink. "Not saying I didn't hear something interesting. Just saying it would be inappropriate to share."

Ga raised his cup in a mock toast. "Of course," he said with the barest hint of a smile on his otherwise stoic face.

“Senior staff, report to the bridge. Repeat, senior staff report to the bridge.” Commander Sanada’s voice repeated the summons.

Ga turned serious and stood, leaving his cupl. “Please excuse me.” He turned and quickly left the room. He wondered what had gone wrong this time.

Captain Jilel and Commander Sanada sat in the command chairs as Lieutenant James and Dr. Ga came onto the bridge. James moved to operations and the doctor took a position at the auxiliary station in the upper deck. Lieutenant Simon exited the rear corridor, walked past Issus’ station and sat on the bench next to Sanada. Rome was at the helm.

“Confirmed,” Issus said. “It is a distress signal but it is heavily garbled. Subspace is chaotic so close to the Pinwheel,” she said as she worked the controls.

“Chief Rome, lay in a course for that distress call. Issus, do your best to decipher that signal and send a confirmation that we’ve received it,” Jilel ordered, not daring to get his hopes up.

“What do you think it could be?” the first officer asked.

The captain shook his head. “Hard to know for sure out here; but no matter what, we’re obligated to respond to a distress call and try to render what assistance we can.”

Lieutenant Simon looked around the bridge to note if Captain van Asch was there or not. van Asch was absent from the bridge.

Issus managed to isolate the distress call, but not easily. The audio-only distress signal was from an unidentified vessel a short distance away. “The audio signal is clear now, though the alien language is indecipherable. The universal translator is working on it.”

“Captain, I don’t know if this is related,” said Lt. James, “but I’ve been making some sweeps and I’m seeing stuff I can’t explain. There’s nearby pulsars that look really strange. A bunch of them, all formed within decades. That’s not supposed to happen,” he commented. “They seem to be involved in the gravimetric disturbances we’ve been dealing with—but that’s not all. I’m getting a bunch of indirect markers consistent with tetryonic filaments. It’s like how it was when we passed through from the pocket dimension.”

“Considering what we’ve been told about this region of space by the Tilikaal, it makes sense that things aren’t at all the way they should be. The indirect markers have me intrigued. Could they be the filament that Trask and the *Obelisk* were traveling through?” Jilel rose from his chair and walked over to look at the data. “In the meantime, we need to keep trying to translate that language before we get to the origin of that distress call. I don’t want a miscommunication to cause problems.”

Simon offered up a suggestion from his position next to Sanada. “Maybe I can take a look at the signal. I have some training in encryption. At least it would help to rule that out as a possibility.”

Jilel stepped aside and smiled. “Be my guest, Doctor. Keep me apprised of any developments,” he said as he returned to the captain’s chair.

As Simon went to work at the vacant science station, Chief Rome moaned. "Please say we don't hit another filament. And I'm not only worried about our ship's power network. I'm worried about our sanity."

Simon studied the distress signal. There it was. Chad had to recalibrate the tertiary baryon frequency sustainer to make it work. Being a little green and only working simulations, Chad had only cracked a couple of codes before. This one was more tricky, but with the proper algorithm it was possible. "Captain, I did it. I cut through the interference."

"Hail them," Sanada ordered.

It was just an audio signal.

"Wait, I can understand you now! Incredible. I am Commander Mauti of the Akaru explorer Starward. An intense graviton wave has impacted my vessel. Our propulsion systems and primary shielding are inoperable. Most of my technical crew members died in the initial impact. We are adrift and require immediate assistance. May the Iryax guide you to us."

"Commander Mauti, I'm Captain Jilel of the Federation Starship, *Pioneer*. We're on our way to your position as we speak," Jilel said, hoping the calm in his voice would help his counterpart.

"Thank Iryax. Someone heard our call. We have 74 crew aboard. Many of them are wounded. Another 20 are dead."

"We have medical personnel and facilities. Help is coming, Commander," Jilel assured them.

"That brings me great comfort. We are Akaru explorers and hail from the planet Setu. Our ship's star drive is damaged. Are you also explorers?"

"We are indeed, Commander. We hail from a region of space called the United Federation of Planets, a union of many worlds."

"We gladly await your arrival."

Jilel looked at Sanada.

The first officer knew what he was wondering. "We are about fifty minutes out at warp 3.5."

"We'll be there within the hour, Commander," Jilel said, nodding his thanks to Sanada.

Sanada signaled for the comm link to be discontinued. She addressed ops. "Mr. James, any chance that these tetryon filaments you are detecting have any correlation to Ash'Tamalia and the Tilikaal trying to escape their pocket universe prison?"

"I will look for correlations," Franklin said as he flipped to the rear of his station and pressed several controls.

While James worked on his analysis of the tetryon filaments, Simon asked a question to his fellow bridge officers. "Iryax. Hm. The way it was praised made it sound like some type of religious word, as the universal translator didn't translate it as something else."

Jilel nodded. “Just like the Elements on Romulus, the Prophets on Bajor, and God by whatever name on Earth. Interesting to think so many civilizations have that in common: a desire to embrace the divine.”

“I guess we will find out soon enough where on the Zhongshu scale of divinity this Iryax lies,” Simon added.

“Yes, but the divine do exist. We met Nagashun. Q is a God of a sort. And so is Apollo, whom Captain Kirk met. Given that they do exist, it seems plausible that they put into us the desire to seek them out,” Issus postulated.

“Confirmed!” yelled Franklin. “I mean, about the energy signatures. Commander, every sign is consistent with what we’ve seen when the Tilikaal try to push through. But Ash’Tamalia had said they needed something on the other side—Tilikaal tech in this dimension working to bring them through. I’m not picking up anything like that nearby. We’d have to cover more ground; do a wider search to be sure.”

Sanada settled into her chair. “Keep an eye out for anything. The rescue is our priority. Let’s hope we stumble across something that might be useful.” The first officer had to ask Jilel, “Have you decided what we will do if we discover technology able to help the trapped Tilikaal escape?”

Jilel frowned and didn’t reply for a long moment. “Not firmly, no. On the one hand, it goes against my grain to keep beings imprisoned that haven’t been convicted of a crime. On the other hand, how many billions of people died when they transported those worlds into the Shackleton Expanse?”

“It was an experiment gone wrong,” Sanada said. “They couldn’t predict the chaotic nature of the Expanse any better than we could.”

“You’re right, of course, Number One,” Jilel conceded. “We’ll find a way to free them. I’m sure of it.”

Chapter 4

The *Olympic*-class *Jamshid al-Kashi* emerged from the purple-hued nebula that bordered the Endurance Divide. The vessel had set out months ago from Narendra Station with a crew of Starfleet's best engineers and scientists with the goal of tracking down more Tilikaal technology and performing deep space scans for Romulan vessels that might possess such technology. They were a science and survey ship with strict orders not to engage the Romulans but to report back to Narendra any findings. Hence, dropping subspace beacons along their survey route was part of their duties. Part of their mission was to pierce the Endurance Divide, a task that no other Starfleet vessel had accomplished this far. Admiral Janeway was sure that so many answers to their questions lay behind that cosmic curtain. The *Pioneer's* adventures in the Centaurus-A galaxy gave the crew of the *Jamshid al-Kashi* insight into what to look for. Lieutenant Amon Trask and his team of scientists on temporary assignment to the vessel were convinced that they could reverse engineer and possibly even replicate the Tilikaal technology if they could examine the device.

Of course, the fact that *Pioneer*, presumably having made contact with the Confederation of United Worlds, had not contacted Narendra station for over eight months was worrisome. Commodore B'Elanna Torres had lost many night's sleep wondering about their fate. Had diplomatic proceedings gone wrong? Had they had another confrontation with Hehdi? Had they had a run in with another godlike being, this time not being able to triumph? Maybe they lost the galaxium device that allowed them to communicate with Narendra? So many problems and she couldn't think of an engineering solution but to travel to the Centaurus-A galaxy via DS9 and search for them herself. Of course, there was a fleet of Starfleet vessels and a Klingon one there and they had been ordered to establish contact with *Pioneer*. But *Triton*, *Zulu*, and *Mupwl'* had all reported being unable to pierce the Mull's membrane. Until they could confidently do so without risking hundreds of lives the fate of *Pioneer* would be one of the Federation's biggest mysteries.

Torres sat in the captain's chair of the science vessel and stared out into the purple haze as the flight control officer announced, "We have arrived at the coordinates, Captain."

Torres enjoyed being referred to as Captain even though her stint as such was relatively short before she was promoted to Commodore and stationed, upon her own request, back on Narendra as an advisor to Admiral Janeway.

"Lieutenant Trask," she said to the brown-skinned Human that sat at the main science station. "Your homework tells you this is the best place for us to pierce the Endurance Divide. All engines, shields, and sensors have been modified to compensate for the intense spatial conditions. The last two attempts didn't go so well. Let's hope that third time's the charm."

The Endurance Divide was a massive complex of interstellar dust, cold gasses, and brown dwarf stars. Located along the Federation border with the Expanse, the Divide wrapped around the spinward edges of the Expanse like a blanket, preventing accurate sensor scans and increasing the amount of power needed for warp systems to maintain a stable subspace bubble. Ranging between one and three light years thick, current theories suggested that the Divide was the remnant gas and debris from the supernovas that formed the Washboard Triplets, another Shackleton phenomena. The *Jamshid al-Kashid* had modifications so that while passing through the Divide and into the Expanse proper, they could drop to low warp speeds to reduce wear on

the subspace coils and maintain a detailed sensor sweep for dangerous obstacles or large conglomerations of dust and gas that may tax the ability of the primary deflector array to protect the vessel from harm.

“Now that we’re through that emission nebula, let’s get one more scan of the Divide before we proceed.” Torres signaled for Ops to give sensor controls to Amon.



Trask didn’t respond. His face was buried in an updated viewfinder, an enhanced and modern version of the kind that used to be found on old Starfleet vessels and sometimes added to newer science vessels. Torres looked around at her bridge crew and smirked. If she hadn’t been so close to the quirky Reginald Barclay she might have been offended by Amon’s lack of response to her order. *Amon is a lot like Reg but without the stuttering*, she thought. “See anything interesting, Mr. Trask?”

“My eyes are open, Captain. So, yes.” Trask responded holding up his pointer finger asking for a moment. “Initial scan reveals strange, filament-like anomalies almost one hundred light years away. Digging deeper.”

Torres crossed her arms and her foot began tapping on the ground. She offered a polite smile even though his head was buried back in the viewfinder. Amon rarely spoke about his brother, Desmond, who was assigned to *Pioneer*. He actually rarely spoke about much of anything unless it had something to do with his job, and B’Elanna had never heard him discuss his feelings or emotions. She wondered if that was why he chose a Vulcan and Klingon xB for his science team.

“Okay, Captain, I’ve ruled out any centralized organizations to the filaments. They are young, between ten and thirty years, and appear to be randomly placed,” Amon said without looking up.

“The tendrils appear to be interacting with tetraionic and electromagnetic radiation within the Expanse.”

Torres peeked at the readings that were showing on the main viewscreen. “Far side of the Expanse. Anything for us to worry about?”

“Not necessarily. But I can’t rule out one of these things randomly appearing near us. The fact that the Washboard effect has sped up over the past few months suggests the entire Expanse may be unstable.”

“I knew that since we first stepped nacelle in this place.” Torres went back to her original query. “So, are we good to go into the Endurance Divide?”

“Ready to make our next attempt, Captain,” Amon replied.

Torres cocked her head quickly. “Okay then. Helm, take us in. Cross your fingers everyone.”

The *Olympic*-class ship shot into the divide.

The inertial dampeners were fed more energy than usual as the ship plowed into the denser volume of the Divide. A sudden deceleration that would have normally caused the crew to compress themselves against the forward bulkheads was rendered down to a gentle feeling of deceleration. Dust swirled around the vessel in eddies. Particles being captured by the Bussards and pushed away by the forward navigational deflector ionizing in different spectrums made the transition into the Divide a visual experience that contrasted with the dimming of the stars of known space they were leaving behind.

The pitch of the engines increased in pulses. A feeling of acceleration and deceleration began to increase as the Divide began to truly make its presence felt, the famed Washboard Effect jittering its way through the ship’s structural members, stronger with each second as the ship pushed ever deeper into the dusty embrace of the region. A nearly purple-red brown dwarf star sputtered into view as *Jamshid al-Kashi* cleared a dense bank of carbon and iron dust, the light of its deuterium fires lighting the ship’s way for a few moments like a lantern in a cave passage before being snuffed out again in just as much time.

The jittering of the vessel began to ebb as the ship’s systems adjusted to the gravitational anomalies. The dust and gas of the Divide seemed to slowly push itself into bands of material from the same gravity waves, sorted and divided by particle size and mass...some of the bands glittering like diamonds as the ship slashed through them at speed, and some resembling wisps of breath on a cold morning. After hours of these strange multihued clouds and bizarre celestial flights of fancy, *Jamshid al-Kashi* pushed through a final dense carbon cloud and into the Shackleton Expanse itself.

While hundreds of light years away, the USS *Pioneer* responded to a distress call from a vessel called the *Starward*.

Jilel looked back to the tactical station. "Raise *Tuxedo* and *Chariot*. Let them know we’re going to intercept a distress call if you would please, Issus.”

Some interference crackled through the subspace frequency being used to contact *Tuxedo*.

Nalanid's voice came over the comm. *"Acknowledged, Captain. If you need us to rendezvous at different coordinates, keep us updated."*

Issus waited a moment for *Chariot* to respond as well. *"Chariot hasn't responded,"* she finally announced.

Sanada remarked. *"That's not good. I can think of 1,000 things that could go wrong while mining a transjovian planet. Should Tuxedo make contact with them while we handle this distress call, Captain?"*

Jilel nodded. *"Do it. We can't afford to lose anyone else."*

Sanada transmitted to Nalanid and Torpon. *"Tuxedo, looks like we have two searches to conduct. Chariot is not responsive. We are transmitting her last known locations. Establish contact with them and report back. It might be nothing, but we want to be sure."*

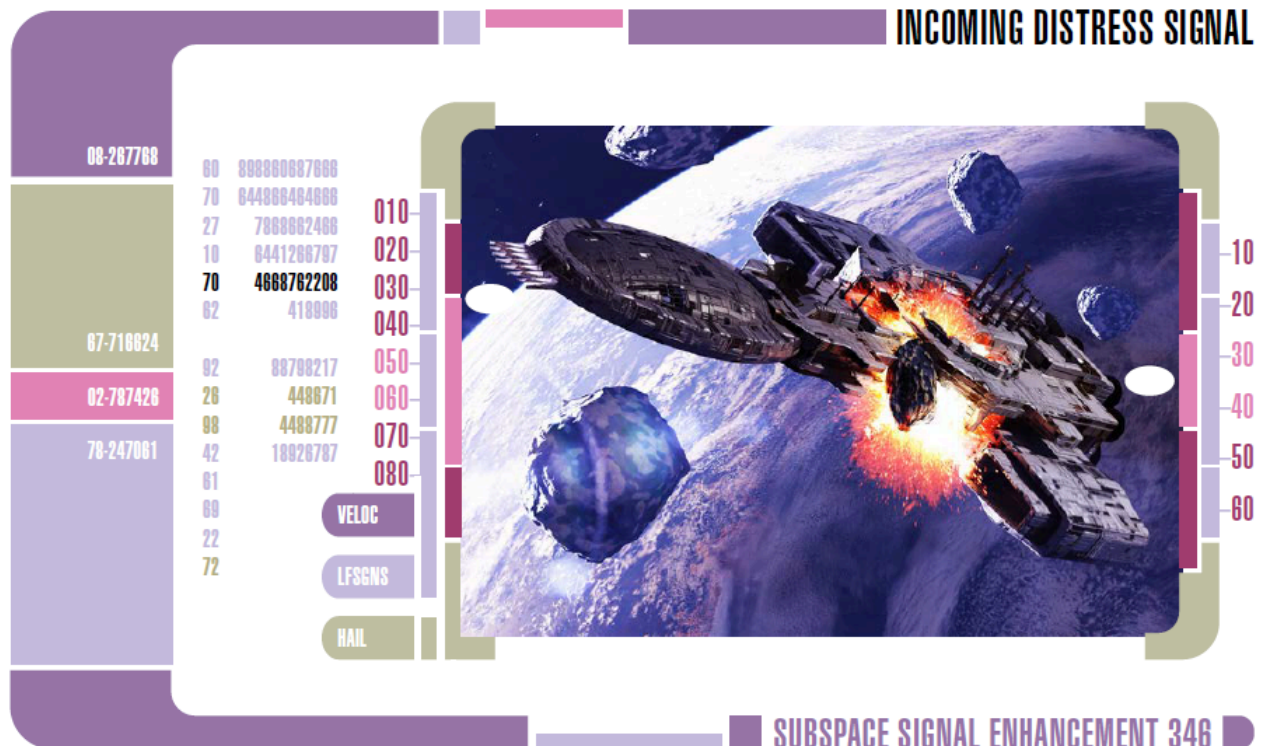
"Chariot too?" Nalanid sighed. *"Acknowledged Pioneer. Count on us."*

Sanada looked at Issus. *"How are those shield modifications going? If the vessel we are rescuing was taken out by a gravimetric distortion that means we might be at risk too."*

"I have modulated the shields to give us greater protection. I think they will let us approach close enough to effect a rescue," Issus responded.

Chief Rome adjusted navigational sensors. *"We are coming into visual range of the vessel now."*

"Put it on screen," the first officer said.



Sanada could see the readings to the left of the viewscreen. "Subspace signal enhancement grid 346, Mr. James. What are we seeing?"

"I've got coordinates on the vessel," announced Franklin. "It's surrounded by gravimetric eddies, pretty deep down the well. What's more, the local area is suffused with electromagnetic fields which are rising in intensity as I'm monitoring." He glanced at the commander, thinking of the EM fields that had so recently plagued *Pioneer* when it lay trapped in another dimension. "Sensors are struggling but I'm doing what I can to keep my eyes on the scene."

"Take us within transporter range, Mr. Rome," Sanada ordered. She knew transporters were down but Mr. James had proposed an idea to cannibalize holodeck components to jury-rig the transporters for emergency use.

"And keep a close eye on the EM radiation levels. We don't want a repeat performance of the Tilikaal dimension," Jilel counseled.

Rome skillfully maneuvered the vessel around the eddies toward the stricken ship. Occasionally there would be a solid jolt, rattling everyone on the bridge and making them grip whatever they could tightly to maintain their balance.

"Sorry, everyone," he said apologetically. "It's hairier than a tribble's backside in here. This would be near-impossible in a shuttle."

"Sounds like the transporter option might be the only one on the board, Mr. James," Sanada said.

Franklin looked up from Ops. "Engineering teams are already working on it, ma'am. They should be ready to go in a few more minutes."

After several more jolts and quick maneuvers to avoid hazards that the sensors could barely detect, Rome brought the ship to a stop, mopping his brow with the back of his arm. "We're within transporter range, Commander, though I don't recommend we hang around for long with the EM radiation on the increase like it is."

"Well done, Mr. Rome," Jilel said. "We'll try to get this done as quickly as we can, I assure you."

Sanada stood up from her chair. "Hail Commander Mauti. Let her know we are ready to assist. Dr. Ga, James, Issus, Simon, you're with me." She stopped in front of Orim. "You may want to bring a triage specialist with xenobiology experience from your department. No way to know what we will see over there."

The away team left the bridge for the transporter room.

Madrek could hear the concern in Moshe's voice.

"Winds just picked up something fierce. Sensors are tracking that phosphine eddy coming in from the north. High level of particulate matter in the eddy that reads as beryllium aluminum cyclosilicate."

Madrek and Dr. Dregg were tucked away in a cave in the ravine they had taken shelter in. *Chariot* could not be seen. The shuttle was shrouded in the orange-brown dust of the transjovian planet.

Dregg belched out information indicating that the cave network was solid enough to shelter from any storm and that he felt extremely comfortable and at home.

“Acknowledged, Ms. Ginoss!” replied Madrek.

He took a glance through his dirty visor to take in the full extent of the storm. His eyes fell to the makeshift mining operation he and his Horta colleague had spent hours setting up and running. “Let’s have one more incision on the rock face with the shuttle’s phasers. Then, if it’s possible, you may need to relocate the *Chariot* away from the storm—in orbit, if you have to. I’m inclined to take up Dr. Dregg’s offer of a spelunking tour. With any luck we’ll be able to capitalize on the fractured lode and continue mining while the storm passes.”

“*Are you [static]? I’m detecting more [static]—buried if they [static]—*”

“Ms. Ginoss! Ms. Ginoss! Can you read me?” he spat. “Affirmative, yes! Get the *Chariot* to safety. Repeat, evacuate! We will take shelter!”

Madrek heard a loud slam in the air as if something hard had impacted the shuttle. There was a whining of engines that was soon drowned out by a gust of wind that drove Madrek deeper into the caves. It was as if someone was dumping sand from buckets in front of the cave entrance. Dimmer and dimmer the cave grew as the storm came upon their location. Attempts to raise the shuttle failed and the away team could only hope Moshe was okay.

Dr. Dregg rumbled out of concern. He was worried about his fellow officer. He explained that it was not unusual for large deposits of beryllium aluminum cyclosilicate to build up in thruster assemblies causing complete system failure in shuttles.

Madrek took a look back at the sealed path behind them. He ran mental calculations. How much force could an unshielded type-6 withstand? Once the storm abated, could their comms pass through solid stone?

But where had these calculations been before the storm hit, he asked himself. Did they follow all appropriate operational protocols in conducting risky mining on a transjovian world? Or had he been reckless, driving the team on in a rush to get back to the “real work” on *Pioneer*?

It didn’t matter. What mattered now were the lives of his team. Dregg could survive here for who knows how long. He himself would run out of oxygen, but he had shelter. What mattered was Moshe.

Sanada walked into the transporter room followed by Franklin, Chad, Issus, Dr. Ga, and Dr. Akeakamai. Karnax was working at the transport station next to Chief Zzet.

“How are those modifications looking?” Sanada asked, looking between Lieutenant James and Karnax.

“Good. Real good,” said Franklin, as Karnax configured the panel beside him. “See, once you have basic matter stream mechanics, the real key for transporters is in computing. When the environment’s as crazy as it is out there, your key leverage is in better data modeling.”

“He’s not going to be happy about this, Lieutenant James,” muttered Karnax.

“So we had to find some extra computing resources. Tons of overlap with holodecks...I mean it’s all playing with the same tech, right?” Franklin mused.

“He’s going to be very upset that we’ve compromised the Salaman Madrek simulation,” Karnax added, shaking her head as she worked. “He keeps talking about how essential it is to our critical galaxium research.”

“So we’ve got some clean-up to do afterwards,” explained Franklin, “but we’re in good shape for this transport.” He extended a thumbs-up.

Sanada eyed Issus and Chad as she stepped on the transporter pad. “Don’t know how I feel about testing this out. Hopefully we don’t all end up merged. But we have lives to save and first contact to establish. So, let’s make it happen, people.”

“If we’re not dead, we can probably be unmerged—although sometimes someone’s had to die to do it,” Issus commented.

“Very reassuring, Ensign,” Kotaru said with a shake of the head. “Doctors, are we all ready to go?”

Dr. Ga and Dr. Akeakamai, an imposing human of Samoan heritage, stepped onto the pad.

“I believe the phrase is ‘what could go wrong?’” Dr. Ga deadpanned.

Akeakamai had a grimace on his face, as if he were tasting the air. “We’ve got good *mana*, brother. We’re good,” he reassured the Betazoid/Vulcan.

“*Mana*”? Sanada had never heard the term before.

The big man chuckled. “Spirit or mystic energy in the mythology of my people back home.”

“I thought it was a Jewish term for bread sent from heaven. Guess I was wrong,” Issus said with a shrug.

“Two n’s in that one,” Akeakamai said, holding up two fingers.

“Ah, ok. Today I learned,” the Separa security officer said.

“Okay. Everyone. I understand we are blabbering because we realize how dangerous this is. Mr. James, we are trusting you.” Sanada’s nerves were beginning to show. Hellish spatial conditions and *Pioneer* still reeling from pocket universe damage didn’t make her feel any better.

“I hear that, Commander,” said Franklin gravely. “We’re gonna do everything we can to preserve integrity on your patterns. I’ve scrapped everything loaded into short-term memory buffers from the chief’s work. The baby and the bathwater. Ok, Assistant Chief,” he said, turning to Karnax, who met his eyes. “Let’s make this happen.”

The six away team members materialized in a smoky corridor aboard the alien ship. At least two burnt and mangled corpses meshed into twisted metal bulkheads greeted the Starfleet visitors; there may have been more but the mixture of scarred debris made it hard to tell for sure. Blue lights flickered off and on and the team assumed they had beamed into what was once a service corridor one deck below the command center. The passageway went in two different directions. It was hard to tell if there were any doors along this corridor as it seemed that a massive explosion had melted the door frame to the wall.

Sanada looked around as her officers pulled out tricorders. She tapped her combadge. “Away team to *Pioneer*. We made it.”

“Good thing.” Jilel didn’t hesitate to update them on the status of their systems. *“That move just blew out every transporter patch engineering and operations devised. You’re stuck over there until we come up with another safe solution to get you back. Do what you can to help those people while we work from this end.”*

The one red uniformed command officer, two yellow-uniformed officers, and three blue-uniformed medical officers went about their work as only trained Starfleet professionals could.

Seeing no one around, Chad Simon shouted down the corridor while the others scanned. “We are from Starfleet from the *Pioneer*, the ones that you communicated with. We are here to help. Can you take us to your wounded?”

A female rounded the corner through the haze of damage. She was flanked by two others. The Starfleet officers couldn’t help but notice. The Akaru were a bipedal, mammalian species who resembled Romulans and Vulcans to some extent—copper-based skin and slightly pointed ears—but these three had more widely-set eyes, more robust physical frames, and digital fusion or vestigial webbing between their fingers.

When she spoke, the away team recognized the voice as Commander Mauti. “Oh. Thank Iryax! You have arrived. The situation is even more dire. This is our acting lead engineer, Specialist Jumai, and the ship’s surgeon, Curate Kelu. We welcome any help you may provide.”

Commander Sanada took the lead, motioning to three of her staff. “We brought along some of our best medics including our chief medical officer, Dr. Ga.”

“If you will follow me,” Curate Kelu bowed, extending his hand to direct the medical team. “We have set up a triage bay two decks down.”

Mauti offered a tired smile, her face smeared with grease. “The rest of you are most needed in engineering. Our systems are critical.”

Sanada watched the medical team head off then addressed Franklin James and Issus. “Let’s see what we can do to help. Can you tell us exactly what is wrong with the ship, Mr. Jumai?” she asked as they began to walk through crumpled corridors toward a tube and ladder.

“We are two years into our first interstellar journey.” Jumai paused in front of the ladder. “Hence, we are still testing out many of our systems. The *Starward* is the first of its kind—”

“But hopefully not the last,” Mauti said as she headed down the ladder.

“To answer your question,” the engineer continued, “our gravimetric stabilizers had a compensation error that shattered our ionic induction matrix. The feedback pulse sent a shockwave through our vessel’s power systems. Resultant explosions crippled us and—” He paused as if choking on the words. “—cost lives. Iryax forgive us.” He headed down the ladder, the sadness of his words weighing him down.

“So if we can get your matrix back online,” asked Franklin, “or bypass it, do you think your ship’s engines can get you out of this well?”

“Temporarily,” Jumai said as his voice echoed in the access tube. “Major repairs would need to take place on our homeworld. If we can patch our FTL drive, we can get there. Of course, this depends on you understanding our technology.”

“I am confident in their abilities,” Mauti said by the time the group emerged in the engineering section.

It was a mess.

“Can you make heads or tails of it?” Sanada asked Franklin and Issus.

“We’ll get there, Commander, and I appreciate your confidence, Mauti,” Franklin said warmly as he peeked around the chamber. “So that’s...FTL main power supply—Ensign, want to take a look?” he asked Issus.

Issus nodded and stood next to the Ops manager as he pointed out the system components.

“And this is the main systems monitoring panel, right?” He idly tapped the side of a display as his mental gears turned. His eyes darted everywhere as he began to make sense of what made this vessel go. “It can be disorienting learning a new culture’s operations,” he continued as he walked on. He stepped carefully over sprawled power lines and began to follow them. “But there’s always an underlying order. Is this—is this a main power relay?” he asked, palming a panel.

“It is,” Jumai said.

“Can we get this open?” Franklin asked.

With Jumai’s help he got a look inside the enclosed channel. He followed the Akaru power lines from the main chamber into relay couplings, relay couplings with small metallic connectors pulsing with thin blue veins of energy. Their industrial design bore all the signatures of Tilikaal technology like the pillars spied in their extra-dimensional prison but in miniaturized form. It was enough to make the hairs on his neck rise.

“So...” he began, head and shoulders emerging from the open panel. “The good news is, I think there’s common ground here. The inner workings of the vessel’s power systems are quite similar to technology we’ve worked with in the past. Really, quite similar. So, I think there’s things we can

do. I'll start working-up a plan. In the meantime, Commander and Ensign, I invite you to take a look and check my reasoning on this." He gave a tight smile and made eyes at Sanada.

She offered a quizzical look, stepped forward, and peeked inside the panel. "Is that—?"

"Right?" Franklin asked in response. "Commander, if you're comfortable, I'd like to ask the crew a few questions about this, uh, set-up."

"Likewise."

The three doctors came into a large area with dozens of injured crew members. It was grisly. A moaning woman caught Dr. Akeakamai's attention. A specialist in triage, he began assessing the room as the three medical professionals spread out.

Curate Kelu said, "In all my years, I have never experienced such devastation and loss of life." His voice cracked. "Perhaps the Akaru are not ready for the stars."

Dr. Akeakamai scanned the first patient. He double-checked his medical tricorder readings and adjusted the settings. He didn't believe his eyes. Dr. Ga and Dr. Simon must have simultaneously caught the same shred of data from their scans. The Akaru were not just humanoids who resembled Vulcans or Romulans. Their DNA suggested common ancestors with both Vulcans and Romulans.

Dr. Akeakamai looked sharply at his contemporaries as he realized what he was seeing. Dr. Ga raised an eyebrow before turning his attention to the patient before him. Akeakamai chose to respond to Specialist Jumai. "Your people are ready for the stars, Curate. It's just a sad fact that explorers must suffer dangers that others don't. My ancestors were Wayfinders on our world's great oceans," the Samoan explained as he worked.

More cries of pain and moans focused the Starfleet officers on the problem at hand, though they glanced at each other. They couldn't ignore the significance of the readings. Of course, one boon was that the somewhat familiar physiology would make them easier to treat.

Dr. Ga administered another pain-killing injection to a woman with a leg that was bent at an angle that would set someone's teeth on edge. He wanted to discuss their findings with the others, but didn't want to alarm his patients.

Simon bound wounds with a dermal tissue regenerator and set broken bones. There were a lot of wounded. Chad kept in mind what he knew about Vulcan anatomy as a guideline for his treatments.

Chapter 5

“So what are we looking at here?” Franklin asked Jumai. They were squatting over an exposed array of pulsing blue filaments, to all eyes of Tilikaal design. “Would you say there are multiple generations of technology integrated into this vessel? Or is all this stuff contemporary Akaru design?”

The three Starfleet officers—Kotaru, Franklin, and Issus—watched carefully for Jumai’s response.

“All of our technology is the gift of Iryax Nedaon the Ageless,” the engineer responded. “It is they who granted us wisdom and set us on our path into the stars. For over seven millennia, Iryax has guided our hands. Everything the Akaru have is from the blessed Iryax. Are you able to comprehend the technology?”

Sanada jumped in. “We understand it fine. We just like to have as many details as possible before tinkering with alien technology. Safety protocols.”

“Wise. Do you not have a supreme leader of your own?” Commander Mauti asked.

“We are currently led by Nanietta Bacco, our President,” Issus responded.

“Ah. Is the honorable Bacco the one who gifted you with the knowledge and technology to travel the stars?”

“No, we discovered it in our own ways through cooperation with each other and sharing knowledge,” Issus explained.

Mauti was confused. “Bacco is not...ageless?”

“No. Bacco is a mortal person just like any of us. Because of this, we choose regularly from our best leaders to face the challenge of leading the Federation,” the ensign said.

“Can you now fix our ship?” Jumai asked Lieutenant James.

“We got this, Jumai,” replied Franklin. “Iryax’s gifts have some things in common with technology we’ve encountered before.”

“Blessings upon blessings,” Jumai exclaimed.

“Just one more question, Jumai,” added Franklin, “that we might learn more of Iryax and the bounty they’ve given you. How did Iryax make contact with the Akaru? Did Iryax travel to your people or appear in some other way?”

“Nedaon is not Akaru, but has lived on Setu for as long as any of the People can recall. Our oldest historical records indicate that Iryax has always guided the Akaru. Setu is a world unified under the word and the will of the Iryax, and, as a result, has no significant internal conflict.”

“And he gave you your technology?” Sanada asked.

“We develop many things ourselves. However, Iryax had guided us in wisdom and insight,” Mauti proudly said.

Issus nodded. "Perhaps when we get out of this we will have a chance to meet this Iryax. They sound fascinating."

Sanada motioned for her officers to continue with repairs. "I'm going to check in on the medical team. Commander, could you lead them to us? Lieutenant James, do you have everything handled here?"

"Roger that, Commander," replied Lieutenant James.

Commander Nalanid and Acting Ensign Torpon were now on a dual-pronged mission: searching for the *Obelisk* and contacting *Chariot*, which was at least a day away at high warp according to their flight plan.

"At warp 3.5 we won't make it to *Chariot* for a few days, Mr. Nalanid. What do you suggest?" Torpon asked.

"Time is relative, Mr. Torpon. We do what we can with the time given, and *Chariot* seems to be closer to our position, so we should go where they were when they were heard from last." Nalanid was already bringing up what astrometric data there was on the star system, linking back to *Pioneer* and her databases. He raised his eyebrows at the limited information that had made its way back to *Pioneer* on the transjovian planet they were exploiting. "Not particularly the best place to try and take shore leave, but better than Risa."

"That is a matter of perspective I would guess." The Romulan smiled.

Nalanid smiled back. "Another form of relativity."

"Adjusting heading to compensate for the instability of the Expanse," Torpon said. "With any luck we'll hit a dead zone and be able to push it to warp 4. So exciting." The Romulan was completely deadpan with his last remark.

Nalanid was quiet for a moment, clearly not responding to the joke. He cleared his throat. "Mr. Torpon, I hope that I have been treating you with the same respect as I would other members of the crew. My previous encounters with Romulans prior to my posting on *Pioneer* were not positive ones. I am acutely aware that it is possible that subconsciously I may behave differently. If I have, you have my apologies." Nalanid scowled to himself, looking down at the controls in front of him.

"I assure you, Mr. Nalanid, I wouldn't have requested you for this mission had I thought you were mistreating myself or the other Romulans. In fact, I'm sometimes jealous of how freely you express yourself, especially when my people work hard to not act in that manner." Torpon stood up to stretch his legs. "The way you explained how to delay notifying the Federation of our presence makes me think you're more Romulan-like than you realize though."

Nalanid huffed but looked relieved to be told that he hadn't been acting shamefully. "Rules are there because of something that happened in the past. A well-read man may know all the rules and why they are there, but a wise man knows when to apply them to ensure the spirit of the law is kept. I do plan on doing my duty and reporting this, but I also know that immediately doing so would not be in the best interests of all involved. Including the Empire."

“And how about me?” Torpon followed up. “Have I been respectable?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t have agreed to come along if you hadn’t been.” Nalanid was setting up an automatic scanning protocol to look for the polarized subspace particles if they did appear while they were engaged with other activities. “And I’m happy that you brought forward this idea to help find our crew mate. That kind of help truly does mean something.”

“It’s the least I could do to help. The others would like to help as well, but they would like to be asked. I was sick of sitting around doing nothing. I know we’re technically crew members of *Pioneer* now, but sometimes it still feels like we aren’t trusted.”

“I think most people are weary to ask anything of you, mainly because they are still coming to the conclusion if they can trust you. Centuries of conflict takes a while to get over.”

“A fair observation,” Torpon conceded. “Why do you think Trask trusted me from word one?”

Nalanid considered this for a moment. “I think some people see when they can trust someone right away. Trask is one of those people. It also helps that he himself is someone who you can trust with your life.”

“Where I’m from we call that a liability,” Torpon replied.

“But where you are now, it’s who we all strive to be.”

“Exactly my point.” Torpon stared blankly at the viewscreen. “I hope the rest of the crew will make the same observation when we return with Trask.”

Sanada strode into the medical triage area. Commander Mauti had gone to get an update from her people. Sanada saw an opportunity to talk privately with her staff. She walked up to her chief medical officer as she looked around at the injured. “How are you faring, Dr. Ga?”

If Orim was weary from the efforts of he and the other doctors, he showed none of it. Instead he wiped his hands on a bloody rag and turned his attention to the first officer. “The team has performed more than adequately, Commander. Unless there are unforeseen complications, none of these patients will die.”

“That’s great to hear. That is sure to get some goodwill in our bank.” Her voice dropped. “Notice anything out of the ordinary?”

Ga nodded. “Unless my observations and data are incorrect, these people have the same progenitors as the Vulcan and Romulan peoples.”

Sanada’s eyes widened. “I thought they shared some similarities but I had no idea. That’s equally amazing as what we stumbled upon.”

“Indeed?” Ga asked, raising an eyebrow.

“This ship’s power systems are constructed on some form of miniaturized Tilikaal technology. Can you even begin to postulate a theory about all of this?”

"I can," Ga said softly. "We may have stumbled across the descendants of the Romulan worlds that were exposed to Tilikaal technology nearly two hundred years ago. It is logical to deduce they have interacted with the technology and, quite possibly, with those that survived the journey from Centaurus-A."

"I'm thinking along the same lines. However, how does that explain their webbed fingers and—" She pointed to a near naked patient. "—toes. Mutation in just 200 years?"

"Possibly a blending of species over five or six generations allowed for mixed traits of both." Ga ran a hand through his normally immaculate hair, now plastered to his head with sweat. "Forgive me, Commander, but I was only able to devote fourteen-point seven percent of my mental capacity to this."

"Where was the other 85.3%."

"Attempting to diagnose and treat multiple traumatic injuries in these areas. It has not been easy, but our team is exceptional."

"They are. I need to compile a report for the captain. Get his take on all of this." Sanada synched her tricorder readings with Dr. Ga's medical tricorder then tapped her combadge. "Sanada to Captain Jilel."

"Go ahead, Number One."

"I'm transmitting some interesting tricorder readings. You may want to pass it onto engineering and medical teams." She found Commander Mauti in the area and offered a smile from afar. There was no need for the Akuran leader to know that their origin had piqued *Pioneer's* curiosity more than any other species in a while. "Mauti has asked that we provide escort to their homeworld. Their systems are patched together and could fail if they were to encounter another gravimetric or tetrayonic eddy. I think after you review the away team's data you might find it a good idea to accept the invitation. Not to mention, we transported over successfully once. We may not want to risk that again."

"Understood. I'll pass the information along to the medical department. In the meantime, inform the commander that we'll be escorting them home. Well done, Number One."

"She will be pleased to hear that. You know it is five days at our best warp to Setu. What about the other two away teams, sir?"

There was a sigh on the other end. *"We'll inform them of what's happening and see what the situation is. If nothing else, the shuttles can follow us out or we can double back once our new friends are safe."*

"Understood. Sanada out."

Jilel stared at the stricken ship across the void on the viewer, his thoughts moving to the vessels he had out there even now. He'd already lost Trask and the *Obelisk*, and now he would be leaving more of his people to put others before his crew because that's what Starfleet does.

“Dammit,” he whispered to himself.

Madrek and Dr. Dregg hadn’t heard from Moshe in four hours. They had been forced to go deeper into the dark caves to avoid the intense cold. The temperature on the outside of the cave had dropped another thirty degrees celsius and Dregg had located a small sulfur pond one hundred meters in that provided more tolerable temperatures despite the poisonous air. They had set up automated mining operations successfully enough but Madrek checked his air indicator. He had ten hours of life support left.

Dr. Dregg offered a question inquiring in what fashion the Cardassian imagined he would meet his end.

“In typical fashion, Doctor,” replied Madrek. “That is, with deep bitterness and resentment. And the target of my ire, as I drew my last breath, would have to be none other than myself, for overestimating our mastery over something as commonplace and deadly as the weather.”

He crept forward, placing a gloved hand against the face of the rock wall which shined back dimly in the light of his EV suit. The vein of rubidium within—under the care of the sophisticated production facilities aboard *Pioneer*—would turn into almost magical technological devices; devices which could communicate or even transport matter through solid rock. If there was only a way to conduct their own suit comms through to Ensign Moshe; some way to use its capabilities in—but no, it was too coarse. They would waste valuable time and life support. They had a job to do and Moshe had hers. The rock would need to conduct their prayers instead.

“Time to get back to work, Doctor,” he said, withdrawing his hand.

The Horta grumbled softly as it verified that the magnetic cable bolts being used to bind large masses of rock in the hanging wall were properly calibrated to the existing atmospheric conditions in the cave.

Tuxedo dropped out of warp. They had been traveling for a full day to arrive at the transjovian planet and had had zero success raising the *Chariot*. Nalanid brought up the forward sensor pallet to perform an orbital sweep.

The current conditions were dangerous. Tetryon and gravimetric distortions in this region of space. *Tuxedo*’s sensors were inferior in range and sensitivity to *Pioneer*’s. Localized pulsars added to the gravimetric disturbances. Horrible transjovian wind conditions permeated the planet. *Chariot* was missing hidden under the adverse climate conditions.

Nalanid was quiet for a full minute as he stared at the sensor readings before folding his arms across his chest and glaring out the forward window at the planet in front of them. “I’ve seen worse, but not many. The first question that comes to mind is why Madrek would ever want to set foot on a planet like that.” The Tellarite closed his eyes and began mentally ticking off boxes from what he’d described to Torpon as his decision trees. “We can’t raise them. Spending time establishing communications would mean if they are injured or dying that we wasted time finding that out. We have to proceed with assuming they are alive.”

“I believe the atmospheric disturbances extend to the ground. We’d need to land the shuttle and hope we’re close,” Torpon replied. “Surely there’s a way to break through at least some of the interference. Where’s that good old Starfleet ingenuity, Mr. Nalanid?”

“Oh, there are a few dozen ways I can think of to begin to cut through the interference. What we’re looking for—without a suitable communications or sensor lock—are neutrinos emanating from the shuttle’s fusion bottles. Unless there is an advanced civilization down there, neutrinos are going to be fairly straightforward to find. But spatial interference is flooding our sensors with nonsense.” He swiped his hand across the display and showed neutrino readings being scrambled by tetryon and gravimetric distortions. “Here is where my remote classes from the Imperial College of the Arts on Andor come in handy. This planet is a transjovian. All these planets have a powerful magnetic field that’s going to interact with these distortions in a regular way. If we map the field and I compare it to...oh...let’s say Permilian VI—it’s about the same composition, size, density—we can start to piece together how the distortions are impacting the sensors and narrow down where the shuttle is.”

“A fair chance that could work. We would need to compensate for the twenty-seven moons and any innocent solar interference.” Torpon pondered, tapping his chin. “I might also be able to modify the Type 9’s inferior deflector to shunt the tetryons back into subspace.”

“Hm. We could do just that. Map out the magnetic field, see how the tetryons are interacting with it, and calibrate the shuttle’s deflector like you suggested. It would negate most of the interference we’re getting from the tetryons, plus we could use the transfer of energy into subspace like an inertial sink and help dampen out the gravitational distortions.”

Nalanid drew a suggested winding course around the planet with his finger on the display, twisting the shuttle through the colorful magnetic field lines. "That should give us an excellent cross section of the planet's field."

“With a few tweaks, I’ve given our sensors a tunnel void of tetryons roughly three meters wide. It will be like using a search light, but it’s better than nothing,” Torpon responded.

“Excellent. I think I should accurately model the planetary atmosphere so, if we need to go down, we’ll be ready for any of the conditions we’ll face at different altitudes. Perhaps you could begin sweeping for neutrinos?” Nalanid smiled. “If we don’t get a solid reading when we enter the thermosphere we could pulse out the shuttle’s phasers to ionize the atmosphere. It might act like a big neon sign saying ‘we’re here’ if they see it and can respond.”

“If the *Chariot* team encountered trouble, it would also alert hostile forces of our presence,” Torpon pointed out. “Let’s try to stay subtle like a Romulan, Mr. Nalanid. Ionization should be at the bottom of our list of options.”

The type-9 shuttle kept a tight orbit around the giant yellow planet, its occupants desperate to find their allies.

It had been four hours. The *Tuxedo*’s two-man crew had been working tirelessly.

“I’m currently writing a program to compensate for the tetryons’ effects on the planet’s weather systems, Mr. Nalanid,” Torpon said. “With a little luck, it should widen our search window dramatically. Initial observations showing abnormal stratospheric wind eruptions.”

“Nothing unusual at all about the wind. It’s all a matter of gasses moving energy from one part of the planet to another. I’ve found that no matter the planet or the atmospheric composition that the same patterns tend to apply.” Nalanid had been staring at projections of planetary climatology for several minutes as he made small adjustments to the model’s inputs. He stuck his finger onto the map display where a dim light was flashing. “I think I can narrow down their location to an area about four square kilometers from our current altitude. I can narrow it down more as we get into the mix.”

“Adjusting heading to gradually decrease our altitude. That should allow us to make adjustments should anything unexpected occur on the way down.” The Romulan then got up and began pacing.

Nalanid could tell something was bothering him. “What’s wrong, Torpon? There isn’t enough room here to properly pace.”

“It’s just...” Torpon paused. “I hate being a pessimist. But if Mr. Trask encountered a planet like this, there’s no way he’d survive.” The Romulan sat back down in his chair and shook his head. “We can worry about that after we conduct a successful rescue operation here.”

Nalanid stopped for a moment and looked out the window at the planet nearby. “Much of the universe is filled with things that will kill us. Not through any fault of our own, but just because they exist. We are simple, fragile beings incapable of living on our own outside of our planetary cradles. The rest of the universe is filled with beings that could kill us because they choose to.” The Tellarite smiled. “I’m supposed to be the pessimist, Mr. Torpon. I know the odds are that we could very well die whenever we find ourselves lost in the universe. And planets like the one beneath us will do it quickly and efficiently. But that’s what Starfleet trains us for. They teach us to say, ‘No’ whenever the universe tries to kill us. We are taught to say ‘No’ that the odds are long and our friends and colleagues may be lost to us. And as long as one of us can keep arguing against the universe’s desire to extinguish us, then that means there’s a chance.”

“It would appear Starfleet and the Empire have something in common after all,” Torpon pondered out loud.

Suddenly, a beeping alarm sounded on both stations. Both officers’ fingers moved deftly trying to ascertain the source of the interruption.

“Looks like a life sign, Mr. Nalanid. Let’s continue to tell this planet ‘no’, shall we?” The Romulan grinned.

“An excellent suggestion, Mr. Torpon. Take us lower into the exosphere and we’ll see what we can do to make contact.”

Torpon quickly adjusted commands based on Nalanid’s ongoing meteorological scans. Even with the best path possible, *Tuxedo* still strained and groaned as it was buffeted by the tetryon-propelled wind systems. With their target locked in, the two near-strangers worked in a tandem unison as though they practiced the moves together innumerable times. Suddenly, a

cyclone enveloped the shuttle and Torpon lost control. *Tuxedo* was flung around and the inertial dampeners fought a war with centrifugal force.

“Mr. Nalanid, I’m doing everything I can to keep us in the air. Can you find us a way out?” Torpon barely finished the sentence when a flight path arrived on his screen. His mouth dropped agape when he saw the path. “You want me to cut the engines?”

Nalanid looked over the displays in front of him. “No. Full power at heading 006 mark 355. It’s a volutus cloud. There’s a region of stability in its center. When we hit the region of stability, change course to 088 mk 009. We’ll exit the worst of this super cell twenty six seconds later.”

“I’m starting to think Starfleet ingenuity is actually just sheer madness.” Torpon chuckled. “In we go.”

The shuttle again fought the winds trying to rip it from the sky. *Tuxedo* entered the system at the designated coordinates and Torpon immediately adjusted the heading. After being tossed around like a roller coaster, the ship emerged in the stability ring. The ship went silent and Torpon closed his eyes and counted to himself. Twenty-six seconds later, *Tuxedo* was beneath the bulk of the super cell.

“Like a pea through a straw. Starfleet ‘Boldly Goes’, Mr. Torpon. Madness is almost a prerequisite.” Nalanid smiled as he went back to looking at the sensor returns. He didn’t smile for long as he thought about Trask not being there to share in the madness. He’d have to remember to download the sensor data to recreate it in the holodeck when they did meet again.

Underground, Madrek knelt on hands and knees where the influx of dust and silt met the mouth of the cave. For a half hour he’d been trying to dig a channel without result. He huffed, sweating and trying to catch his breath as Dregg’s gurgled prompts were translated by his suit.

“No, I’m not getting anywhere,” he admitted bitterly as fresh piles of sand filled-in the space he’d excavated. He glanced back at the doctor and the fruits of their mining work. The Horta waited attentively. Madrek was sufficiently used to his presence now to sense concern in his stillness. Madrek swallowed dryly, taking in the array of rubindium fragments which lay upon the cave floor. They’d been sized, prepped, scanned, and tagged for transport. Perfect and useless at the same time. His team would die for this Job Well Done. “Pathetic,” he declared, to Dr. Dregg’s rumbled confusion.

He slid off the pile and grabbed one of the chunks. He hauled it back towards the cave mouth and carved a fresh channel in the collapsed soil. He shoved the ore into the space as the dust began to stream around it, then heaved his weight to drive it deeper in.

Dregg grumbled.

“No, Doctor, I haven’t lost my mind,” he grunted, dashing back to the work area. He picked up a utility strut, tested its weight, and returned to the cave mouth. “The rock we’re behind may be too thick to penetrate, even with rubindium at its core,” he continued, as he drove the strut hard against the submerged ore with a loud ping. “But if we can tune our comms to the right refraction index, this ore may bounce our signal through the softer earth that blocks our path. Yes, I know we won’t get it back!” he said between thrusts, wielding the strut like a pike to drive the ore

fragment deeper still. “We don’t know how deep the cover is. We need it as close to the surface as possible to...” He broke off, feeling the ore shatter beneath his latest thrust. He let out a breath. “No turning back now. Quickly, Doctor. Configure your comms to the following subspace bandwidth...”

“Chariot,” Madrek’s garbled voice spoke into the *Tuxedo*’s cabin. “Chariot, *come in. Ms. Ginoss, do you read us?*”

Nalanid and Torpon locked eyes when they heard the tired voice of their chief engineer come over the comms.

Nalanid smiled briefly before cutting into the transmission. “Mr. Madrek, it’s good to hear your voice. This is Dr. Nalanid on *Tuxedo*. We’re about thirty kilometers from your position. Is there any assistance that we can provide?”

“Doctor!” shouted Madrek, who shot a look towards Dregg, imagining he found some fellow-feeling beneath the Horta’s rocky hide. He rested his body against the dust flow to speak.

“How did you...no, there’s no time. We’re buried underground! We’re near the mouth of a cave that has been filled-in with loose earth from the windstorms. We...that is, I...have approximately six hours of oxygen left. I’ve had to compromise a material fragment of our mined rubindium to establish communications. Do you suppose, Doctor, that if my signal is getting through, the ore could act as a rudimentary pattern enhancer to beam us out? But wait...the *Chariot*. Can you locate the *Chariot*? What is the status of crewman Ginoss?”

“I personally wouldn’t trust my pattern to be filtered through possible impurities inside rubindium crystals. If I can’t get a lock on you both otherwise, we’ll write a paper together about rubindium enhanced transporter devices.” Nalanid had already brought up the library computer entry on subspace interactions with rubidium crystals. “As for *Chariot*, I have her on sensors, but no response to standard hails.”

Madrek stared at Dregg, a mixture of relief and fear on his face. “Rescuing Ms. Ginoss may then be our highest priority. Dr. Dregg and I are—at least for the next six hours—stable.”

“*Let’s say five hours then to give you some leeway. In the meantime, if Dr. Dregg is with you, please ask if he can tunnel through the rock around you so you can climb out.*”

“A fine idea,” Madrek commented, scrambling towards the Horta. “So my natural inclination would be to ask you, Doctor: ‘why didn’t you do this in the first place?’” He shook his head, eyeing the Horta respectfully. “But I’ve learned my lesson about your instincts. Tell me what’s at stake.”

Dr. Dregg emitted a low rumble, translated visually into Madrek’s HUD as <sigh>. He proceeded to rattle off an expert’s assessment of all the ways boring through the rock face during a

high-powered windstorm could kill them. The integrity of the face was already weakened by mining; the two might be crushed in an avalanche, buried in rivers of loose earth or sheared by a sudden pressure differential.

“I don’t have the expertise to counter any of those concerns,” admitted Madrek. “But it’s that or be beamed through broken rubidium. You’re in your element, Doctor. If there’s a chance you can get us out of this, I am asking you to take that chance!”

The Horta leapt forward with sudden power. He edged to the cave’s perimeter, palpating its walls with the deep rumble of stone-on-stone.

“Dr. Nalanid,” Madrek reported, unable to take his eyes off the animated Horta. “We are now attempting such an evacuation. I will keep you apprised!”

“Wonderful. If you find any gemstones, be sure to have Doctor Dregg taste them for my wife. Mr. Torpon and I will check on Chariot. We’ll attempt to keep in contact and check in every thirty minutes.”

Chapter 6

Captain Log, Supplemental

“We answered a distress signal from a ship operated by the Akaru, a species native to the Shackleton Expanse, one not yet formally encountered by the Federation. My crew and I rendered assistance and helped them patch up their ship and crew, and now we’re escorting them back to their home planet of Setu. Due to our damaged transporters and extreme spatial conditions that place our shuttles at risk, I have chosen to allow the away team to stay aboard Starward. We are treating this like a first contact situation and have reminded the crew to be on their best behavior. So far so good, as the Akaru seem to be an honest and friendly people. I’m curious to see what their homeworld looks like. We expect to arrive in a few days.”

Franklin and Issus watched Jumai as he placed the large circular platter in front of them. “Now, this is my grandmother’s specialty. Roasted *zabba* nuts in sweet cylinder bread sprinkled with grated *masha*. Eat it slowly. It tends to stick in the throat.”

The technician’s quarters were cramped and dim. Life support did a fair job scrubbing the air, but nothing like the pristine atmosphere aboard a Starfleet vessel. Still, his hospitality was precious and honest. “Give it a try. Let me know what you think.”

Franklin’s senses were amplified in the foreign setting. He took in the strange scents of the place like a tourist. He smiled at Jumai and took himself a slice. “Smells delicious,” he commented. “Judging by the looks—and its grandmotherly origins—it’s kind of giving me vibes of a holiday food back home called a ‘fruitcake.’ It’s passé and nowadays everyone seems to make fun of it. But if you actually try one? It’s pretty darn good.” He took a bite, chewing the scrumptious food slowly as the Akaru had instructed him.

“I agree,” Chad Simon said after he took a bite. “This is very good.”

“Breaking bread together, as they say,” said Franklin, lifting his half-eaten slice in a toast. “At least, they say that in our homeworld,” he said motioning to Chad and himself, “Sacred traditions. We may not have Iryax, but we do have a heritage. While I hate that it’s come about because of a disaster like this, I must say one of my favorite parts of space travel is coming into contact with new peoples and new cultures like yours, Jumai. Would you say the Akaru are a curious people?”

“Curious? Oh yes. And intensely so about technology, science, the arts, and theater, especially kinetic visual performances. The latter varies depending on which continent you are in, of course. But anyone can find something they might like to explore. Above all, we enjoy efficiency in all we do. We are always eager to learn how to improve our processes, be they mechanical or artistic. Perhaps when we arrive at Setu I might learn about your technology. The ease at which you repaired our vessel is of extreme interest to me. Where did you all receive your training?”

“We received our training from various places. I for one received my medical training at a University on my homeworld and my star-faring training from our government.” Chad paused for a moment. “Kinetic visual performances and improving a process, eh? Let me tell you about the

game called golf.” Simon thought to himself. *Being here and now is worth being stuck on a ship month at a time. Experiencing new and different cultures is what makes life worth living.*

“Golf?”

Chad continued on about golf for a bit, explaining the sport, but also stressing the mental aspects of the game.

Issus listened intently to the conversations her companions were having. The crew of the ship had been welcoming, and she appreciated their hospitality. However, she also appreciated their spirituality. It reminded her in many ways of home and the fellowship she had with her fellow priests of Nagashun.

Jumai turned his attention to Franklin. “I couldn’t help but notice you’ve taken a special interest in our technology. Is there something of particular interest to you?”

Franklin wiped his mouth and made eye contact with Jumai. “In Starfleet, we’re interested in learning of all kinds,” he began. “But on our vessel, the *Pioneer*, we have a particular interest in all types of faster than light travel. It’s kind of our thing,” Franklin said with a disarming smile. “We’ve seen things like the gifts of Iryax before,” he continued. “They seem associated with instantaneous and extradimensional travel. That’s a game changer for everyone in the galaxy. We always try to understand as much as we can about this and who has this capability. Would you say you understand how it works, Jumai?”

“I would not have been assigned to this vessel if I did not have a basic understanding of its function? Is something perplexing you?”

“Excellent,” said Franklin, calmly nodding. “I didn’t mean to insult you. It’s just that sometimes advanced technology can work so well that we rely upon it without even knowing the way it works. Have you encountered any other civilizations using technology like this?”

“No. We have met a few offworlders. Traders. You are the first large vessel we have ever encountered that comes from such an organized governmental structure. Have you traveled far and wide in the Expanse?”

“Our space is beside the Expanse. We travel far and wide beyond it,” Issus explained.

Jumai thought for a moment. “Have you encountered technology like ours before?”

Issus answered. “We have, but in many ways it is still mysterious to us. It is part of why we are exploring the Expanse.”

“How could you have encountered such technology before? We thought it was purely a gift from Iryax?” Jumai wondered.

“It is very rare,” the Separa female admitted, “and so I wouldn’t be surprised if Iryax thought they were the only ones who had it. Your applications are also advanced, more so than our applications with the technology.”

“So you have met others with technology similar to ours? Who are these people?”

“Here’s the thing, Jumai,” said Franklin. “You know how vast the universe is. Ageless beings like Iryax...they can be anywhere. Everywhere. They appear to different people in different ways.” He drew closer. “There are beings we’re aware of. We’ve found evidence of their presence. We’ve approached them, caught glimpses of them. We know them by a name: the Tilikaal. But they’re way bigger than any name. They’re beyond our type of existence. Are they the same as Iryax? Are they affiliated? We can only guess. But your people were given special knowledge. Your people were chosen to receive the gifts, while we’ve had to grasp at straws. Can’t blame us for wondering why. Anything you can share about how and why Iryax chose you, can help us understand our place in all of this.”

Jumai seemed instantly flattered. “I—I shall try my best to help you grasp the magnificence of Iryax. There is so much to tell.” He got up, ran to his cool unit, and brought out more food of blue and purple coloration. “Here. Here. Eat up. I will tell you all I know. Perhaps it will help you understand the grandeur of Iryax. And maybe you in turn can tell me about these—”

Seeing his host at a loss for words, Franklin filled in the gap. “Tilikaal.”

“Yes. Tilikaal. Tell me more.”

“We know they’ve made works, great and small, like what I saw in your engineering section. And we know they’ve got a special relationship to the Expanse. You say Iryax is Ageless,” he said. “When did Iryax provide you with their gifts?”

“Long before any time our People can recall. Iryax has simply always been a part of our development. Perhaps when we arrive at Setu, Iryax will grant you an audience and you may ask Iryax yourself.”

“I don’t want to speak for my leadership, but under the right conditions, they might be very interested in that,” said Franklin gratefully. “So Iryax has been physically present on Setu throughout your civilization’s history?”

“Yes. As long as anyone can recall. Why does this seem to intrigue you so? Aren’t all deities Ageless?”

“In certain cultures in our world a deity can be represented by an image and others can not. Since you mentioned that we might meet the Iryax, do you have an image that you can show us?” Chad said thoughtfully and respectfully in keeping with the conversation.

“Yes. Of course.” Jumai moved from the table and grabbed an electronic tablet. He pressed a few buttons on it and an image appeared.

Franklin knew right away what he was looking at.

The alien looked just like Assessor Tredik, the entity his away team, led by Captain Torres, had encountered years before in the Candidate Three system. The same time they first learned of Ash’Tamalia.



"What?" The away team had managed to tuck themselves into Commander Sanada's cramped guest quarters aboard the *Starward*.

The commander, Issus, and the three doctors surrounded a small metallic table as Franklin spoke. After all, he was one of the two currently present that had had a run in with the Assessor before, Dr. Orim Ga being the other. Franklin and Orim took turns updating the others on what they knew of the entity.

Franklin began. "It was on our first mission into the Candidate Three System. We arrived on the local planet on the trail of Romulans who were also looking for Tilikaal technology. Klingons were present also. I had just been injured and had hunkered down behind some rubble. That is when we came upon Assessor Tredik, who looks dead-on like this Iryax person, except for the clothes. Tredik was chopping it up with some Romulans. We stayed hidden to observe. Then, all of a sudden, he is talking directly into our heads."

"A telepath?" Dr. Akeakamai asked. Having just come on at Deep Space Nine, this was all news to him.

"A telepath of great power," Dr. Ga said. "Before we could acquire more information from Tredik, the Klingons attacked the Romulans. A firefight ensued."

"I had completely forgotten that we had evidence of Romulan interaction with an Assessor," Sanada said out loud. "It was in the records. It slipped my mind."

"Don't feel bad, Commander. This is all a lot to take in." Franklin continued. "Anyways, Tredik slunk away from the battle. Who knows what information he exchanged with the Romulans telepathically. By this time, we were drawn into a skirmish between the Romulans and Klingons."

"Our pursuit of Tredik led us into a hypostyle hall inside a large structure," the doctor explained.

"This is when we met Ash'Tamalia for the first time," Franklin added, "in a sense. Her form had taken full shape within a holographic shimmer. She seemed surprised and then desperately reached a hand out toward Torres. Do you remember what she said, Doc? You were there."

The Vulcan/Betazoid said, "Of course. She said, 'I am Ash'tamalia; of the Tilikaal. We are trapped; we need your help! Please, if there is anything you can..'", and then the transmission ended. It flickered and a massive surge of energy flowed through the pillar from all around the hypostyle hall and surged up the column."

Franklin jumped in, excited to explain. "The ceiling brightened to the intensity of high noon sunlight and then there was a deafening whoosh of suddenly-released power. Assessor Tredik suddenly entered the pentagonal archway from outside. Everyone present heard in our heads, 'No! It is not yet time!'"

Orim took over again. "Assessor Tredik glared at our away team with an expression that suggested both frustration and pity. He said, 'The True Way must be maintained. You have overstayed your welcome. Now, you must leave!' Tredik splayed out their fingers in a quick, intricate design and the air in front of us shimmered with symbols lined in electric blue energy. The holographic image of the Tilikaal female shuddered briefly and then winked out of sight with a silent cry

etched on her face. The tracework laced throughout the hypostyle hall's walls, pillars, and flooring pulsed with bright blue energy, and then there was a surge of raw power all around that was both ear-splitting and hair-raising. We were all blinded by blue light.”

“And then the incredible occurred,” Franklin said. “After the blue light disappeared, we found ourselves back on the bridge of *Pioneer*. Tredik waved us away with the gesture of their hand.”

“It seems like we are about to meet one potent being,” Chad remarked.

“That’s not all,” the ops manager continued. “After we were back on *Pioneer*, an impenetrable force field surrounded the planet and our entire vessel was folded back to Narendra Station.”

“Just like that?” Akeakamai asked, astonished.

“Just like that,” Franklin and Orim said simultaneously.

“According to Starfleet records,” Sanada says, “the next time *Pioneer* encountered this being was after they sent a telepathic distress call to the crew. This sent you heading back to the Candidate Three System along with the *Jump Cannon* and *Elon Musk* to investigate.” [Pioneer SE01EP13 [“Displaced, Part I”](#)]

“That’s right.” Franklin leaned forward on the table. “Apparently, things had gotten way out of hand, even for Tredik. Tilikaal technology was creating a cataclysm of epic proportions. Orgun III, the first planet *Pioneer*’s away team ever detected a world engine, had somehow been folded into the Candidate Three System. It was on a direct course for the third planet where Assessor Tredik was guarding thousands of sarcophagi, which we now know to be the dormant bodies of the Tilikaal.”

“The situation was most dire, as I recall,” Issus said, remembering facts she read in reports. “An away team had to head down to the third planet to make contact with this Tredik character and render aid while *Pioneer* dealt with the gravimetric disturbances and swirling energies all around the Tilikaal planet and Orgun III.”

Dr. Ga nodded. “We knew that if Orgun III impacted the Tilikaal planet any evidence of Tredik or other Tilikaal artifacts would be destroyed. Captain Chakotay of the *Jump Cannon* led an away team to the planet to the same location we had encountered Tredik before, the hypostyle hall.”

“As the record shows, by the time Chakotay’s team got there, Tredik was in a full panic,” Franklin recounted. “He led the team through some sort of transporter that was built into the structure. The walls glowed with solid gold color. According to the science officer’s report, there was an unusual hum in the air and they were moved to another part of the planet in an instant.”

“Into a control room to be exact, Lieutenant,” Orim said. “The control room was situated at the top of a massive chamber dug deep into the planet’s surface. For as far as the officers could see, down into the darkened depths, were rows upon rows of connected pentagonal sarcophaguses, attached to pentagonal spires so large their bases could not be seen down in the darkness. There were thousands of the spires, and even more, thousands of sarcophaguses attached to them. Very faint blue energies coursed up and down the spires and into the sarcophagi. Captain Chakotay noted that many spires were entirely dark, no doubt damaged or unpowered due to extreme age or to the damage the planet had as yet sustained. Tredik indicated his role to safeguard the Tilikaal in the chambers. He explained that they were refugees from another galaxy.”

Franklin continued. “He indicated that that planet, like many of the planets here in the Shackleton Expanse, were transported here ‘utilizing technology forbidden by imperial decree’. He claimed the Tilikaal were the ones who created much of the technology we found in the Expanse; that they were the ones who planned the Great Planetary Exodus.”

“That matches the stories we heard so far,” Chad admitted.

“Very much so,” Dr. Ga said. “The mission logs indicated that the Tilikaal chose to place themselves in suspended animation while their planet was transported to the Expanse. This coincides with the information the ZMR provided us with. And, based on our encounter in the pocket universe, we now know what happened during transport that disrupted the suspended animation program. They did not awaken as planned.”

Sanada was piecing it all together. “Without them to guide the exodus, the incoming planets continued to wreak havoc in the Expanse. When they plotted this destination they did not account for the strange energies in this area of space within this part of our galaxy. Their calculations were severely thrown off. Everything that could go wrong went wrong. This is why Ash'Tamalia and this Tredik character are so desperate to revive their people. They might be trying to correct their mistakes.”

Franklin scratched his head. “This is when Starfleet came to realize the power of the Tilikaal. It was on that mission that Chakotay reported that Tredik was trying to restore enough power to the planet—which must have had a world engine—to transport away from the impending collision with Orgun III. Tredik said that the Tilikaal were masters of space folding transportation. Before the away team could assist, the Romulans made an untimely appearance. It seemed that Tredik had their limits. Chakotay asked Tredik to fold the Romulans away from the scene and Tredik claimed they were not in the right location to make that happen.”

“So, Tredik’s powers seem partially dependent on Tilikaal technology,” Sanada said. “That’s good to know.”

“Either way, we know how the story ends. *Pioneer* tried to buy Chakotay’s team some time. The Romulans screwed that up. *Elon Musk* bought us some time, sacrificing nearly everything to do so. *Pioneer* ended up smashed into the Centaurus-A galaxy. The *Jump Cannon* evacuated their away team in just the nic of time. All evidence of Tredik and the Tilikaal was lost...or so we thought? And I’ll be honest, Commander,” Franklin concluded, “just as an aside. We’ve run into this over and over. The whole project the Tilikaal and their enablers are carrying out seems to leave a swath of collateral damage. They need help, but I also feel there needs to be a reckoning. I for one am ready to speak with Tredik again.” He looked at the commander with remembrance of barely ushering her broken body out of a Tilikaal facility.

“You’re assuming that Iryax and Tredik are one in the same?” Sanada asked.

“Guess I was,” Franklin replied.

Issus crossed her arms. “It doesn’t matter if Iryax is indeed Tredik or not. We still need to talk to them.”

Franklin agreed. “We do know there are more Assessors out there. And we know they’re fighting the Hehdi. But there’s lots of hubris to go around. I’m hoping ‘Iryax’ can give us some answers and aid in getting this situation under control before more worlds die.”

Captain Jilel came out of his ready room and onto the bridge. Captain van Asch was at the ops station hovering over Thefer Norata, a Bolian communications specialist.

“...so I enhanced the aft dorsal sensor array to bolster our comm signal. We were able to pierce the polaran field and get a distress call to Starfleet before the Pakled located us,” the captain explained as he pointed to a schematic. “That move earned me my promotion to lieutenant junior grade. If we use the same concept to—” Nic stopped speaking when he noticed Jilel. “Captain.” He stood at attention.

“As you were,” Jilel said with a smile that didn’t hide the concern on his face.

“Everything okay?” Nic moved away from Ops and asked the captain.

Jilel smirked, “Not on this ship.” He quipped, then lost the smile completely. “We’re escorting our new friends to their homeworld, which means leaving our two shuttles behind for several days if they can’t follow us. I don’t like it, but we’ve got a clear duty here.”

“You’re people are professionals. They’ll be fine. Away missions are part of the job. I’d be more worried about what we find on Setu. I read Sanada’s report. Descendants of Vulcan and Romulans with some sort of unexplained genetic deviation. About to meet somebody who looks like that Tredik character that shot a Starfleet vessel dozens of light years with a wave of its hand. *Pioneer* is a patch job right now.” Nic summed up the situation. “How can I help?”

“I need a second pair of eyes here, someone that sees things in a different light than I do. I’m a diplomat, so I’m always trying to see the best in people and situations; but I need a tactical mind to warn me of possible trouble before they escalate into real problems. Sanada has her hands full with her team, and I need a voice of reason against my idealism,” Jilel replied.

Nic gestured toward the empty XO chair. “You’re the captain. You have the right to pick your first officer. And I don’t really have anything better to do.” Nic paused for a moment. “In fact, I...I could use something to keep me busy; keep my mind off—you know.”

Jilel nodded. “I know,” he confirmed softly. “Let’s take a look at what data we’ve got and see if there’s anything we need to be on special alert of—aside from Tredik or whatever they call him here.”

“Yessir.” Nic pulled his uniform taut and stepped near the XO chair. He touched the armrest lightly as if recalling the position. He took in a deep breath then turned to face the viewscreen. He went into first officer mode. “Mr. Norata, please prepare a full departmental report for my review. I want to be up-to-date on all ship systems every hour on the hour until we arrive at Setu. Tactical, start running scenarios with the security teams. We have no idea how many vessels we will be facing when we arrive or what their planetary defenses look like. Cross-reference your work with Chief Rome in case we need to make a quick escape.” He turned to a red-uniformed officer that was working on the top deck. “You there, get me a work up on *Pioneer*’s cloaking

device. I need to get up to speed and fast.” The officer issued acknowledgement and turned back to the master situations display to get to work.

Nic turned back toward Jilel and offered a bold nod. He took a seat in the first officer's chair, opened the central console, and began tapping away. “Captain Jilel, I always like to have a command or security officer with a penchant for administration or record keeping as an attaché. Anyone you think might be a good fit to work with me?”

Jilel thought for a moment. “Lieutenant Commander T’Lar is a first contact specialist that I’ve trusted in the past for straight information with unbiased advice. I can’t think of a better attaché for this situation.”

“Great.” Nic stopped to lock eyes with Jilil. He said sotto voce, “Thanks for this, sir. It means a lot.”

Jilel smiled, “Welcome to the family, Nic.”

Chapter 7



Setu was a verdant Class-M planet, with a surface area that was approximately 60 percent ocean, with two large continents, Telesh (the northern continent) and Boka (the southern continent), and thousands of islands of varying sizes. Telesh was home to the planet's capital city, Perro, as well as many of the mining, processing, and manufacturing industries. Boka was somewhat warmer than its northern cousin and boasted three of the four major planetary universities and the shipyards that were building and launching new spacecraft into orbit.

Setu had two moons. The larger and more distant, Koro, was uninhabited but rich in heavy ores and was expected to be occupied and mined in the near future. The smaller and closer moon, Obela, was lighter in resources but expected to host the first permanent off-world Akaru settlement within the decade.

The away teams from *Pioneer* came together in Perro and made their way to the assigned diplomatic location. Captain Jilel, Commander Sanada, Lieutenant James, Ensign Issus, Officer Chen, and the three doctors—Ga, Simon, and Akeakamai—arrived. They soaked in the alien world. Their eagerness to learn was apparent.

Commander Mauti and her senior officers were waiting in a wide, tiled plaza ringed in tall pillars. Each pillar was covered in finely-detailed glyphs and iconography. It was clear they were in a section of a much larger complex of buildings and pillared halls and courtyards. On the warm breeze, they caught a whiff of pungent incense and heard faint chimes, such as from bells or small cymbals. The overall impression was that this may be a religious facility of some form.

Mauti smiled and offered both hands in greeting. "Welcome to Setu, my friends. Akaru'bak Chiel has prepared a welcoming space for you."

Mauti led them into the large, open entrance to the palace, and turned left down a wide corridor that provided a welcome break from the heat outside. She led the officers into a square courtyard that had a small pool of water in the center. Blue flowers floated in the slowly-circulating water. Many thick cushions, embroidered with extreme care, were scattered around the courtyard. Mauti invited the away team to a cluster of cushions and took a seat along with her senior officers. Various small serving robots appeared, floating on anti-grav units, serving small bites and drinks of various hues in clear glasses. Mauti was the first to raise her glass to the group.

"Let me be the first to thank the crew of *Pioneer*. Without them, we would have been stranded, at the mercy of the Pinwheel, cast into despair and hopelessness. But like a shining star piercing the veil of night, your crew came from depths of the Expanse to provide rescue, succor, and comfort. Give honor to those of the *Pioneer*."

Applaud filled the palace chamber.

As the crowd's appreciative response Lieutenant James slapped Lieutenant Simon's shoulder. "Check this out," he said surreptitiously, pointing to one of the server robots.

"What is it?" Chad asked.

"The gifts of Iryax are the gifts that keep on giving," Franklin explained, pointing to the telltale blue energy filaments visible on the base of the drones, marking their derivation from Tilikaal technology. "An advanced civilization rose and fell to bring you this cocktail," he added, taking another swig.

Sanada walked over noticing Franklin's glee. She sipped her refreshment. "You look elated. Not nervous at all, eh? What's got you all excited, Franklin?"

Franklin grinned. "I just have this feeling," he explained, his eyes searching the room. "Like we're close to something. Iryax, and maybe those close to them, have answers. A new perspective on everything we've been mixed-up in since the very beginning." He eyed some of the nearby Akaru. "Wanna' mingle?" he asked Sanada.

Kotaru smiled. She would never admit to being charmed by the lieutenant but his enthusiasm was infectious. She laughed out loud. "Okay. Let's mingle." She motioned for him to lead the way and side-eyes Chad Simon in the process.

Officer Chen, *Pioneer's* intelligence specialist, approached Captain Jilel. "Quite a planet, eh, Captain? Anything in particular that you want me to investigate while we're here?"

"More than anything, I want to know if this Iryax is Tredik, and why they've chosen the Akaru to bestow their gifts upon. If my suspicions are correct, Iryax isn't going to be overly happy to see us."

Chen pressed on. "The history buff in me is trying to figure out how the Romulans and Vulcans are involved. That didn't catch your attention, sir?"

Jilel nodded. “Very much so, and the scientist in me is desperately curious about it. If we can learn more about that, we do so; but Tredik poses the greater threat.”

“The Akura claim to have a recorded history 7,500 years long. That predates the separation of Romulans from Vulcan, doesn’t it?” Chen asked.

“It does, though our history prior to that is admittedly patchy at best because of the nature of the sundering. I doubt even the Vulcans could say there wasn’t some group that left before that,” Jilel replied.

Chen shook his head as Dr. Ga walked over into the conversation. “Still doesn’t make sense. The Romulans are a genetic divergence from Vulcans. Dr. Ga, your medical scans indicated that this offshoot is post-separation. Your models suggested that this branch indicates that these Vulcans and Romulans came together at a later date. Could it have something to do with that third strand of mystery DNA?”

“Logic would dictate such a possibility since we have yet to disprove it,” Ga responded.

“Yet another mystery to solve,” Chen said.

Issus for her part was talking to people about one of her favorite subjects, theology. While getting information about Iryax was a useful side effect, she enjoyed the conversations on their own.

Mauti engaged in a conversation with *Pioneer’s* chief security officer. “So, if I understand you correctly, it was entirely possible that you ascended into a type of godhood if your people were still an empire?”

Issus considered. “Not for as long as my mother held the throne. But, yes, a form of godhood as you understand it. Many rulers throughout various species have proclaimed themselves to be gods. One of the important aspects of the Separa is our religion and a ruler that must unite the temporal and spiritual needs of the people. However, I would be under our primary God, Naga’shun. Naga’shun is not a ruler to impose her will on others. She instead acts as a sort of ideal example and constant goad to greater things. Your sense of the divine is different than ours though. I would not be considered Divine to us. Divinity is not something to be grasped, to be used for your own advantage. Rather, the divinity presents itself in the nature of a trickster, or jester, humbling itself to provide enlightenment for others. How does your God’s divinity manifest?”

“Iryax is our leader. He is Ageless. His origin is shrouded in mystery. Is he our god?” Mauti pondered her own question. “Does he demand worship? He is our sole ruler and leader of our faith. But he or the ruling religious class—the Akaru’bak—do not enforce participation in religious events. Perhaps a pilgrimage to Ewyn Khar. You could learn more about the mysteries of our origin.”

Issus lit up a little bit at the mention of a pilgrimage. There were many kinds of pilgrimages, some taken individually to meditate on the purpose and destination, others joyful and completed in the company of strangers who would over the course of the journey become friends. “I would be most honored to go on a pilgrimage to Ewyn Khar if my stay allows me the flexibility. Although when it comes to godhood, I think many religions would view God as the object of their worship. Is Iryax

the object of your worship? Alternatively, other religions view gods as being more akin to 'large people' who must be placated or enticed with offerings. What do you think of these views?"

The Akuran commander gave the question some thought. "Iryax only asks us to prepare for life off of Akura. The Iryax is confident and comfortable in their combined role of parent figure, supreme judge, and religious icon of the Akaru. They are eager to meet visitors to Setu and learn of their worlds and capabilities. But they have never claimed the title of god."

"The Bajorans have their Prophets, which they do not see as gods but rather as messengers, as the object of their religion. Perhaps it would be helpful to reflect on their observations. What sort of life does Iryax tell you to prepare for? Colonization? A life on ships?" Issus asked.

"In recent years, a number of enterprising merchants have braved the Expanse's spatial phenomena to travel to Setu and trade with the People. The Iryax, aware that regular visits from off-worlders will only continue to increase, authorized Setu industries to accelerate the development of warp capability and associated spinoff technologies for defensive shielding and weaponry and approved the designs of the first space-worthy Akaru vessel, the *Iryax*-class frigate. The first six ships of the class departed the Iryax Shipyards on the southern continent a few years ago and have made remarkable strides in mapping the Setu system as well as several nearby planetary systems and spatial phenomena."

"What other spatial phenomena have you mapped? Knowing about them might be helpful for our own maps," Issus suggested.

"I'll be glad to share," Mauti said.

Simon was listening in to Issus and the Akaru's conversations from a few steps away. He moved into the conversation and offered his own observation. "Hm. Recent years. So your people went from a non space faring society to a fully warp capable one in a few years?" Simon was both incredulous and impressed in this achievement if true. This is why Chad gave up a promising career on Earth and joined Starfleet.

Mauti corrected the counselor. "Iryax wanted to make sure we were ready. They have guided our hand for over 7,000 years. Once it was his will, we went about the task most efficiently, as we do with all things. What is so strange about that?"

Issus nodded in agreement with Mauti. "Unlike with natural technological development, Iryax knew what would be involved with building such things and would be able to lay the foundations for it more efficiently than if the principles were discovered without knowing what they will be in advance. In many ways, their technological development is closer to a colony."

Just then, a tall woman dressed in flowing cobalt-blue robes, embroidered in silver, swept into the courtyard, followed by a pair of aides carrying datapads. Commander Mauti turned and bowed to the robed woman, who spread out her arms in a welcoming gesture. "Welcome to Setu, and to the Olan Khar, the center of our government and the residence of our ruler, Iryax Nedaon the Ageless. I am Akaru'bak Chiel, governor of this province and your host. How have you enjoyed your visit thus far?"

Ga kept his expression passive. "It has been most informative, Akaru'bak, thank you. We are looking forward to learning more about your culture and people."

Chiel found a cushion and took a seat among the away team, giving them each an open and curious look. Her aides likewise took seats nearby, though they avoided the food and drink in favor of recording whatever the visitors would share.

“Tell me more about where you come from? You are quite the menagerie of lifeforms,” the Akaru’bak stated.

“We are all from different worlds. I was born on Essia, a long way from here. Many of our crew are from Earth and its colonies. Some are from Vulcan and Romulus. Our Chief Science Officer is from Tellar. I could go on, but we would be here a long time. The Federation is made up of many different species who have joined together,” Issus explained.

“Does this Federation conquer worlds?” she asked.

“We do not,” Dr. Ga answered. “We engage in trade, diplomacy, and mutual defense; but do not conquer. Those who are part of the Federation are there by choice.”

Chiel directed her next comment back to Dr. Ga. “Ah. You, too, are an empath.” He could feel her creeping in. “I sense much anticipation from many in your away team—more than just curiosity at meeting a new species. What is it that you are truly seeking here? What is your endgame?”

Ga reinforced his mental discipline, but replied. “We have encountered technology like yours in the Expanse during our travels, but on a much larger scale. It has caused problems in the past and we are seeking to better understand it,” he replied, not bothering to hide that truth.

“I sense you are telling the truth. Captain Jilel, I would like to offer your officers accommodations in the palace for the evening, an invitation you are welcome to accept or decline. You will find our levels of personal care and hospitality unrivaled.” The Akura’bak added, “Also, I sense much curiosity from some of our citizens regarding your vessel. They would like to study how you work and live. We would be happy to provide supplies or satisfy any other needs you may have.”

Jilel bowed slightly at the waist in a gesture of gratitude. “You are most generous, Akura’bak. We will gratefully accept your generous offer. If you will permit, I will inform my wife and have her join me here. As for satisfying curiosity about our ship, certain tours can be arranged for small groups to observe life on board our vessel.”

Sanada said, “I will see to the tours aboard ship, Captain. Perhaps their offer of supplies might assist us with some of our...projects.”

“Very good, Number One,” Jilel agreed. “Dr. Ga, one of you three doctors should probably return to the ship as well. Sickbay is alright for now, but I’d feel better if one of you is there.”

Ga nodded. “I will allow the others to experience Akura hospitality and return to my duties with your permission.”

"Of course."

“I think I want to stay here and experience more of their culture, sirs,” Issus offered.

Jilel smiled. “I expected you might. Please inform your assistant that you’ll be remaining here and to coordinate with Commander Sanada in regards to the tours.”

Franklin approached the captain hesitantly. The galaxium device repairs needed his help, and work was needed to undo the damage he'd done to the Salaman MadreK program. But fate had intervened, putting the Akaru and the deeper mysteries of the Tilikaal and their Assessor allies in their path. "Captain, I'd like to remain here if at all possible."

Jilel nodded. "Granted, Franklin," he said, figuring he knew what was on the younger man's mind.

Chapter 8

Commodore Torres spotted Amon Trask in the *Jamshid al-Kashi's* cozy mess hall. The area was fairly crowded. Alpha team had just ended their duty shift. The amazing colors of the Expanse painted the windows of the room casting everyone in rainbow colors. Amon was reading something on a PADD as he sipped a beverage. He sat alone. B'Elanna approached.

"May I?" she asked, referring to the empathy seat across from him.

"I cannot stop you, Captain," Amon said before he smiled. "But I appreciate your gesture. What problem would you like me to solve next?"

B'Elanna sighed then sat down. "What are you working on?" she asked, pointing at the PADD.

"I'm currently extrapolating what data we have on the Washboard effect to see if a world engine may have caused it by using vacuum energy. Just a thought experiment really. Trying to search for a power source that isn't a star."

"Quite the theory. You would be postulating that the effects in the Expanse are completely unnatural—all an after effect of world engine technology. That's saying a lot. What proof do you have?"

"With the number of species making their way out here, I assume most of what we see is either directly or indirectly due to the work of living beings. No proof really, just something I like to dabble with in my free time," the scientist said.

Torres squinted her eyes. "I have to ask. Do you worry about your brother? He has been missing for months."

"I miss Desmond and hope he isn't suffering. He is the embodiment of Starfleet. If he isn't found, I know that he went down for what he cared about more than anything else."

"And what do you care about?"

"I care about many things, I think. It is more challenging for me to understand what that means than for most people. But my work, my peers, and my family are special. I think of them often. I even miss them when separated for an extended time. That is the chemical response for caring, right?"

Torres laughed out loud. "Yes. Amon, it is. You so remind me of—"

"Bridge to Commodore Torres."

She tapped her badge. "Go ahead."

"We just picked up a class-M moon. We will be in close survey range in six minutes. What's more, we are detecting a tetryon spike. Can't make much more of it."

Torres looked at Amon signaling for him to come. "On my way."

Moments later, they were on the bridge. Amon headed for the science station.

Torres asked, "Why didn't long range sensors detect this moon?"

Torres' Human first officer shook his head. "Can't be sure. We were trying to figure it out."

"Dr. Trask, scan the moon. Can you figure out why it just popped up on sensors?" Torres took a seat in the command chair.

Amon stared at the readings. There was no cloak field but something about the gravitational bend of space in this region of the Expanse made it so that sensors could not pick up the moon. The tetryon spike was coming from a location on a mountain range to the extreme south. The repetitive nature of the spike indicated something technological in nature. He also picked up one life sign.

"Captain, there appears to be gravitational eddies that are distorting our sensor images," Amon said. "It's possible the moon was hidden behind one. As far as the tetryons go, they are emanating from a peak on the moon. There is one life sign."

Torres signaled for the communications officer to hail them.

"No response, ma'am," they returned.

Her brain went to work. She checked her console, completing a standard planetary scan to determine atmospheric conditions. She stood from her chair. She tapped her combadge. "Dr. Bedford, report to transporter room one. Lieutenant Trask. Mr. Odo. You're with me. Commander Corea, you have the bridge." She began to exit the bridge with her chief science officer and the Changeling security officer in tow.

Amon paused, off guard. He'd never been on a rescue mission before. Those heroic things were what made his brother excel at, not him.

"Yes, captain," the science officer said as he grabbed a tricorder. *Try not to be a liability down there. You'll be back to your work in a few hours,* Amon thought to himself as both of his thumbs pressed deeply into the balls of his hands.

Four figures materialized on the hot, bright, rocky, mountainous moon.

Dr. Bedford pulled out his medical tricorder as Torres and Odo positioned themselves back to back and surveyed the area.

After a moment, Amon realized he should be scanning too. He pulled out his tricorder and set to work. His familiarity with tetryons paid off after a short time. He locked onto the tetryon spike. It was a short hike up the mountain 300 meters from their current location.

"Captain. This mountain is the origin point. Three hundred meters up the face here," Amon noted.

"Let's go. Odo, take point. Amon, any idea what we may find?"

“I know of fifty-four man-made objects that produce tetryons, as well as a few dozen natural phenomena that do so,” Amon confidently assured before seeing his captain staring at him. He then cleared his throat and continued. “Uh, not really sure, sir. The tetryons have blinded our scans to specifics. There’s a life form, but not sure what kind.”

The trek took the quartet up the mountain. It ended at the mouth of a cave.

“A cave. Of course.” The brown-skinned doctor scanned. “The life sign is definitely coming from there.”

“Allow me.” Odo cautiously entered the cave.

Amon stayed fixated on his tricorder. In addition to tetryons he was picking up the presence of metals and complex polymers indicative of advanced technology.

Torres had her tricorder out too. “Are you seeing what I’m seeing?”

“Advanced technology would make sense when discussing tetryon creation,” Amon said. “The question is, who made it?”

Odo’s voice came from inside the cave. “Commodore! Doctor! Hurry!”

Torres and Bedford gave each other a quick glance and rushed in.

Amon’s heart raced and he started to breathe heavily. It had been years since he last had a full on anxiety attack and he felt his flight response tingling. *If I die, the mysteries of the Expanse will never get solved*, he thought to himself as he stood there. The anxiety wave passed over Amon as he took several deep breaths and was able to think clearly. *Some answers may be in there*, he thought. And, without fully realizing it, his feet were taking him toward the cave.

His nose assessed the situation before his eyes had time to adjust. The smell was putrid like stepping into a latrine. His eyes instantly watered and he sneezed and gagged on reflex. He couldn’t imagine how the others could do anything but vomit. But soon his logical mind kicked in, blaming Torres’ Klingon constitution, Odo’s Changeling abilities, and Bedford’s medical experience for their ability to work unhindered. While he glimpsed an emancipated alien in the corner to which Bedford rushed to attend, his attention locked onto a large computer that sat in the cave. It was obviously Tilikaal in design, its blue etching pulsating weakly through etched veins on its surface.

Amon shut out his senses and immediately began scanning the equipment. The last five years of his life spent studying reports about Tilikaal technology would be nothing compared to actually interacting with it. He scanned the machine with the tricorder as he overheard the conversation happening behind him.

“He’s barely alive.”

“What species?”

“Nothing we’ve encountered before. But the genetic markers indicate that he is not from our galaxy.”

“Like so many of the other Shackleton species you’ve been cataloging, Doctor.”

“Could he be Tilikaal?”

“There is a blue tint to the skin. Faded horribly due to malnutrition and age. I’m detecting cellular degradation due to long-term exposure to radiation poisoning too. Hard to tell what kind though.”

Amon knew what kind. The computer’s batteries were tossing off trace amounts of chroniton and tetryon radiation along with a steady amount of leptons.

“Can you revive him?”

“I—I’m not sure.”

“It would appear this piece of tech is releasing more than just tetryons, Captain,” Amon reported. “I’m also detecting chornitons and leptons. Both can be fatal with prolonged exposure.”

“Is it safe to move him,” Torres asked Dr. Bedford.

“I don’t think so. Best I can do is revive him.”

Amon saw that one program had been recently activated—the one that sent the tetryon spike. “It looks like this device sent the tetryon spike, perhaps as a signal beacon, Captain.”

Torres looked back and forth between the computer and the alien. She signaled for the doctor to revive him. “Amon, why don’t you take the lead in asking the questions?”

Amon visually winced then pressed his fingers to his forehead, “Yes, Captain. As long as I can have a few minutes with this device before we head back to the ship.”

The scientist put away his tricorder and walked over to the being sprawled out before them. The hiss of the hypospray was followed by the alien opening its eyes and emitting a hurried gasp. Amon put out his hands in front of himself to show they were empty. He then gestured to the others to back away. The scientist then brought his hands down by his sides, palms facing the alien.

The alien said nothing. Only its eyes moved, taking in the four figures.

“What is he doing?” Odo whispered to Torres.

“I have no idea,” was her reply.

Amon tapped his chest with two fingers and softly said, “Amon.” The scientist said over his shoulder, “Somebody, pull up the readout of the tetryon pulse on a tricorder.” He then outstretched his hand to the team, awaiting what he asked for.

The voice that came forth from the alien was weak and cracked. “...take the...processor. Don’t allow the...Assessors to have it.”

Torres handed Amon the tricorder with the readout.

“...it tracks their machinations...” the old being said.

“Our translators apparently work with your language. Do you understand me?” Amon asked.

“Yes. Who...are...you?” he exhaled.

Bedford scanned the being as they spoke. He nodded to Torres. The alien’s life signs were dropping.

“We represent the United Federation of Planets. We detected your tetryon surge,” Amon replied. “These Assessors. Do they know about the processor?”

“They search for it. I was assigned...as Keeper to the processor. Separated it from...the guidance unit. Need the processor to program the devices. To find...the last of the Tilikaal.”

Torres jumped in. “What devices? Do you mean the galaxium devices?”

“...yes...”

“Ma’am, his pulmonary system is crashing. We have minutes.” The doctor closed his tricorder.

Amon’s eyes widened. “If the Assessors find us, how do we stop them?”

The question caused the alien to lock eyes with Amon, an evident horror washed over his already decrepit countenance. “...only one force can stop Assessors. The solution is as bad as the problem.” He took in a painful breath. “Hehdi.”

The name sent shudders through Torres. She backed up and held herself as if a wave of cold had come over her.

“Then we will avoid the Assessors and find the rest of your people,” Amon said. “Where do the world engines get their power?”

“Only the power of a—”

The alien’s body suddenly jerked.

“Cardiac arrest,” Bedford said as he administered another shot from the hypospray. “I—I don’t know enough about his physiology.”

Amon whispered something to himself and then spoke up. “Captain, I don’t have to tell you how important this find is. I must have my team begin analysis immediately.”

Torres snapped herself out of the shock. Her professionalism came to the fore. She studied the computer. “I agree. Huge find. Can’t transport the computer due to the tetryons coming from the thing—like the galaxium device. It might fit in a shuttle.” She turned back to the alien. “Please, I thought the Assessors protect the Tilikaal. How did you come to be here? Where can we find others of your kind to talk to?”

The alien offered no response. Just the stark reality of death.

Chapter 9

Sanada, Issus, and Chad Simon had been granted a pass to Ewyn Khar (yew-in car), a sprawling complex of hypostyle halls, temples, and facilities spread across nearly 50 kilometers, right next door to Setu's capital city, Perro. The entire complex was dedicated to the history, life, and leadership of the Iryax, though it was rumored that some of the older sections of the complex were dedicated to a more ancient being or group of beings who may have resided on or visited the planet in the distant past.

The three Starfleet officers studied the temple each from their own distinct perspective.

Kotaru came next to Issus as Chad perused one particular wall etching. "What are you thinking, Ensign?"

Issus was impressed. "I haven't been in a religious complex this size in...a long time. The history is fascinating as are the symbology and rites. However, it's not my religion. It makes me homesick in a way. A part of me is wishing I had decided to go with the ship going to Separa space," Issus said honestly.

Sanada turned away from the wall markings and faced Issus. "I know it has been hard on you. I can't imagine how hard that decision was, leaving one's people behind. Going it alone. And, I admit, I've been hard on you. You were a top-ranking official in the Hegemony. Now, you are starting out in Starfleet. That is a lot of change in a short amount of time."

Issus took in what the XO said, not sure if it was an apology or a confession.

Sanada kept her eyes on Issus wondering how she might respond.

"At each step each decision has been the one that made the most sense at the time. We can't go back and retrace those steps with knowledge of what the future holds."

"That last statement is a little deep for me. I am not sure what you mean." Sanada waved it off. "I know that our cultures are very different. We communicate differently. Perhaps I can make more of an effort to understand your poetic language. Sometimes—especially in critical times—I need you to speak plainly. It is more efficient. Right now, I am asking my security officer if she feels there is an impending threat—" She motioned to the wall etchings. "—based on what you observe here. And 'I have no idea' is an acceptable answer, not a sign of weakness, Ensign."

Issus thought about the commander's first statement. "Perhaps I underestimated how much of a change I could take. The Separa had always been about change, but it was a slow, gradual, change over thousands of years. Each step we took to grow our empire—to alter our genetics and expand the Garden—was done deliberately. Starfleet moves at a much faster pace." The security chief looked back at the etchings. She placed her right hand on one. "I see these etchings and they tell of an ancient being or beings, perhaps the Tilikaal, who came to this world long ago. I see a similarity with the Separa."

"How so?" Sanada said as she turned her attention back to the etchings.

"Well-designed plans," Issus remarked. "All around us we see the results, but what was it all for? How did the Romulan/Vulcans get involved? Why has their civilization evolved for over 7,500

years when we know that the Reunification movement is only 200 years old? If we can figure out the why, then we will better understand the end of the matter.”

“Ah. Retracing the past to get a better understanding of the future.” The first officer finally understood. She saw Chad Simon as he studied a piece of art resembling Iryax Nadeon. “Counselor, what’s your take on all of this?”

The counselor was paying close attention to the images and his own thoughts. His enjoyment in a discovery made him totally preoccupied with it. He then heard Sanada. “My take. Well, it is fascinating. I have never seen anything like this before. The Iryax certainly appears ageless and immortal, like most religious beings.” Simon paused for a moment then continued. “But unlike other religious figures in other worlds, the image changes based on the culture that interprets it, but not this Iryax Nadeon. They remain very consistent.”

“Take a guess,” the first officer prompted. “What do you think is going on?”

“I think we need to take this Nadeon at face value, that they are ageless as they proclaim. In this case, we need to tread carefully as it would mean this being has been leading these people for many thousands of years.” Simon postulated. He then continued. “How a being such as this would think may be beyond my understanding.”

Sanada smirked. “Wouldn’t it be nice for once to get fed the answer at the beginning of a mission as opposed to the end?”

“Now that would be something, but we both know life doesn’t work that way for us lesser beings,” Simon concluded with the last bit dripping in sarcasm.

Athena stood with Jilel near the window that overlooked Setu’s capital city. They had been given lavish accommodations.

“My goodness,” the captain’s pregnant wife remarked. “The hospitality here has been better than Baradisia and Hogg combined. For every horrible thing we encounter, it seems like the blessings balance it out.” She rubbed her belly. She looked at Jilel. “You are tense.”

He smiled at her warmly, feeling the now-familiar caress of her mind touch his. “I’m always tense in situations like this. I guess I’m just waiting for the next shoe to drop. Talak would say it’s a reaction to mental and emotional trauma over the last two years, I’m sure.”

“It is. But think of it this way. We are, once again, close to home. This is due to your leadership. You have taught Starfleet so much about putting trust in someone different and overcoming fears and biases. You should feel proud.”

Jilel put his hand over hers on her belly. “And you have taught me so much about life and myself. All of my accomplishments pale in comparison, and I love you more every day for it,” he told her softly, his eyes shining with the emotion that was his people’s hallmark.

“I’ve been thinking more about his name. I’m not sure I like Liam.”

“What would you like to name him?”

“I’m not sure. Liam is so Human. It doesn’t represent my Betazoid side. And it surely doesn’t honor your Romulan heritage.” Her face became serious. “To be honest, I don’t think the Humans have treated you all that well. To give our child one of their names—”

Jilel nodded. “I understand, *e’lev*. It does leave a bitter taste in the mouth now. What about Tam? Isn’t that your grandfather’s name?”

She hugged Jilel. “Why don’t we not rush the name. Let’s talk it over more.” She pulled away. “Back to business, though. I know you brought me down here for more than hugs and kisses. What’s my role on this mission?”

Jilel smirked. “As much as I’d love *that* to be our only mission for once, we need someone that can sense hidden or nuanced communications in our meeting with this being. I’m afraid of missing anything dangerous that could threaten our people or ship.”

“I sense that all of the Akaran have inherent mental powers,” Athena said as she moved to the window and looked down on the street. “Jilel, how did all of this come to be? I checked their records. They have been here for over seven millennia.”

He shook his head, “I don’t know. Orim thinks it’s a merging of two races in the past, perhaps a proto-Vulcan race and an amphibious humanoid race.”

“How long has the Romulan Empire been in existence?”

“Not quite two thousand years,” Jilel replied. “By Federation reckoning, the dispersion happened in Earth’s fourth century of the Common Era.”

“So these Romulans and Vulcans came together 5,000 years before the Empire was in existence?” She stared at her husband waiting for him to do the math or provide an answer.

He felt his head spin again with the possibilities and implications. “I can’t explain it. The physical evidence is right here, but there’s nothing to show how that five-thousand year gap was bridged,” he admitted. “Maybe that’s a question we’ll have answered in this meeting.”

Athena nodded her head. “It should be interesting.”

The *Tuxedo*’s engines were screaming. Hurricane level winds whipped against the hull. Heavy particulates in the atmosphere threatened to clog thruster intake valves. They were flying blind, relying only on sensors to lock in on the *Chariot*’s location.

Nalanid had strapped himself into the co-pilot’s seat as shuttles had sensible restraints in opposition to starships and their lack thereof. He was looking at the wireframe of the shuttle on sensors and shaking his head. “Still no response and the life sign of Ms. Moshe is weak and fading. Judging by the metabolic reactions, I can detect the atmosphere is low in oxygen. And judging by the non-standard landing position the shuttle is in, I have to assume the storm flipped the shuttle and incapacitated Ms. Moshe.”

“Is there a way we could drop some pattern enhancers to help beam her out?” the Romulan asked.

“That’s possible, yes. It would also be the least dangerous option, but one with the least chance of success.” Nalanid closed his eyes and thought through the possibilities. “Pattern enhancers being dropped. Pattern enhancers being placed after we land and exit to place them with some accuracy. Landing and digging her out. Landing and flying the shuttle out. Regardless, she needs oxygen soon.”

Decisions had to be made and none of them sounded optimal. Nalanid was the commanding officer. Torpon waited for orders. Greatest chance of success. Best chance at saving a life. Torpon was competent. Nalanid nodded.

“Mr. Torpon, could you set *Tuxedo* down right next to *Chariot* please? I’ll don an environmental suit and see if I can deliver medical aid to Ms. Moshe. If it’s just a minor injury, she may be able to right the shuttle on her own and then we’ll have two shuttles to work with in our rescue.”

Torpon fought to keep the shuttle in the air and from rolling in the torrential atmosphere. “I can’t get the angle to land, Mr. Nalanid. These winds keep pushing the nose up. Either we crash or find another way.”

“Just hold her steady.” Nalanid unbuckled from his seat and went to the emergency locker, pulling out an EVA suit and an emergency medical kit. “Oh, and try to get close enough to the ground so that when I jump out I don’t break my legs. We don’t want an extra person to rescue.”

“Jump out? Are you crazy? You’re going to get yourself killed!” Torpon exclaimed.

“I can’t leave Ms. Moshe to die from lack of oxygen. I won’t.” He stopped as he saw the inspection panel he’d taken the screw out of previously and the system that it contained. “Hm. I wonder if anyone in Starfleet has ever shunted a transporter beam through a ship’s navigational deflector. It’d knock away the particulate matter interfering with the transporter and likely clear up the signal because of it.”

“I could certainly try making adjustments to try that. The key would be to *not* simultany disperse the particle beam as well.” Torpon began running the calculations.

Nalanid started pulling the plate off, smiling that he saved a few moments from not replacing the screw. “We could make those adjustments. We might not be able to retrieve the shuttle, but if we do get Ms. Moshe back, I’m sure my wife will thank you for saving me the inevitable time spent in sickbay having my shin bones rebuilt.”

Madrek slumped back against the rock face, gulping oxygen.

“You’ll have to give me a moment, Dr. Dregg,” he panted. “That tunnel saved our lives. But even you must admit that the grade was a bit much! Especially dragging this,” he said, glancing at the magnetic belt which carried a full complement of rubindium ore. “Fear not. I’m in no way deprecating your work. Finding that exposed vein of ore along the way was a masterstroke. I’ll be singing your praises in my report when—if –we return to *Pioneer*.” He took in another deep breath and stood.

He staggered forward, gazing into the storm. Dr. Dregg rumbled a stream of information his way. “I see,” he replied. “Thank you.”

“*Tuxedo*,” he intoned, activating his comms. “Dr. Nalanid. Mr. Torpon. I hope you read this. Thanks to Dr. Dregg, I am pleased to report we are now on the surface. We’ve taken shelter in the lee of an overhang and our condition is stable.” He took another breath as the wind whipped across his faceplate.

Nalanid and Torpon paused to listen inside the wind-whipped type-9.

“My geo-savvy colleague informs me that I am presently staring five degrees south of magnetic west, in the likely direction the Chariot would have been carried. Thus, though the view from here is all violent abyssal winds, with luck I am vaguely gazing in your direction as I make this report. I fear there is little else I can do but conserve oxygen. I am not a praying man, but I am praying now. May luck and fortune go with you. May your training and our fragile Starfleet shuttlecraft sustain you. I hope against hope that you can save crewman Ginoss and that we may depart this harsh planet with our lives. If not, I will try to stave off regret, and console myself that we have met our ends in service, and in the company of friends.”

Madrek checked his air one more time. Four hours left. His lungs were already beginning to burn though, a mixture of exhaustion and deprivation. He honestly had never been in such a perilous position in his life. Yet, he could only think about Moshe and failing the crew of the *Pioneer*.

Franklin James and Phillip Chen had hunkered down in their lavish quarters. Though there was a plethora of fun activities in which to partake on Setu, both were more concerned with unraveling the mysteries of the planet's technology. Thus, they stayed up all night pouring over any and every document about Setu technology that they could get their hands on. They had already deduced that Akaru power systems generated clean energy similar to Federation technology, though much more efficiently. Also, all their power distribution systems appeared to carry Tilikaal influence in micro-design elements.

“I was shocked to find the Tilikaal power relays on the *Starward*,” said Franklin. He was looking over a schematic of a circuit, held in place on the well-appointed table by empty beverage containers. “But what really blew my mind? Seeing the blue filaments in the gosh darn cocktail server robot.” He shot an enigmatic look at the intelligence officer.

Chen nodded, “The technology is integrated into every aspect of their lives. It almost seems to be foundational to their society as a whole. It makes sense though, considering who their guide and protector appears to be. This being could have built this all over millenia for all we know.”

“You’re right. If Iryax is an Assessor, the origins of all this tech makes total sense,” said Franklin, pacing into the kitchen area. “What makes less sense to me is the motive.” He placed his glass onto a pad, and ice promptly appeared in it, cool water swirling around it. “I’ve been staring at these schematics for hours,” he continued. “And that’s after pouring over the Tilikaal galaxium device, trying to fix it. What, that old thing? The ice maker over there’s probably more advanced, at least in terms of circuit design. The Akaru have it all: the best the Tilikaal can offer, and I think it’s freaking me out a little.” He swigged the ice water, then sat at a stool with his forehead in his

hands. “Tilikaal tech is elusive. It’s deadly. Our own first officer almost got dismembered by a spiderbot when we dared to walk into a Tilikaal building. And Iryax just...shared it with the Akaru. Just shared all of it. You’re in intelligence, Chen. What’s Iryax’s game?”

Chen grinned. “Cult of personality maybe? Unfortunately, we know next to nothing about the Assessors in general or this Iryax in particular, so it’s almost impossible to set up any kind of a profile. We don’t know what motivates them. Were these people protecting him somehow millenia ago, and now he’s protecting them?? He shrugged.

“Their ways are mysterious, for sure,” Franklin replied. “But we have a little bit to go on. Back when we were trapped between dimensions, Ash’Tamalia speaking for all of the trapped Tilikaal manifested briefly on the *Pioneer*. She had nothing but love for the Assessors. Said they were gonna help them get back to the bodies that are supposedly waiting for them.” Franklin paced to the window, overlooking the well-ordered city. He could see his own ghostly reflection hovering just on the other side. “Let’s assume the Tilikaal and Assessors are tight. Now we have Iryax dispensing top-tier tech to a random Milky Way civilization, guiding their every step. What’s in it for Nadeon? For the Tilikaal? We know they go big. They do big things. They have unimaginable technology. What do they need with...a people?” He turned to Chen inquisitively. Suddenly, he squinted, his face hanging down in a frown as his inner gears turned. Then a big grin broke out. “Nah...” he said, dismissing an idea with a laugh. Then his face went still as the grave. “Chen, I don’t like this thought I just had,” he said, shaking his head slowly. “Not one bit. Is this what you deal with in intel? Paranoia?”

Chen laughed. “Just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they aren’t out to get you, whoever ‘they’ might be at the time.” He grew serious. “It also means you don’t dismiss any ideas that are even remotely possible. What’s in your head?”

“Jeez, Chen, you’re not even trying to talk me out of this,” said Franklin, with a tense grin.

“Ok, here’s what’s eating at me. I asked ‘What do the Tilikaal need with people?’ But when you think about it, that’s exactly what they don’t have—embodiment. They’re ghosts! And they want their lives back. And the Assessors are helping them. All this we know.” The young operations manager began to pace the lavish suite, increasingly energized. “So take a look at this place,” he said, sweeping his arm around the dwelling and the world visible out the windows. “Pretty great, huh? Luxurious. Well-ordered. A utopia. With Tilikaal tech powering everything. Forget the Akaru for a second. If you were a Tilikaal returning to bodily existence, would there be any other place more to your liking?”

Chen’s jaw dropped. “Oh my God. That sounds plausible enough to be terrifying. Grooming an entire planet to be populated by bodies willing to ascend—or whatever the hell they’ll call it—for their guides and benefactors is something I could absolutely see the Assessors’ doing.”

“Chen, you’re killing me,” said Franklin, rubbing his eyes. “Okay.” He clapped his hands. “Counterpoint. Ash’Tamalia said something about their bodies being preserved. They were stored in chambers somewhere. Said they had machinery to transfer their souls back, or something. We haven’t seen anything like that here. The Tilikaal have practically made and moved entire worlds. What the heck do they need with this one? So this can’t have anything to do with Setu, and the Akaru are just a...a...charitable side project, while they...desperately try to return to existence.” He gave Chen a pleading look.

"I don't buy it. Call me a cynic, but no one just does things without having an angle. They must stand to gain something from it, even if it's just a sense of accomplishment. The Tilikaal want something from all this, but I can't figure out what that is yet," Chen replied. "A race as advanced as they are would think they're being charitable by having the Akaru as a very willing servitor race."

"I was afraid you'd say something like that," sighed Franklin. "We better brief the Captain."

"Absolutely." Chen agreed.

Jilel, Athena, Issus, Chad, and Dr. Akeakamai were working in a conference room adjacent to the captain's guest suite. They had been going over diplomatic tactics and developing talking points.

Their discussion was interrupted by a hail from *Pioneer*.

Issus was the first to tap her combadge. "Away team here."

"This is Sanada. I wanted to provide an update on our progress with repairs up here."

"Go ahead, Number One," Jilel said.

"Their technology is just as advanced as ours. They can help us with some batteries that may help us limp along, but we are having some compatibility issues. A temp fix, but it should hold long enough for us to rendezvous with Madrek's team."

"Have the others checked in? I would love to compare notes with everyone before we plan any next steps," Simon chimed in.

Athena responded. "Lieutenant Franklin and Mr. Chen should be along shortly. They were completing some further investigation into the origin of Akuran technology."

Issus asked, "Commander Sanada, will that temporary fix enable us to use transporters?"

"It would be risky, but it's possible. It could blow out the kitbash the Akaru are proposing. No way to tell for sure until we test it."

Issus looked over the team. "I like to know all possible means of escape, just in case."

As Issus concluded, the door chime rang, revealing Lieutenant James and PO Chen.

"Captain, officers, sorry to bother you, but we felt we needed to bring something to your attention before your meeting. Something's setting off my spidey senses," Franklin said.

Everyone looked around, confused by his expression.

"Sorry, Earth reference. I'm concerned by a constellation of facts around the Akaru." Franklin took a breath and relayed the theory he and Phillip Chen had discussed. "I say all this and I realize I don't have any evidence; well, except for the fact that the Tilikaal tech Iryax has spread around this world is at least a generation ahead of what we've seen before. The Akaru are set to inherit the peak of Tilikaal achievements. Why? Minimally, they're being manipulated by Nadeon."

Maximally? They're being used to prepare a fresh world for the Tilikaal to inhabit and are gonna get culled. Mediumly—if that's a word—I fear the Akaru themselves may be instrumental for the Tilikaal's return. Paranoid, right? But, Captain..." Franklin's gaze grew fierce. "You were there when Sanada and I came out of that facility on Stoker's moon. These people will use whoever's in their path. Maybe it's jaded me. Anyway, that's what I'm afraid of."

"Are you implying that the Akaru are...fodder?" Issus asked. Her scales jittered.

Jilel's expression grew more and more grave as he listened to the two younger men. His eyes met Athena's, who reflected his concern.

"I think you may be right," he said, beginning to pace. "It's too idyllic, too perfect. The Akaru have been accelerated and manipulated, that much is clear. We just don't know the endgame yet."

Chad heard all the facts that James and Chen presented. "I think it is time to meet this Iryax Nadeon then. What do you think, Captain?"

"It's absolutely time," the captain confirmed.

Chapter 10

Captain's Log, Supplemental

“My senior officers and I were treated to good food and better conversation during our time with Akaru’bak Chiel. The Akaru are a kind and open people, who appear to be possessed of good charm and remarkable technologies. We have noted Tilikaal influence in Akaru engineering designs, though how this is possible cannot yet be determined. More worrisome, Mr. James and Mr. Chen suspect that Iryax’ motives might not be advantageous for the Akaru people in the end, but this is suspicion. We have yet to find evidence of such a claim. Perhaps our upcoming audience with the Akaru leader, Iryax Nedaon, can provide some answers.”

The away team gathered in the same courtyard for a light breakfast and then were led by Akaru’bak Chiel through another section of the palace, heavy with incense and deep drum beats. They were brought to a wide audience chamber lined with empty wooden benches. On a raised dais at the far end of the chamber stood a tall wooden throne, elegantly carved and burnished to a bright sheen. Sitting on the throne was Iryax Nedaon, a long, lean alien being who bore a clear resemblance to Assessor Tredik, though they were dressed in long, flowing cobalt-blue robes with gold embroidery.



Akaru’bak Chiel introduced the crew to the Iryax by rank and name. Upon a gesture from the Iryax, Chiel then encouraged the visitors to sit in the front row of a section of wooden seats facing

the Iryax. Chiel then moved to the back of the chamber, watching attentively. Jilel, Athena, Issus, Chad, Franklin, Phillip Chen, and Dr. Akeakamai made themselves as comfortable as possible.

“Welcome to Setu, members of Starfleet,” Iryax said. “Your good deeds have not fallen below my gaze. You have my gratitude. I hope that Setu has been to your liking.”

The ship’s counselor felt a bit of unease in the presence of the Iryax. He had never encountered the Assessor, but Nedaon was unnerving. Chad knew this was an unplaced feeling since he had something of a heated conversation with a Q before. Maybe it was an unconscious bias about the Iryax’s appearance? Chad shook it off and then continued to observe what was happening.

Athena couldn’t feel any emotions coming from the leader. She gave Jilel a glance and a slight head nod, indicating her inability to get a read on the figurehead.

He put a sense of calm in his mind, hoping that she would feel it and know he had heard her and was steady. “Thank you. We have not experienced such a welcome on our journeys thus far. Setu is a world of beauty and peace that is far too rare in the galaxy. We rendered what aid we could. It was our pleasure to do so and meet new friends in doing so.”

Iryax offered a slight bow of the head in acceptance of the captain’s words. “Setu is a world of peace. The Akura are ready to meet the galactic community. The hazards of this region of space are real. As a father worries about their child as they take their first step, so I worry about my children as they make their way into the stars. But it must happen. We must establish trade agreements and form diplomatic partnerships. Our time had come to enter the universal stage. What are your Federation’s intentions in the Expanse?”

“As they have always been: peaceful exploration, diplomacy, and the expanding of our knowledge. We welcome the Akura as friends in the galactic community,” Jilel replied.

Iryax’s eyes shifted for a fleeting moment to Akaru’bak Chiel. They then brought their gaze back to Jilel. This time, they chose to communicate telepathically to the entire group. *Akaru’bak Chiel reports that you have come across technology similar to ours during your travels.* Then they switched back to speaking vocally. “Tell me more.”

Jilel had been half-expecting some sort of psychic connection and didn’t let it rattle him. *Akaru’bak Chiel is correct in her report. It is much like your technology here, though I believe it is older* was the thought he sent in return. What he said aloud was, “Gladly. Our people are a union of many different worlds all working together for common good and common knowledge. We strive to always extend our hand in friendship to those that we meet in order to share knowledge and friendship. We do not always succeed, but we do always try.”

“The Akaru will need friends as they travel the stars. And I am happy to share any knowledge you desire to have. You and your team are brimming with curiosity.” Iryax raised their hand to indicate an open floor. “Ask your questions.”

“The Akaru seem so closely related to the Romulans, like my husband, and Vulcans, like Dr. Ga here. How can that be since their dispersion didn’t happen until thousands of years after the Akaru civilization began?” Athena asked politely.

“Time is immaterial to one such as I; another fabric of the universe that can be weaved and moved as needed, just like light and gravity,” Iryax stated. *Time, space, gravity, energy—all three*

can be manipulated to serve a greater purpose. “When they first came to this world, the Akaru were young, without a clear purpose, seeking guidance and enlightenment. I gladly gave them a purpose and weaved them into the great design. We merged together for a unified purpose. Now, they thrive. They have ascended to become something greater than the space travelers who stumbled upon this world.”

Dr. Akeakamai said, “The third strand of DNA. Could it be that of the Iryax?”

“That would explain a lot,” Chen responded under his breath.

“Captain Jilel,” Iryax asked, “your thoughts speak of Reunification. Is this not a dream come true?”

Jilel considered this. “Am I to understand that the Akaru were travelers when they came to Setu? They didn’t evolve here? How is it you found them, and why did you choose them?” His mind was full of questions.

“The Akaru originated from your region of space. They came into the what you call the Expanse escaping a failed government and unending war.” As Iryax spoke, the epic was projected into the away team’s minds. “Their ship was on its last remaining days when they foolhardily chose to cross the Endurance Divide and travel deep toward the Pinwheel in search of Ha’kiv, ancient creatures of legend that could be harvested for energy.” *They hoped to settle a world and become a utopia for their disparate groups.* “Instead, they met spatial phenomena that threatened to end their lives. Thankfully, I detected their flailing vessel and brought them to Setu where I existed alone.” *I tended to them as if they were my own children.* “I gave them purpose. Together, we built this.” Iryax raised their arms up in an expansive gesture.

Issus gave the away team a quick scan. She was trying to read body movements. She turned her attention to the Akaru in the room. The fact that they could be all communicating telepathically was unsettling. She felt like they could have a strategy, leaving her team one stop behind what they were planning—if they were planning anything at all. She kept quiet. She did not want to miss a sign, anything that might give them an advantage.

Chen had been listening to what had been said, and what wasn’t being said. “I apologize, Captain, in case this has been mentioned before in a meeting in which I wasn’t present...but, Iryax, you’ve said that your goal is friendship and sharing knowledge. You’ve also said that the Akaru need friends amongst the stars. You’ve said that you gave them purpose multiple times, but you haven’t said specifically what that purpose was.”

“Soon, my time will come to an end. The Akaru must not share the same fate.” *They must become self-sufficient.* “I prepare them for a grand destiny. What greater purpose is there but to survive...to endure...to thrive.” *They will become the masters of this wondrous technology.* “My children must continue. You must ensure that no one interferes with their destiny. They must be protected at all costs.”

Franklin had been keeping his awareness on his breath, and the sensation of his feet upon the grand chamber’s floor. He drew on a bit of childhood jiu jitsu training. He hoped to avoid bringing his suspicions about Assessor Nadeon to mind, where they might be subject to his psychic view. “What might interfere with them, Iryax?” he asked coolly.

“Those who would try to steal our technology.” *Those who would take advantage of them.* “Those who would halt their destiny—their ascension.” *I did not come this far to fail.*

Simon used all of his training to keep his thoughts in check; that Betazoid seminar was going to come in handy. “By all indications from what we have seen, you have been alive for many thousands of years. Why is now your time? What is happening that your time is ending?”

“I am dying. My body is breaking down slowly. I gave all I had—my knowledge, my very essence—to preserve all that I am.” *All that I was.*

Franklin looked away, as if in thought. He took a risk, carefully letting-in a little of the truth into his thoughts, knowing they’d be listened-to. He was deliberate in his thinking, trying to avoid conjuring their deeper suspicions. *Ascension*, he voiced inwardly. ‘Our technology.’ *Just seems so much like the Tilikaal.*

Iryax focused on Franklin. “Tell me what you know of the Tilikaal.”

“What...?” Franklin asked. He looked to Jilel as a brief confirmation, then continued. “...we’ve come into contact with artifacts like your gifts to the Akaru. We’ve associated them with a civilization known as the Tilikaal. I’ve studied these and gained some familiarity.” *He spoke of ascension*, he thought. *Does he mean for the Akaru to follow them?*

“And you know their fate?” Iryax asked.

“We do,” Jilel replied simply. “They are trapped in a pocket of subspace while their bodies are in suspended animation.”

He figured there was no point in lying to someone who could basically read one’s mind.

“You...know of their location?”

Athena could sense the wave of curiosity, elation, and excitement brimming from Iryax, though the being seemed to catch themselves and reel back their enthusiasm behind a wall of control.

“They’ve contacted us,” said Franklin aloud. “In various different ways, from inside their dimensional bubble. They’ve asked for help, and spoken of allies. Are you in a position to help them, Iryax?”

Commander Sanada walked Commander Mauti onto the bridge where Captain Nic van Asch was working near Ensign Steele at Ops.

“...and I think our system incompatibility issues will be fixable with a few more days of study,” Sanada said as she rounded to the center deck with her Akaran guest. “As long as the technology upgrades your team is providing can be quickly removed in the event of a cascade failure I see no problem with—”

A sudden beeping alert interrupted her conversation. Ensign Steele at Ops moved from running a power allocation scenario to monitoring the sensor alert.

“Ensign?” Sanada asked.

“Strange. Just detected a major tetryon flux along every subspace frequency our sensors can pick up,” Steele said as he frantically tried to monitor the spiking sensor readings.

Nic moved into Ops and studied the readouts. “All of a sudden our sensor range has expanded exponentially. It’s like someone just sent a radar pulse through the entire Expanse.”

“The telemetry is overwhelming navigational computers.” Steele sent the data to the main view screen.

Sanada pointed at a sensor reading that came from the planet. “What is that?”

Mauti was confused. “It is coming from the center of Setu.”

“I’ve seen those readings from Starfleet reports. Setu has a world engine,” van Asch remarked. “And now we are picking up a temporal differential.”

“Temporal differential?” the first officer asked as she sat down to access command controls. “My goodness. Our sensors didn’t notice before. But the tetryon spike seems to have temporarily heightened our sensor acuity. Time in this solar system is moving faster than in any other area of the Expanse.”

Lieutenant Mendon was at the science station. He saw the data and ran the calculations in his head. “For every day of natural galactic time, 37.5 days pass in this system. That would explain the rapid appearance of stars in localized space.”

“Should we inform the away team?” Steele asked.

Both van Asch and Sanada said at the same time, “Are you kidding?”

Iryax’s fingers flexed as if something tantalizing had been placed just out of reach. “For this I was destined.”

“Pioneer to *Captain Jilel*.” Sanada’s voice came through.

Jilel was squinting, still measuring Iryax’ last response. He tapped his combadge. “Go ahead.”

“Captain, I thought you should be aware we detected a sudden subspace burst of tetryon particles and EM radiation from the planet, the energy of which was directed toward a point in one of Setu’s large oceans. In addition, similar subspace bursts were detected near other planets in the Expanse. There are similarities to the tetryon filaments.”

As Sanada spoke from space, Akaru’bak Chiel approached the Iryax with a datapad and had a quiet conversation.”

“Acknowledged, Number One. Keep me apprised of any changes as soon as they happen. We’ll try to get some information down here. Jilel out.” He shared a quick look with Athena, expressing concern, but not fear. Something was happening, but he couldn’t determine if it was for good or for ill yet. “Is there anything we can do to help?” he said, hoping to gain the Iryax’ attention.

Akaru'bak Chiel waited for Iryax to give her permission to speak then stated, "Our planetary sensor network has detected an EM spike that is interacting with our planet. It contained a message."

With a wave of her hand, a blue-hued image of an ancient Tilikaal man appeared and audio played in the chambers.

"...we are here because we desire it! Do not let the others... into releasing...! Please...if you can hear my words, help me..." The message shattered into a spray of prismatic colors before ending.

Athena looked at Jilel with alarm on her face. "There because they want to be? Something is very wrong here! Why would they want to be there?"

Jilel shook his head. "I don't know," he said before looking back at the pair in front of him. "Why would they want to be there, and why would they beg us not to listen to the ones who want to be released?"

Iryax stood from their seat and all the attendants in the room did the same. The being who so resembled Assessor Tredik replied, "I am afraid I cannot answer your questions. I am not sure about the origin of this spatial phenomenon but I promise to have some of our starships and scientific community conduct research on the matter." *It would be best that you leave the matter to us.*

Franklin looked down at his tricorder. He had pulled out the tool shortly after Sanada's hail, synched with *Pioneer*, and was checking the readings himself. His eyes widened when he saw that time was passing faster on the planet than in the rest of the galaxy.

Athena's eyes darted to Franklin. She sensed his shock. Issus sensed tension rising in the room. She slid slightly closer to the captain while keeping an eye on everyone in the chamber.

Jilel inclined his head toward Iryax. "As you wish. We'll leave you to your efforts. Don't hesitate to call us if needed." *We will return to our ship.* The thought formed in his mind. He quieted the rest of his thoughts and emotions the way Athena had been teaching him to do.

Another hail from Sanada gave the away team pause. "*Captain, we have confirmed the existence of a world engine built into Setu. It is kicking off major tetryonic energy. It's acting like an amplifier throughout the Shackleton Expanse. It's possible we could hail Narendra station at this point, using the planet like a booster, though I am not sure how we would compensate for the temporal differential. And there is something else..."*

"Get on with it," Jilel said impatiently as he and the away team stood.

"The planet seems to be scanning the tetryon filaments and establishing contact. Not sure why, though. Too much data. Our computers can't keep up. The center of activity is undersea in the large ocean. Do the Akaru know the meaning of this?"

Iryax said, "You will discontinue your scans of the planet and leave the matter to us. You may go."

Jilel shared a look with his team and tapped his badge. "*Pioneer*, bring us home." He knew they'd just been ordered to leave, but held his questions for now.

“Transporters are still iffy, Captain. I advise you to utilize deGrasse Tyson .”

“No,” Iryax said as his hands rose into the air and blue veins of power began to pulse through every wall in the chamber. *Now.*

A flash of blue light and the away team disappeared before the grand audience.

“Captain? Captain, do you copy?” Amidst a busy bridge set at yellow alert and a flurry of computer warnings and sensor alerts, Sanada looked back towards Nic who stood at Ops with Ensign Steele. She was not sure why the away team did not respond. She glanced at Commander Mauti who shrugged.

A sudden flash of blue and the entire away team was on the bridge. Disbelief covered their faces along with slight awe.

“What just happened?” Mr. Chen said as took off for an auxiliary station.

Issus and Franklin broke for their stations while the remaining away team members stayed center deck.

Athena was overwhelmed by the crashing wall of emotion. “Jilel...” she started just as another flash of blue whisked Commander Mauti away.

Jilel whirled, “They’re using the world engine to either search for or communicate with the Tilikaal where they’re trapped!” He looked to Athena to see if she was alright. “There was a message just before this from a Tilikaal that said they were where they wanted to be and not to listen to those that wanted to free them.”

Another finger-snap and Franklin grumbled inwardly. *We’re playthings at their mercy, but they’re the bull in the galactic china shop.* His fingers flew over his console, trying to gain some fresh insight on what the Tilikaal technology was doing or how it was functioning. *We’re grasping at straws, but every glimpse gives us a new breadcrumb. Wow, I’m glad Iryax isn’t here,* he thought, spinning-up sensor assays, *’cause I mix a lot of metaphors...*

“I’ve got eyes on what’s happening,” he shouted. “Kind of. The time dilation’s coming from the world engine inside Setu. But I can’t see too deep. There’s a chroniton/tetryon radiation screen I can’t penetrate. It’s coming from underwater, putting it on screen now.”

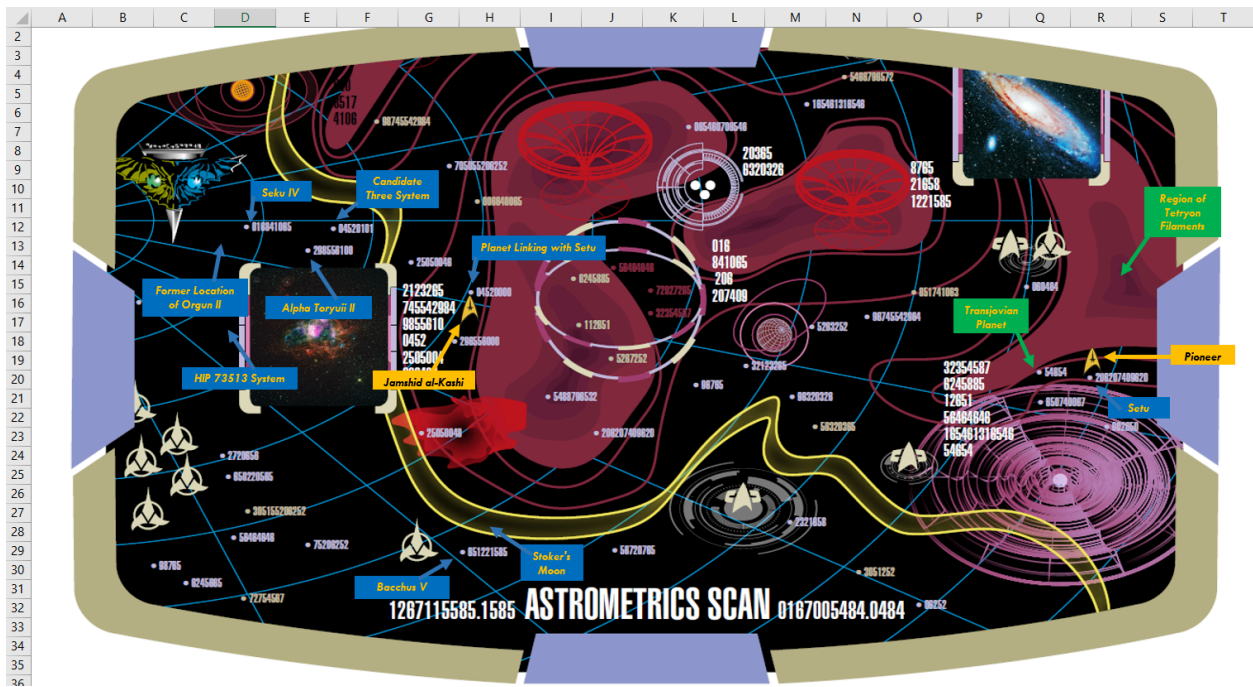
A corner of the *Pioneer’s* viewscreen showed an abstract rendering of an undersea facility, glowing blue lines disappearing deep under the sea floor.

“There’s some kind of control tower emitting all this radiation. Tilikaal tech signatures, cables heading underground presumably towards the world engine. Whatever’s happening, the world’s wired for this. It’s doing what it was designed to do.”

“Like a giant galaxium device.” Jilel breathed, fascinated by the lieutenant’s report. “With them searching the filaments, could they be looking for a way to transport the Tilikaal bodies and essence here to be joined again?”

“Could be, Captain,” said Franklin. “I haven’t deciphered the signal, but there’s clearly data being exchanged. Setu’s engine’s made contact with some kind of sister world, about 100 light years to the galactic west. But it’s doing more work than that. It’s mapping local tetryonic filaments, the same kind of fractures that—that the Tilikaal lie behind? ...that the *Pioneer* went through? ...that Trask was lost in?—that we’ve, uh, been dealing with,” said Franklin.

“Bring up a map of what we’ve got on the Expanse,” Jilel instructed. “I want to see if we’ve been to this target world before.”



“Looks like not,” Sanada commented.

“It’s a moon,” said Franklin. “Basic planetary survey has it as Class M. No coarse markers for habitation or civilization.”

“Look. There, in orbit,” said Sanada. “That’s a Starfleet transponder signature.”

“Whoa,” said Franklin. “You’re right. It identifies as the *Jamshid al-Kashi*.”

Nic nearly bounded out of his skin. He abandoned Ops and arrived at the center deck next to Jilel. “A Starfleet vessel! We have to hail them! We need to get a message to Starfleet. Inform them of what we found. This world engine, this planet, has all the answers we are looking for. We can’t just let them boot us off the planet, Captain. They know too much! I am sure of it!”

“I wasn’t planning on it, Captain. We’re staying until we get some answers. In the meantime, hail the *al-Kashi* and send it priority, Issus.”

“Communications are not able to get through the extreme tetryonic radiation, not to mention that we are ahead of time, if that makes any sense, sir,” the tactical officer said as she tried several different procedures. “If our galaxium device was operational, we might be able to hail them. But without it, we can only see them, not hear them or be heard.”

“Dammit, Ensign!” Nic yelled. “Figure something out. We need a fleet of ships here and now!”

Jilel gave Nic a stern look before turning back to Issus. “Work with Franklin and see what you can figure out. Work fast, because I’m afraid we’re running out of time on this one.”

“Captain, with all due respect,” Captain van Asch persisted. “Authorize me to lead an away team down to the planet. Give me a security detail and a capable science officer. I will get to that control room and figure out what’s what. That thing down there whisked you away like we are gnats. We need to show them we are not so easily dismissed.”

“And when they do the same thing to you and your team, or simply cause you to cease to exist entirely, what then?” Jilel countered calmly. “If they wanted to, they could wipe this ship out of the universe with a thought. They will know the moment you set foot on the planet. Give me a good idea for how you intend to bypass all of that.”

“Well, definitely not by being a Romulan coward!” Nic’s anger seethed from his face and he felt the hard stare from everyone on the bridge after the words burst forth from his mouth.

Sanada took a step toward Nic as if she was going to arrest him or punch him.

Jilel’s eyes went hard as diamonds, but his expression remained calm. “You are relieved, Captain.” He turned to Sanada. “If you would please escort the captain to his quarters where he will be confined until we can get this sorted out. If he resists further, the brig will suffice.” With that, he turned away and back to Franklin and Issus.

There was a slight pause as Sanada and van Asch faced off for a moment. Nic looked around but, in the end, acquiesced. Sanada followed him off the bridge.

“Franklin, Issus, I’m counting on you to figure out a way to get in contact with the *al-Kashi*. Use the planet as a booster, if that can be done,” Jilel said quietly.

Simon then turned to the captain. “You did the right thing, sir. We can’t have a man in van Asch’s state making those types of calls.”

Jilel nodded. “I appreciate that, Doctor. Now we need to figure out what’s going on and what to do about it before everything falls apart around our ears. Something bad is coming.” He could feel it like an impending storm, the pent-up power straining to be released.

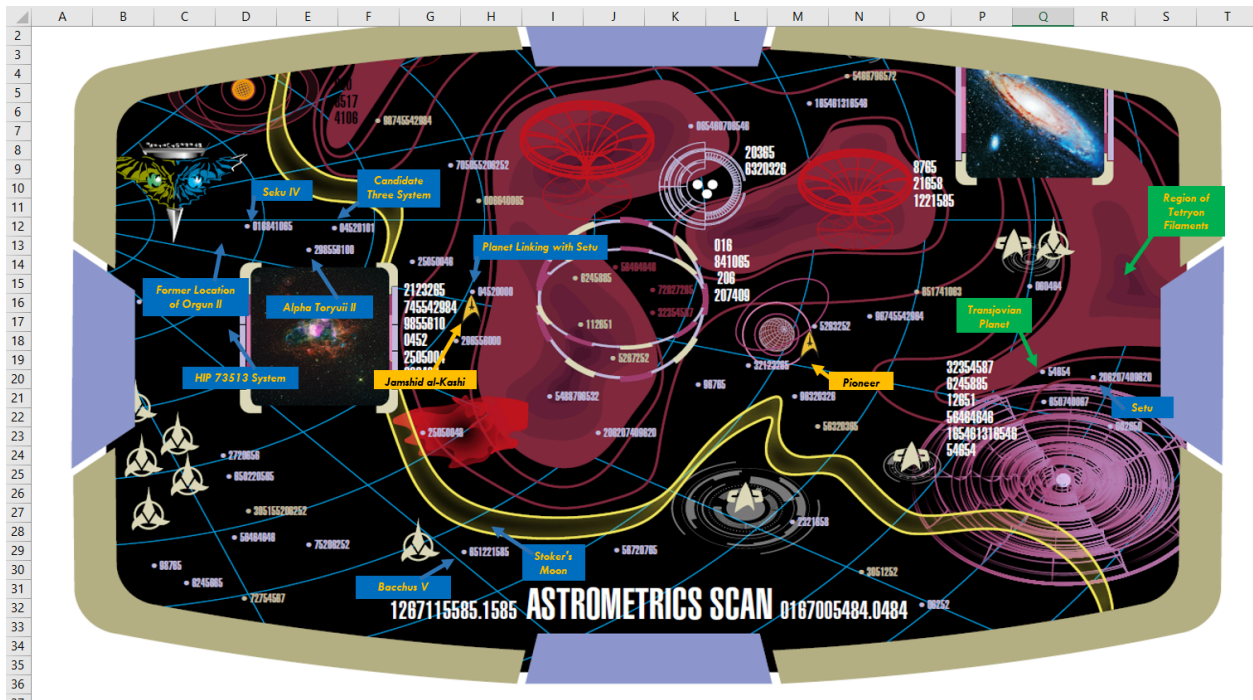
Issus said from tactical, “Trying to interlink with Setu’s communications network. Matching their signal variance. Aligning subspace—”

Suddenly, an image in the shape of Iryax Nadeon’s giant head appeared in the front of the bridge. The power it emanated was palpable; the energy unquestionable; the intent unmistakable. *I commanded you to not scan my world.*

Every instrument on the ship redlined as a wave of tetryonic energy shot from the planet, impacting *Pioneer*, folding it away like black origami paper collapsing in on itself until the vessel disappeared from its orbit around Setu.

Stomachs lurched and pitch darkness existed everywhere for a nanosecond. Bridge lights came back on and *Pioneer* was reeling through a new, unknown region of space with a panorama of

stars outside the viewscreen that were not present mere seconds before. The din and klaxon of confusion reigned supreme as ship and crew alike struggled to get their bearings.



Chad woke up from the confusion. His mind was still reeling from what had just happened. He pulled his thoughts together. The ship’s counselor made his way to a sensor station, trying to get a heading on where their current position was. He stared at the map. They were dozens of light years from their former position and, sadly, much farther away from the *Chariot* and *Tuxedo* than anyone on board would care to be. Chatter filled the bridge.

Rome was at helm. “Navigation systems coming back online. Checking course and heading.”

“We have lost the *Jamshid al-Kashi*,” Issus stated. “They are still there I am sure but without Setu to act as a sensor booster—”

Dr. Akeakamai had been perched on the upper deck near the MSD alongside Mr. Chen and other bridge officers. The Samoan man was astonished but stayed focused on the practical. “I think we left the captain’s yacht parked back there.”

Chapter 11

Captain's Log, February 5, 2386 (2215 hours)

“Once again, we’ve been a toy in the hands of a being whose power exceeds our own by a level we can’t even comprehend. We’ve been flung across a large part of the Expanse in the blink of an eye; though I guess we should be grateful for no casualties from the event. There has been no more communication with Setu and the nature of its temporal displacement has made it impossible to scan, though long-range sensors indicate that the area of space is slowly beginning to sync with normal space. What is it that Iryax is so driven to hide from us? And what is the endgame in all of this from the Tilikaal and Assessors? For every question we answer, it seems a dozen more crop up.

“Our power systems are still in shambles, cobbled together with some jury-rigged solution from the helpful Akaran people. Chief Madrek’s mission to collect the materials we needed to reinforce our power systems and get transporters operational failed, which required the team to be rescued by Commander Nalanid and Acting Ensign Torpon. Nalanid’s team also failed in their mission to locate Lieutenant Trask, Badvin, and the Obelisk. It took two weeks to rendezvous with the Tuxedo, which was forced to tow the Chariot back. Though I have heard no complaints, the away teams were suffering from exhaustion and mild malnutrition; Dr. Nalanid’s medical background was used to keep everyone functionally healthy. Dr. Ga has indicated that they should be cleared for duty shortly.

“It is time for yet another senior staff meeting to review our mission objectives and current situation. I have purposely excluded Captain van Asch from this meeting. To say he has been surly over the past two weeks would be a great understatement. He has been confined to quarters and common areas, though he has requested to be reinstated to duty. On a positive note, it is good to know that we are not alone in the Expanse. The Olympic-class Jamshid al-Kashi is also here, having apparently pierced the Endurance Divide. The fact that they were in orbit around the planet that was transmitting data back and forth between Setu could be viewed as a good sign. Now, it is time to take the pulse of my staff and determine what our next steps are...”



Commander Kotaru Sanada said, "Let's start with departmental reports to get everyone up to speed. I can begin. Captain van Asch is still requesting a return to duty. It has been denied. Staff morale is holding up. They are still shaken up by being folded halfway across the Expanse. We are beginning to dip into emergency rations to minimize replicator use. Holodecks are still offline; along with transporters. The *Chariot* will be offline for the foreseeable future." She handed Jilel one of the three datapads that were in front of her. "New duty rosters, sir. Commander Nalanid, your report."

Kalani a'Nalanid had forced her husband to bring a large platter of assorted cookies, small cakes, and other sweets to offer the officers at the meeting. "Starfleet survival training is not a waste of time; though mining ammonia, water, and carbon dioxide ice from a comet so you can all breathe and eat is...taxing." He rubbed his eyes and continued. "We were unable to detect any polarized subspace particles from *Obelisk*. We attempted to scan for any temporal vectors in the particles that would indicate a presence within a week or so from the present. No success."

"The absence of the polarized particles could mean that Mr. Trask and Badvin have chosen to conserve power, so there's still hope," Torpon added, grasping at straws before his face went grim. "Equally, it could mean the *Obelisk* didn't successfully transverse the tetryon thread."

Nalanid said, "We couldn't go further than that with the limited resources on the shuttle. *Chariot* will require extensive refurbishing with the damage it took on the transjovian planet."

"Captain," said Madrek, "from the engineering department's perspective—on the books—this escapade finds our balance sheet entirely in the red." He cleared his throat, preparing to relate the damage. "We failed to retrieve any of our extracted rubindium; could barely transport aboard the *Tuxedo* with our personnel as it was in that storm. What's more, the *Chariot's* been mangled. We'll likely need to draw upon even more rubindium to replace key parts of its destroyed sensor array." He let the report sink in. "It gets worse," he continued. "We've lost time. The Salaman Madrek simulation has been purged from accessible memory. I may need Dr. Ga to open my veins again so that we can consult our 'expert' on galaxium engineering." He laughed darkly.

Franklin stared coolly at his friend. "Karnax and I dismantled the holodeck to save lives, Chief," he said. "I am sorry that it messed up your program. It was a distress call. You weren't there."

"You don't need to tell me about distress!" barked Madrek. He contained himself and said, "Oh Franklin, spare your defensiveness," he pleaded. "I won't rake you over the coals. Nor any one. How could I? And that is my point. Now is not the time for despair. I can't express the gratitude I felt as Dr. Dregg, Torpon, and Dr. Nalanid brought us out of danger; nor Moshe's perseverance through injury, oxygen deprivation, and more." He sighed. "We have scratched at the universe and come back hungry. We've been bandied about like a plaything of the gods. But we have our lives, our wits. We have each other. We must take strength that we have not been harmed, and go from there. Sir," he said, nodding to Jilel.

"Things are desperate. Madrek is giving pep talks," Sanada joked to calm the mood.

Nalanid listened and nodded with Madrek, having heard the concerns over the nearly two weeks they'd spent together. As the mood was somber and no one had partook, Nalanid reached to the platter and took a pink frosted cupcake and attempted to eat it without covering his facial hair in the sugary mess.

Dr. Ga politely waited for a moment before speaking. "Sickbay is in surprisingly good condition, given the events of the last two weeks. Our away teams have been treated for exhaustion, dehydration, and malnutrition, but are none the worse for wear. Mr. Moshe has been treated for a compound fracture of her radius and ulna along with tissue damage and oxygen deprivation. I expect a full return to duty within the week. Medical personnel are performing up to standard in all aspects of patient care. Thank you, Commander, Captain."

Issus when next. "I have two security officers working in rotating shifts to watch over Captain van Asch. He seems to have calmed down though I'll allow Lieutenant Simon to offer his professional opinion. Weapons and defenses stand at the ready in this unknown area of space and I have prepared several tactical scenarios should we decide to return to Setu. We have not been able to establish contact with the *Jamshid Al-Khalid*. Too much interference, which we are finding the norm in the Expanse with the absence of a functioning galaxium device."

Simon went next with his update feeling there was some anticipation for his report. "The crew seems to be handling this well. There are those who are disoriented from the time distortions and being instantly transported through light years of space. They have been given refreshers on advanced alien technology, crisis psychology, quantum physics, and theoretical subspace dynamics from their Academy training. Now, about Captain van Asch. He is not doing well. He has refused to answer basic questions and has become belligerent, but not violent. He is lashing out at anyone or anything that annoys him." The ship's counselor paused, took a breath, and then continued. "In my medical and professional opinion, he should be confined to quarters until he shows more willingness to work on his current state of mind and take the proper medications to help him achieve greater mental clarity."

Franklin nodded in agreement with Lieutenant Simon. He'd bristled at Nic's treatment of the Captain. "One note of good news," he offered. "Karnax and I have made headway on the galaxium device. The tetryons cleared. Our progressive imaging was able to give us a hypothesis of what was damaged and we've even put a fix in place. Not that we know if it's going to work," he said, in response to Madrek's look of question. "We won't know for sure until we arrange a proper, controlled test."

"I know you're trying your best. I have complete faith in you," Jilel told Franklin with a smile. "As for Nic, I wish we could bring him to the Narendra Station; get him away from here and the constant reminder of what he's lost."

"That would be my recommendation as well if we are not able to treat the captain here," Simon replied.

Sanada took in all she heard. "We need a plan. Let's put it plainly. It is quite possible that we can contact Starfleet now. Do we want to? Do we tell them all we know before we positively identify the location of the two hidden Romulan planets; before we make contact with the Repentant?"

Jilel sighed. "If we don't, we'll play right into the hands of those who are trying to say we're not loyal to the Federation or Starfleet. Now with Nic being in the mix, we can be certain every decision we make is going to be under a microscope."

"We have no idea what Iryax Nadeon's goal is toward the Tilikaal," Issus said. "Are the Tilikaal a threat? What kind of power does the world of Setu contain? It will take us months for us to get back to Narendra station. In the meantime, what terror might be unleashed on our galaxy if we

do not stop it here and now? And do we have a responsibility to the Akaru? What if they are hapless pawns in all of this, as Lieutenant James suggested?”

“The Akaru...I had been pondering them.” Nalanid dusted off his fingers. “As time was moving faster around the planet, it is entirely possible that between their appearance and the story of how they arrived, that they are modified Romulan people that fled during the Romulan diaspora of the 4th century C.E. Is it a coincidence that a modified Romulan people are here along with hidden worlds inside Romulan space? Perhaps. But it is information we should keep in mind. To me it suggests that the Romulan people might possibly be a pawn themselves in all of this outside of the manipulation of the Empire.”

Torpon nodded. “What's shocking to me is that the Empire as a whole appears to have little to no knowledge of these planets. There's no way we would've missed the appearance of two planets. More likely, the Empire learned about them and tried to cover them up from their own people. This suggests the Empire knew something was off.” The Romulan caught Jilel's eye. “Covering up the appearance of two planets would be a massive undertaking for the Empire. There has to be an ulterior motive. There always is.”

“Or we take at face value the tale Celivol told us,” Sanada said. “That the ZMR were part of a movement to hide the planets from the puppet Empire.”

“The fact is, the Empire has more of a role in this than we suspect or know,” Jilel said. “I'm certain; but the immediate concern is what's going on with Setu and the Tilikaal at this moment. Something was worth concealing, so much so that they flung a starship halfway across the Expanse to keep the secret, and I want to know what it is,” he said firmly.

“So, are we going back?” Sanada asked, “Or do we go the opposite direction to contact Starfleet?”

Jilel's face fell into a sideways smirk. “The Tilikaal situation is a clear and present danger to the Federation and, possibly, to the Alpha and Beta Quadrants as a whole. It would go against our mandate as Starfleet Officers if we did not take immediate action to counter that threat. We will contact Starfleet as soon as practical, but this emergency takes priority.” He looked around the room. “Any objections?”

Nalanid was the first to respond. “None, sir, but one suggestion. If contacting Starfleet is on the table, might I suggest a warp probe that will signal Starfleet vessels when it detects its transponders. Send it back on a course towards Federation space.”

“An excellent idea, Talak, thank you,” Jilel replied. “Let's make that happen.”

“And another ship is out here, sir. It may be worth contacting them. They could have information that we do not,” Torpon added.

Issus asked, “With the galaxium device repaired, is it now possible to contact Narendra?”

“And if we do, will we get orders countermanding the ones our captain just gave?” Sanada added.

All eyes looked at Franklin.

“It's gonna work,” said Franklin, nodding. “I think our fix is solid, and...” He shifted under the commander's gaze. “I mean, it might not, though. We really don't know what we're doing with

this stuff. And doing it wrong? Might even make it worse. Yeah, Commander, to ensure the ongoing proper function of the device itself,” he clarified, “I think I’m gonna go ahead and recommend that we only activate it under the circumstances of a highly controlled test when all conditions are deemed favorable.”

Issus nodded. “It would be wise to take all precautions as we are already in a very vulnerable position. Needlessly exposing our position might be tactically unwise.”

“Captain?” It’s your call.” Sanada waited for Captain Jilel’s response.

“I don’t think these are optimum conditions for a test of that kind, do you, Number One?” Jilel replied with a perfect poker face.

“I have to agree. The galaxium device is our only fallback in the case of a true emergency and so far our suspicion of Iryax Nadeon is assumption. It is our responsibility to gather more evidence,” Sanada said.

“Very well,” Jilel said. “If there’s no further business..? Dismissed.”

Kalani had set a table for three in the Nalanid quarters. To make the room feel more open, Talak had even thrown open the stain glass shutters that they often kept closed over the portholes. The cuisine tonight was a mixture of strong Cardassian flavors along with Tellarite vegetarian dishes. The conversation had been polite, but at one point Talak stood and left the room. Kalani smiled at Madrek when he was about to ask what he was doing. After a few moments the Tellarite science officer came back with a bottle of blue liquid, sealed with a gummy purple wax.

“Before we talk about what happened—what we need to do, how we failed, and how we succeeded—I made a promise to myself that if I ever was away from my wife again or my family for a significant time that, when I returned, I’d share this bottle of glowberry compote with those that helped me return.” He tapped the bottle. “My family has been harvesting glowberries for what must be actually over a standard millennium. It’s all done with volunteers now, adults who don’t mind getting wet and miserable for a day or children who love the taste and think they are being clever by eating half they pick. But glowberries are in my family’s blood it seems. So I’m sharing it with you, Madrek. And I have one more I’m saving for when we find Trask.”

Talak peeled off the gummy wax and Kalani pulled out a corkscrew that she wound into the bottle to pull out the cork. The color of the compote began to shift, but it was when Kalani poured the fluid into the glasses that its name made sense. The juice reacted with oxygen and began to softly glow, the bioluminescence making the blue liquid shimmer aqua.

Kalani smiled and sipped her own compote. “It’s good when it glows. It means it’s still as fresh as when it was bottled.”

Madrek held the shimmering glass against the light. Though offered in celebration, it felt sobering. “A beautiful effect,” he remarked. “And a meaningful tradition. I thank you for sharing it with me.” He sipped. “Kalani, this meal smells inviting. I’m very grateful we were able to return your husband to your side. It’s easy for me to discount the tendrils of love and friendship extending out from so many Pioneers. I’m a bit...isolated,” he offered.

Talak scowled and patted his wife's hand, her toothy smile beaming in return. "It's been easy for me too, Mr Madrek. For almost my entire career, I've held myself at arms length from the crews I've served with. Professionally, I had to remain detached, not a part of the command structure, not wishing to get involved in personal matters that may affect a crew member's psychological therapy."

Kalani interrupted. "He relied on me. Can't say I blame him. He did marry me after all."

Talak huffed and nodded. "In any case, yes. The only person I kept close to me was Kalani, my children, and my parents. I've served on many ships, Mr. Madrek, but I would not count a single person I served with before now as a friend. But here, I have made several. You are among them."

"What changed?" asked Madrek. "What was different with this assignment? The crew? The circumstances? Or was it you who changed?"

"All of the above." Talak chuckled and sipped at the compote. "I've gotten older, lost people I've loved, and changed my profession. I no longer need to keep myself apart from the crew for my job, and I find myself...passionate about our mission in a way that I haven't felt in quite some time," He looked at his wife. "since I met Kalani." Kalani fluttered her eyelids dramatically and fanned herself as though she were going to faint like a Victorian Age female.

"Such words, my husband! You see, Mr. Madrek, there is a saying that Tellarite men only find two things to complain endlessly about. Their true love and their life's true passion. So what he's trying to say is that he's found his true passion here."

Again Talak huffed. "And Tellarite women complain about anything and everything? Broad generalizations, my sweet. Unbecoming."

Madrek smiled, the banter of the two penetrating his gloom. "Well. However much a stereotype, to those who would complain about anything and everything, I say: great minds think alike." He sipped again. "I am honored to call you 'friend' as well, Talak," he continued. "Honored to be part of the *Pioneer* family. I stood in the empty holodeck this morning, attempting to contact my great aunt as if conducting a seance. It failed, of course. I think Franklin half expected me to bite his head off. But I feel changed, somehow. It has taken much distance and time to find the right relationship to my family legacy. Time, space, and a little help from my friends."

Talak scowled, thinking about 'Auntie Madrek'. He did not like the woman, though he appreciated her attempts at insulting him...even if she wasn't aware that Tellarites felt at home being insulted. "I've always felt that speaking to the dead is actually speaking to what part of yourself they most touched in your life." He gestured around at the wooden furniture and art that made the quarters feel like a museum. "I don't talk to these things, but they speak to that part of me that my parents left behind." He raised the dimly glowing glass of compote, "This speaks to the child in me who wandered through the Outflow, sneaking glowberries while my parents pretended not to notice. But it all speaks to being a part of something. I spent too long being a part of nothing except the idea of the Federation and service in Starfleet."

"Indeed," said Madrek. "I spent so many years feeling out of step. I wanted to be anything but a Cardassian. Anything but a war profiteer. Anything but a Madrek. Starfleet changed that," he frowned. "Or more accurately, *Pioneer* has." He tipped back the remaining contents of the compote. He felt the sweetness die on his tongue as he inhaled again the scents of Kalani's meal.

“After that harrowing mission, to me this drink—this meal—speaks of the familiar and the strange. In a word: home.”

“Starfleet, both the familiar and the alien.” Talak tapped his glass on the table along with Kalani before they both finished their drink. “Now, home is still a little empty. We’re missing Trask.” He paused. “And Pi. And Latha for that matter. We can’t forget him. But I think he would be enjoying his place with the Prophets.” He poured another glass for those that wished for it. “So, what can we do to make sure *Pioneer* is complete again?”

Madrek nodded thanks. “That’s where I could use your help, Doctor. There’s a laundry list of repairs, chief among them the restoration of transporters. The problem is we’ve no rubindium. My attempted harvest failed miserably. With new Assessors and world engines on the scene, I fear we can’t afford another time sink like that, or risk to our persons. Perhaps you might assist me in a survey for less treacherous deposits? Or do we, from a material science standpoint, have a shot at finding some substitute?”

“We could synthesize small amounts with a particle accelerator and time. We could also keep an eye out for deposits on other worlds, including moons and asteroids. Regarding the mission: its success or failure had nothing to do with you, Mr. Madrek. Circumstances were difficult, and you had wounded. Transporters are useful, but the function of the ship is not impeded significantly without them.” The Tellerite paused for a good long moment and let his eyes catch Madrek’s. “It would be without you, Dregg, or Moshe.”

Captain Jilel sat at a small table in Franklin’s quarters. Occupying most of it was a large edition of J.R.R. Tolkien’s “The Lord of the Rings.” Jilel accepted the invitation as a way to check in on his senior staff members and make sure they were faring well under the circumstances.

“I understand you’re a fan.” Franklin pointed at the book from the other end of the room. The wistful melody of Led Zeppelin’s “Ramble On” played low as he worked his room’s replicator. “I’ve been thinking a lot about Hobbits. You know...the regular folks. Like us. Making their way from one great power to the next, feeling like it’s all too big for them.” Two pints of ale materialized in the chamber, which he grabbed, nearly spilling them as he carried them over. “But in the end, the kingdoms, the ethereal immortals...none of them can solve the big problem. The Hobbits—it’s down to them.” He handed a glass to Jilel and chinked it. “Holodeck’s offline or I’d buy you a round at the Prancing Pony. This’ll have to be the next best thing. Anyway, thanks for taking time out to meet with me, Captain.”

Jilel chuckled. “After the last couple of weeks, I’d gladly take you up on that; but this will do just fine,” he replied, taking a drink. “Oh, that’s nice.” He listened to the music for a few moments. His eyes closed. It reminded him of a young cadet he’d pursued at the Academy. She had been a fan of classical music as well. “You may be onto something there with your thoughts about Hobbits, Franklin. We’re involved in events that are older and greater than we are; but we have to remember that we each hold the ability to change things for the good no matter how small we think we are. You know my door is always open to you. Or your door, as the case may be.”

Franklin’s eyes shined in response. “I really appreciate that, Captain. And thanks for gracing my humble abode,” he said with a grin. “Things got a bit crazy on Setu. I for one would really benefit from a check-in.”

“I know.” Jilel said, “Things have been so stressful since we came back here. I wish I could let everyone ease off some; but I have the feeling that things are coming to a head soon, and we can’t let up.”

He took another long drink from his mug before looking intently at Franklin. “What can I do to help, Franklin? I’m supposed to somehow know instinctively what my crew needs before they can say so; but I don’t have that particular gift. Sometimes I need to be told.” He smiled wryly. “Just ask Athena.”

Franklin flashed a grin, then grew serious. “This contact with the Akaru, the Tilikaal connection, and the Assessor behind it all...I realized, it’s getting personal for me. I know it is for you too. It’ll take some big moves to get to the other side of this. And these revelations just keep coming. We’ve got a growing list of people to save from disaster. Hold on, I’m gonna need this to continue.”

Franklin drank half the pint.

“Ok, let’s make the list. We’ve got to save the Romulans and Remans, somehow using power beyond our ken, and we’re on a clock. We’ve got to protect basically all innocent star systems everywhere from the Hehdi in the process. Now the Akaru are on the map, and though Iryax was elusive, I just can’t shake the feeling they’re headed for a tragedy. Then there’s stuff closer to home. Gotta get Trask back. Gotta shut down the intrigue against you. And on top of all this, somehow underneath it all, we’ve got the gosh darn Tilikaal. And that’s where, personally, my judgment is getting really cloudy. I feel for them. But another part of me feels like they should just go into the West if you know what I mean?”

Jilel smiled sadly. “Not that I think I play Gandalf’s role in all of this; but I’m beginning to understand how desperate the situation was for the Free Peoples of Middle Earth. We’ve had monumental tasks set in front of us and have been given no great power to deal with any one of them. We face opposition from our own people when it comes to saving Romulus and Remus, and we’ve already likely lost Trask in that battle, as if we haven’t sacrificed enough. The Hehdi are the least of my concerns right now, to be honest with you, though they’re still in the back of my mind. The Tilikaal are the key to this whole mess, and half of me just wants to leave them where they are in payment for all the chaos and death they’ve caused over the millennia.” He drained his mug. “I keep thinking how much I wish none of this were happening, and that it wasn’t in our time that all of this comes crashing down; but then I think of Gandalf’s wisdom: ‘So do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.’ I choose to do whatever I can to save whomever I’m able to and let history decide whether I’m a fool or a sage.”

He fell silent for a long moment. He’d thought about this often, especially since he’d lost Desmond; but his conscience was clear on the matter. He couldn’t take responsibility for the choices others made in the battles of life anymore than he could take credit for their victories when they happened. No, this crew had earned every accolade and honor it had received, and more than that even. They had paid dearly for it in blood, sweat, and tears. But he felt that the greater challenges were still ahead. That they had been put through a crucible to burn away the excess and leave the best for what was to come.

“Narsil has been re-forged into Anduril,” he murmured thoughtfully.

Franklin looked quizzically at him.

He shook his head. "We've been put through the fire and pieced back together specifically for these battles. I believe that as I'm sitting here. Call it fate, the hand of God, the will of the Prophets, or whatever makes sense; but there it is. We do what we can, and let the chips fall where they may, Franklin. It's all we can do."

He reached out and grasped the younger man's shoulder with affection and encouragement as he said it.

THE END