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## **Androssi Vessel Overseen by Biron**

STARDATE 53675.1

Sub-Overseer Howwi's voice awoke Overseer Biron out of a sound sleep. "Attention Overseer. Your presence is required on the flight deck. The client has arrived one hour, fifteen minutes early for the engagement."

Biron was instantly awake, his annoyance at the interruption leavened by the information contained in that interruption. He checked the time-keeping device in his quarters, which informed him that it was one hour and ten minutes prior to the scheduled time of the engagement with the client. This meant that Howwi had been awakened and informed of the early arrival first, then it was left to the sub-overseer to inform Biron.

He climbed out of his hammock and dressed. Biron made a note to investigate who spoke to the sub-overseer rather than Biron himself. Proper protocol dictated that the overseer be informed immediately of such a change in scheduling. One of the lower officers—or worse, one of the workers—had decided to inform the sub-overseer instead rather than risk the ire of the overseer by waking him up. A foolish notion, that. If it was an officer, that person would be severely disciplined. (If it was a worker, the solution was much simpler: death and replacement. Workers were, after all, easy enough to come by.)

Once he had dressed and put in the five nose rings that symbolized his position as overseer, he exited his cabin and proceeded to the flight deck. He entered to see Sub-Overseer Howwi and the four workers

presently on duty stand up in his presence. They remained standing until Biron had taken his seat at the front left of the deck.

“Open a communications frequency to the client,” Biron said as the five others retook their seats.

The face of a Yridian appeared on the viewscreen. A like image did not appear on the Yridian’s screen—Androssi protocol dictated that they never transmit visual communications to any but other Androssi, and even then, such a practice was frowned upon. It was a security risk, after all.

“May I assume I’m speaking to Overseer Biron?” the Yridian asked.

“You assume correctly.”

“Excellent.” The Yridian bared his teeth in what Biron assumed to be an expression of pleasure. “I’m sorry I got here early, but my previous engagement was, ah, cut short.”

“Your itinerary is of no interest to me. I wish to conduct a business transaction. I have been informed by reliable sources that you have information regarding Starfleet.”

“Some, yes. I can give you ship and personnel movements from up to one month ago. Given sufficient incentive, I can cut that down to a week or two.”

“Ship and personnel movements are also of no interest to me. What I require are log entries.”

Again, the Yridian bared his teeth, but Biron noted a subtle difference in his facial structure this time. “That will cost more.”

“I expected as much. Provide me with a price.”

Biron noted two things. The first was that the Yridian’s protracted pause was ostensibly to consider what price he would name, but Biron knew that he was simply delaying in a futile attempt to pretend that he had the upper hand in this negotiation. Biron knew that the Yridian already had a price in mind, but wished to make the acquisition of these logs seem more difficult than it truly was. Biron had expected this behavior and did not concern himself with it.

The second thing he noted was that Howwi looked uncomfortable. Biron had only just ended Howwi’s period of punishment—he had continued to perform his duties as sub-overseer, but at half-pay—for his succumbing to Starfleet treachery on the abandoned Cardassian space station Empok Nor, so he was unlikely to raise an objection to anything Biron did at this juncture.

And Biron could understand why Howwi was befuddled by the nature of this particular client interaction.

The Yridian finally spoke. “I take it you’ve scanned my ship, Overseer?”

Biron looked over at Howwi, who nodded. “Yes, we have.”

“Then you know what a mess it is. You’re supposed to be the best tinkerers in the galaxy. If you can upgrade my clapped-out ship—give me a full overhaul—then I can get you whatever logs you want. Just official ones, though, not personal.” Again, the bared teeth. “Even I have my limits.”

“Your terms are acceptable.” Biron entered data into the console in front of him in preparation for

transmitting it to the Yridian ship. “I am transmitting the specific personnel whose log entries I wish to peruse. I wish to obtain entries dating back at least two years.”

The Yridian nodded. “Fine.” His fingers played over his own console. “I’m sending you the parts of the ship I want upgraded.” He looked down. “Getting the data now.” He frowned. “I’ll need two weeks at least to gather this all up.”

Next to Biron, Howwi was perusing the Yridian’s list. The sub-overseer muted the transmission, then spoke. “We will require that time period to obtain the materials to perform the required upgrades.”

Biron nodded, and Howwi deactivated the mute function. “That is also acceptable. We will part ways and reconvene at these coordinates in two weeks’ time.”

“Excellent! It’s a pleasure doing business with you, Overseer Biron. See you in two weeks.”

With that, the Yridian ended the transmission.

Turning to Howwi, Biron said, “Begin procedures for acquiring everything on the Yridian’s list. Use ship’s stores for as much of it as possible—even if it is already earmarked to be used on a future endeavor.”

Howwi hesitated. “Sir, I—”

“Your objection is both anticipated and noted, Sub-Overseer.” Under other circumstances, Biron would discipline Howwi for even considering questioning his orders.

But these were very peculiar orders.

“You have my assurance that all your concerns will be addressed before this endeavor is completed.”

Seeming relieved, Howwi said, “Of course, sir. Thank you, sir.”

The sub-overseer’s unvoiced complaint was a valid one. After all, as a ship in the Androssi fleet, their mission was to provide material requested by the ship’s Elite sponsor. Their sponsor had made no such requests recently, and certainly had done nothing that would lead Biron to contact this Yridian for Starfleet log entries. Should their sponsor request an audit—as was his right at any time—he would not be pleased by the expenditures that would be used for an unauthorized endeavor. It could have a serious impact on Biron’s ability to provide for his sponsor and, by extension, his crew.

But Biron needed this information.

It was unworthy of him, it was true, but he did not care. Not after the second humiliation.

The first time Biron encountered the Starfleet starship U.S.S. da Vinci on the planet designated Maeglin, their crew managed to outmaneuver him. It was the first time Biron had ever failed in a mission for his Elite sponsor. That first time, however, Biron could very easily attribute to random chance. After all, mathematically speaking, Biron’s ability to always fulfill the requests of his Elite sponsor was bound to end eventually. Even the best overseer sometimes fails. The Elite accept this, as long as such occurrences were rare and not damaging. Indeed, Biron’s own sponsor was understanding about the failure of the Maeglin mission.

But then Biron was thwarted again, this time at the abandoned Cardassian mining station Empok Nor—and it was again due to the interference of the crew of the U.S.S. da Vinci. True, that mission had become untenable in any case; the client who was to provide the holo-emitters required by the sponsor was overly demanding and eccentric, and was proving very difficult to work with.

However, Biron did not take kindly to failure. The best response to such was to eliminate its cause. So he set out to do what he could to eliminate the threat posed by the crew of the U.S.S. da Vinci. The personnel he had requested logs for included several members of that ship's complement, including most of its officers and all the personnel assigned to the ship's Starfleet Corps of Engineers.

Armed with this knowledge, Biron would find a way to end their threat to his continued ability to provide for his sponsor.

\* \* \*

The two weeks passed. All the material needed to perform the necessary upgrades to the Yridian's ship were obtained and stored in Dimension 7 until they needed to retrieve them in order to perform the upgrades.

Biron's ship arrived at the rendezvous coordinates at the designated time, to find that the Yridian was once again early. The overseer found that he preferred clients who were early to those who were tardy, as far too many of his clients had been. Timely clients were easier to deal with.

"Open a communications frequency to the Yridian," Biron said.

The Yridian's face reappeared on the screen. "I have obtained as many of the logs as I was able, dating back to the war against the Dominion. This includes, not only logs from the da Vinci, but also the U.S.S. Lexington, the U.S.S. Sentinel, and Starbase 92."

Rarely was Biron surprised by something, but this Yridian had accomplished it. "That is far more thorough than I was expecting."

"I was simply accommodating your request, Overseer. Several personnel on your list were serving in those other places during the time frame you gave me." Baring his teeth again, he added, "It is my hope that my adherence to the full letter of our agreement will be reciprocated."

"It will be. Please transmit the data, and we can begin to perform the upgrades."

"Sorry, but no. First of all, I'm not foolish enough to transmit data this sensitive on an open channel. It's all contained in a storage unit, which I will hand to you. Second of all, that handoff will not take place until all the upgrades are finished." Biron was about to object, but the Yridian, apparently anticipating this, continued speaking. "If you wish to inspect the storage unit to verify that it does contain the asked-for data, you may—but the unit stays with me until the upgrades are done."

Biron seethed for a moment. He did not wish to wait to peruse the logs. But he could contrive no reason why the Yridian should accede to his desire to do so without Biron fulfilling his portion of the agreement.

"Very well. We will engage our matter transfer device and materialize upon your ship in order to inspect the unit and effect the upgrades to your vessel within ten minutes."

\* \* \*

The upgrades took two days. When they were completed, the Yridian's ship had had its sensor efficiency increased by twenty-five-point-nine percent, its cruising speed increased to an FTL of 4.0 from its previous maximum of 2.14.

The Yridian, of course, felt the need to inspect all the changes, from the new antimatter containment unit to the burnished chrome used as molding on the helm console. Biron had seen the latter as an absurd extravagance, but this was a decadent alien species, and could not be held to the standards of the Androssi.

After his inspection, the Yridian stood before Biron—presently standing on the cramped flight deck of the Yridian vessel—and bared his teeth wider than he had at any time in their short acquaintance. “Overseer, I thank you from the top of my head. This outstrips even what I had heard about your people's prowess with engines. I daresay you'd give Starfleet a run for their money.”

The praise of aliens was of no consequence. “May I take the storage unit containing the log entries now?”

“Of course.” The Yridian went to a small panel under his environmental control console and tapped a sequence of alphanumeric characters onto a touch pad, taking pains to block the exact sequence from the view of Biron or either of the workers still present. He then opened the door, revealing the storage unit. “Enjoy the reading. There are some gripping accounts of the war there, as it happens.”

Biron simply nodded to the workers, who removed the unit from the Yridian's hands. Then Biron activated his subspace communications device. “Sub-Overseer Howwi. Activate the matter transferral beam and transport myself, the workers, and the storage unit back to the ship.”

“Acknowledged.”

“It was a pleasure doing business with you, sir,” the Yridian said, just before the matter transferral beam conveyed Biron to his vessel.

\* \* \*

Seven minutes after the Yridian ship engaged its warp drive, Biron turned to Howwi. “Engage the dimensional blockers on all the equipment we installed upon the Yridian ship.”

Howwi was inappropriately enthusiastic when he said, “Yes, sir.” However, Biron was willing to forgive it. The sub-overseer added, “Dimensional blockers now read active. All equipment registers in Dimension 7.”

Biron nodded and rose from his chair. The others on the flight deck did the same. “I will be in my quarters,” he said and departed.

The Androssi had retrieved all of their equipment, including the new acquisitions, which would be potentially useful in future endeavors, and therefore would not be deemed untoward in an audit. Said equipment included an antimatter containment unit, but did not include the antimatter itself. The Yridian and his ship would by now have been eliminated by the catastrophic collision of the Yridian's antimatter with the matter of the ship itself, no longer separated as they were by a containment unit. Thus, there was no danger of reprisal from the Yridian.



Now Biron had the information he needed. The only net loss was that of one irrelevant alien life and time: the time spent obtaining material and upgrading the Yridian ship, and the time that Biron would now spend reading over the log entries of the hated crew of the U.S.S. da Vinci .

The log entries were not up-to-date, but the Yridian had said that there would be a gap between what he could acquire and the present day. The most recent entries related to a medical crisis on Sherman's Planet that the U.S.S. da Vinci 's chief medical officer, Dr. Elizabeth Lense, was able to solve with the aid of Fabian Stevens, a member of the ship's Starfleet Corps of Engineers team. Biron found the method Dr. Lense used to be of interest, and added it to his ship's database.

Once again, Biron found himself baffled by Starfleet's continued insistence on aiding others for no obvious benefit. In this particular instance, the crew of the U.S.S. da Vinci — with the exception of five of its complement—were also in danger from the pandemic that infected the population of Sherman's Planet. Even so, Biron doubted that the ship's crew's reaction would have been any different if none of them were in danger.

He decided to read through the logs of the chief medical officer. Hers, he noticed, were only on the U.S.S. da Vinci since shortly after the cessation of hostilities between the Dominion and the alliance among United Federation of Planets, the Klingon Empire, and the Romulan Star Empire. Prior to that, as the client had indicated, she served on a different vessel, the U.S.S. Lexington .

Sitting in his quarters, Overseer Biron began to peruse the log entries of Dr. Elizabeth Lense. . . .

U.S.S. Lexington

STARDATE 51246.9

The first thing Elizabeth Lense did when she entered her quarters on the Lexington was check her personnel file.

She hadn't been on board the Lexington in almost a month. Her quarters were just as she'd left them—not that she cared. All that mattered was whether or not Commander Selden kept his promise.

After keeping me in his damn dungeon imagining vast conspiracies to create genetically enhanced doctors in Starfleet. . . .

But no, there was nothing about the Starfleet investigation into whether or not Lt. Commander Elizabeth Lense, chief medical officer of the U.S.S. Lexington, top of her class at Starfleet Medical, had violated the Federation law forbidding postnatal genetic enhancement.

Of course, she hadn't. The whole idea was patently ridiculous. And if the Federation wasn't presently embroiled in a war with an enemy ruled by shapechangers who had spent the last several years fomenting paranoia throughout the quadrant, it no doubt would have been investigated quietly and with a minimum of fuss.

Instead, the revelation that the salutarian of her class, Julian Bashir, had been illegally genetically enhanced by his parents when he was six led some to think that Lense, having, in essence, beaten him, might also be so enhanced.

So they locked her in a room on Starbase 314 and went over her life with a fine-toothed comb. End result: she was an absolutely brilliant and completely human physician, who had been kept off active duty,

and probably costing lives with her absence, because some admiral somewhere thought it was a good idea.

Part of Lense wanted to resign right there.

Instead, she returned to the Lexington . There was, after all, a war on.

The door chime rang. “Come in.”

Heather Anderson walked in. Lense had been hoping that Captain Eberling himself would come by. The son-of-a-bitch owes me that much, at least. I always thought Starfleet captains defended their officers when they’re falsely accused.

Instead, he’d sent the first officer to do his dirty work. Lense had never liked Anderson much. She wasn’t sure why, there was just something about the older woman that rubbed her wrong.

“Good to see you again, Elizabeth.”

“Commander, I only just reported on board—”

“Uh, it’s ‘Captain’ now, Elizabeth—but ‘Heather’ is just fine. They’re sending us right back to the front lines, so we’re probably going to all be in close quarters for some time.”

Lense frowned, only just now noticing the fourth pip on Anderson’s collar. “What happened to Captain Eberling?”

Anderson’s lips seemed to twist oddly. “Didn’t they tell you?”

“They kept me in a room for a month, Comma—Sorry, Captain . The war could’ve ended while I was in there, and I wouldn’t have known.”

“I’m afraid that Captain Eberling died at Tyra.”

Blinking, Lense said, “I’m sorry?”

“Captain Eberling is dead.”

Anderson went on for several seconds. Somewhere, in the back of her head, Lense registered the captain’s words explaining that over a hundred ships were at Tyra, and only fourteen, including the Lexington, made it out in one piece. However, Eberling was fatally wounded on the bridge.

“Damn...” Lense muttered.

“There was nothing you could’ve done,” Anderson said.

“Hm?” Lense was confused by the statement.

“The captain was dead before he ever got to sickbay. Your being here wouldn’t have made a difference.”

Lense wanted to say any number of things. She wanted to ask about the other people she might have

been able to save if she had been where she belonged. She wanted to say that she would never get the chance to get the apology from Eberling that she felt she deserved. She wanted to say that she wondered what it meant that her first thought upon learning of the death of a man she had once respected was self-righteous anger. She wanted to ask how the hell Anderson knew what difference her being there really would have made. She wanted to say that she had no desire to serve under Captain “Heather is just fine” Anderson, regardless of rank.

She said none of those things. Instead, she just said, “Thank you, Captain.”

Anderson smiled. Or, rather, her lips upturned. Smiles tended to brighten faces and show some kind of humor or joy. But the rest of Anderson’s face remained as pursed and humorless as always. “It’s ‘Heather.’ And don’t mention it. There’s a senior staff meeting at 1100 in the observation lounge. I’ll give everyone the mission specs there.” Her lips turned downward into a frown that was as unconvincing as the smile. “It won’t be another Tyra, I promise you that. In fact, this may give us a chance to get some of our own back.”

With that, Anderson left Lense alone to figure out how she felt.

\* \* \*

The mission the Lexington went on wasn’t another Tyra.

It was worse.

Dominion forces were threatening the border near the Setlik system. The site of a major battle during a previous war between the Federation and Cardassia, it was once again a flash point in this war in which those two nations were only supporting players. The Lexington was one of six Nebula -class vessels assigned to the sector, along with the Honshu, Sutherland, T’Kumbra, Monitor, and Aldebaran . In addition, they had support from ten Norway -class ships. Intelligence reports indicated a distinct possibility of an attempt to take Setlik by a small garrison of Cardassian ships, led by one Jem’Hadar strike ship, and this force would be more than enough to deal with it.

Typically, Intelligence was both absolutely right and completely wrong. The Dominion/Cardassian forces did try to take Setlik—but with two very large garrisons of Cardassian ships and six Jem’Hadar strike ships.

The Narvik , Oslo , Lillehammer , and Bodø were destroyed before the Lexington had a chance to even go to red alert.

Lense had been on the bridge at the time. She was discussing the possibility of setting up one of the shuttlebays to handle triage in case things got bad. Said discussion was taking place with the new first officer, Commander Fiona Galloway, since “Heather” was busy with other concerns. This suited Lense just fine.

Then the tactical officer—some Bolian ensign who didn’t look old enough to have a ridge—announced the arrival of over a dozen warp signatures, and then four of their support ships were gone in plumes of flame, and a Jem’Hadar ship was firing on the Lexington .

Galloway bellowed, “Damage report!”

Mai-Fan Wan, the second officer, said from the ops station, “Mutliple hits to decks nine, ten, eleven,

and twelve.”

Lense tensed. Sickbay was on deck nine.

Wan continued: “Hull breach on deck twelve. Plasma fires erupting on all four decks.”

So much for “getting our own back,” Heather, Lense thought angrily, and said, “I’ve got to get to sickbay.”

Nobody spared her a glance as she headed to the turbolift.

“Target that Jem’Hadar ship and fire, all phasers.” That was Anderson’s voice.

“Load torpedo bays.”

“Sensors indicate that the T’Kumbra, the Tromsø, and the Trondheim are trying to cut a wedge in the Cardassian ships.”

“The Honshu, Bergen, Sutherland, and Stavanger are chasing the ships going after Setlik IV.”

“Course 189 mark 2, then hit them with—”

Whatever it was Anderson wanted to hit them with was lost to the turbolift doors closing. “Sickbay,” Lense said. Plasma fires. I’ll need to get the burn units up and running. She tapped her combadge. “Lense to Kumagai.”

Silence greeted her request.

Damn newbies. The Lexington’s medical staff had almost doubled—from eleven to nineteen—in the month she was away. Lense’s staff now included two more doctors, twice as many nurses, and an additional medtech. Kumagai was one of those two doctors—an ensign, fresh out of Starfleet Medical, with a specialty in treating burn wounds (hence his assignment to a ship on the front lines).

“Lense to Kumagai,” she repeated.

Again, silence.

She tried her assistant, who had filled in as CMO while she was away. “Lense to Cox. Julianna, you there?”

More silence.

“Lense to Cavanaugh. Lense to Griscom.”

She sighed. With all those people, one of them should have replied.

“Lense to sickbay, someone report!”

The turbolift doors opened onto deck nine. Uniformed personnel ran back and forth, some carrying what looked to Lense’s untrained eye like equipment to be used in repairs. People shouted at each other, both across the hall and over intercoms and combadges.

As she walked closer to sickbay, she started to notice the burning smell. It had the distinct metallic odor of a plasma fire, but it was more of a lingering smell than an active one. Good, she thought, that means the fire-suppression systems are working. The computer could starve a fire with force fields, and it usually had a quick enough response time that damage was often minimal.

The moment the doors to sickbay started to part, she spoke. “Why the hell isn’t any—?”

Whatever she planned to say next caught in her throat.

Sickbay was full of bodies.

The smoky metallic smell from the plasma fire lingered, but it was mixed with the equally metallic odor of blood.

This wouldn’t be unusual in the midst of a large-scale battle, but for the fact that it was all medical personnel. The biobeds were empty, but members of her staff were sprawled about. Julianna lay on the floor, third-degree plasma burns all up and down the right side of her body. Next to her was Nurse Rodgers, like burns on her left side. They were both dead.

There was a giant hole where one of the bulkheads used to be, a force field over that hole, through which she could see dozens of badly burned pieces of whatever normally was inside starship bulkheads.

The fire-suppression systems did work, she thought through the shock, just not fast enough.

She forced herself to look around. Triage. See who needs immediate attention. Half the equipment in sickbay was also burned. She heard moans, and one person screaming. Nobody seemed to be in any shape to help out.

“I need a doctor here!”

That voice came from the doors, which had just parted to reveal a lieutenant she didn’t recognize carrying in an ensign she also didn’t recognize. This was due in part to the blood obscuring both their faces.

Somewhere in the back of her head, she cursed Cox for not giving the crew adequate first-aid training—the lieutenant was carrying the ensign like he was bringing his bride across the threshold instead of in a proper “firefighter’s carry”—then remembered that Cox was lying dead at her feet.

“Computer, activate EMH.”

A short, male human figure appeared in the center of the room. “Please state the nature of the medical emergency,” the figure said in a haughty tone.

“There’s a war on,” Lense said dryly. “Examine the people on the floor. Do triage, and treat the most gravely injured first. There’s no support staff handy, so you’ll have to find everything yourself.”

The EMH looked around. “I’m a doctor, not an archaeologist.”

“Move!”

“Of course.” The EMH knelt down to start examining those on the floor.

Lense pointed to the lieutenant. “You—set her down there, then you sit here.”

“I’m fine, Doctor, it’s all her blood on me. I need to get back to engineering.”

She waved him off. “Fine, go.”

Sickbay’s supposed to be the best protected part of the damn ship, she thought as she ran a scanner over the ensign. The Jem’Hadar managed to penetrate it with one shot. That’s ridiculous. They’re supposed to build ships that are able to defend against our foes.

As the biobed readings came through—broken arm, a combination of electrical and plasma burns on both legs, several cuts and contusions, and a concussion—Lense thought, Of course, we didn’t know about the Dominion when they built the Lexington. She’d heard stories about how the Jem’Hadar could walk through force fields and had technology far beyond anything the Federation had ever seen.

If we can’t protect sickbay, how the hell are we going to protect the rest of the ship?

She managed to stabilize the ensign and apply a dermal regenerator and a sedative. As long as she lay still and remained sedated, her body would eventually heal.

“I’ve completed the triage,” the EMH said. “One requires immediate surgery. Two will require surgery within the next three hours. Three are stable and sedated. The remaining eight are deceased.”

Lense closed her eyes. She had sent four medtechs to various parts of the ship to facilitate the transportation of wounded. She had been on the bridge.

The EMH had just listed the remainder of the Lexington medical staff.

“Get started on the surgeries.”

“Excuse me?” the EMH said archly.

“We’re about to get inundated with wounded, and we’re a sickbay of two. One of us needs to be able to diagnose in an instant and make judgment calls as to what treatment to perform; the other needs to perform those treatments. I think we know how that division of labor should go, yes?”

“A logical course of action, I suppose.” The EMH sounded almost grudging.

Who the hell programmed this monstrosity, anyhow? “So why are you standing around? Get to work on that patient who needs immediate surgery!”

“There’s no need to yell, Doctor,” the EMH said as he went over to prepare for surgery. “Of course, without a nurse, this will be most difficult.”

“My heart bleeds for you,” Lense muttered.

“Doctor?”

Lense turned to see that her metaphorical words applied to someone else in reality—a patient was being

brought in on an antigrav gurney, blood pouring from a chest wound. With a start, she recognized the patient as Jenson, one of the three medtechs she'd sent out—and she had no idea who it was navigating the gurney.

“What happened?” she asked as she ran the scanner over the wound. Eyes widening as the tricorder told her that there was a massive arterial tear, she said, “Never mind.” Jenson had seconds at the most.

She took a quick look around, but the only instruments nearby were fried by the plasma fire. The spares were across the room in a drawer—they may as well have been in the Gamma Quadrant, for all the good they did her right now.

The hell with it. She shoved her decidedly nonsterile hand into Jenson's chest cavity and tried to close the arterial tear with her fingers. If she could just hold it shut, the blood would keep pumping.

It was a ridiculous gesture. It had no chance of actually working. She could barely get a grip on the artery with the blood pouring out of Jenson's body. But she had to try.

She looked up at the person who'd brought Jenson in, and saw that he had one pip on his uniform. “Ensign, get over to the set of drawers on the far wall. In the second from the top is a tray. Bring the whole thing over here, now!”

“Yessir,” the ensign said, sounding almost relieved to be given an order.

It took the rest of Garth Jenson's life for the ensign to make it back with the tray. By then, he had lost too much blood—no amount of infusion would do the trick, especially given how much more he'd lose in the time it would take to repair the artery.

Lense closed her eyes, counted to five, then opened them.

The smell got worse.

Again, she asked, “What happened?”

“It all happened so fast. We were just standing there down on deck twelve, talking about—something.” The ensign almost giggled. “I don't even remember, but we were having one of those stupid arguments that's about nothing at all, but neither side will ever back down for anything, no matter what the other one says?”

Lense bit her tongue. She had plenty of arguments like that on Starbase 314 recently.

“And then all of a sudden, the red alert went off, and we all started to go to battle stations, and Jenson—I don't know why I remember this part particularly—but Jenson said to Halprin, Wilhoite, and Soriano, ‘We'd better get a move on.’ And then—”

“Wait a minute,” Lense said, stunned at this revelation. Those were the other three medtechs. Now that she had a moment to think about it, none of them should have been on deck twelve. Jenson was supposed to be down in engineering, with Wilhoite on deck twenty, Halprin on deck eight, and Soriano on deck two. “They were all together?”

“Yes, sir. Along with me and ... and Ensign Hasegawa. We were all going to report to our duty stations, when ... when the bulkhead ripped off.”

Lense recalled Wan's damage report. Hull breach on deck twelve.

The ensign shook his head. "Soriano, Wilhoite, and Halprin were blown out into space, sir, along with Hasegawa. A piece of shrapnel tore through Jenson's chest before the force field kicked in. I don't know how I managed to make it through without a scratch." The ensign smiled, but like Captain Anderson's, it didn't reach the rest of his face. "I guess I'm lucky, huh?" he asked, not sounding like he felt in the least bit lucky.

"Go to your duty station, Ensign. I get the feeling they're going to need you, wherever that is."

"Mithra to sickbay—we've got wounded down here. Where the hell are your people?"

Lieutenant Commander Rachel Mithra was the chief engineer. "They're all dead or incapacitated, Commander." Think, think, think. "Are transporters still operational?"

"What difference does that make? Shields are up."

"Think inside the box, Commander—we can beam intraship with shields up, yes?"

"What? Oh, yeah, of course we can. Sorry, Doctor, it's a little—"

"Save it. Feed the coordinates of your wounded to the transporter room and beam them directly in here."

For the next hour, the Lexington sickbay was unusually quiet. The EMH performed its surgical procedures with a minimum of fuss, a maximum of competence, and a healthy dose of smugness, but with no support staff, neither it nor Lense had anyone to talk to but each other, and Lense deliberately kept that interaction to a minimum. The only constant noise was that of the transporter as it beamed in the latest casualties, punctuated by the occasional scream of pain.

The smell of blood got worse. Lense would have thought she'd get used to it.

It took a brief lull to realize that there were no other casualties being beamed in. She was about to contact the bridge for an update, when Commander Galloway came stumbling in, carrying another crew member—in, Lense noted, a proper carry. She quickly took stock of the wounds on Galloway's head and torso.

"I'm fine, but Fornel here needs help."

Galloway gently lay the officer down on a biobed. With a start, Lense realized it was the same Bolian whose youth she'd been lamenting back on the bridge. Blue blood coated his entire right arm.

"We need to talk," Galloway said seriously after setting him down.

Lense called the EMH over and had it work on Fornel, then regarded Galloway with an expectant look.

"Transporters are down. That was a very clever idea of yours, but the Jem'Hadar have made it impossible. The bridge has been compromised—Captain's setting up in the auxiliary bridge with Wan."



As Galloway spoke, she was clutching the right side of her belly with her right hand. The blood that covered that hand was red, so it definitely didn't belong to Fornel.

"Tell me the rest while I examine you."

"I'll be fine," she said, backing out of sickbay. "I saw about ten other wounded people on the way here—without the transporters, we'll never get them here. They're worse off than me. Be right back."

Before Lense could say anything else, she left.

Lense was just starting to debate the efficacy of going after her, when she heard a wheezing noise. Antonacci, one of the engineers, was going into shock. "Dammit!"

More hours passed. She stabilized Antonacci, and she and the EMH dealt with the casualties as Galloway and others brought them in. Some even made it in under their own steam.

Too many of them died.

Somehow, Galloway kept coming in with more wounded, even though the red stain on her uniform jacket kept getting bigger each time. At least five people survived who wouldn't have without Galloway playing medtech.

If I'd had the entire staff, if half my equipment hadn't been fried, if I'd been here the past month and not let discipline and training slip with my absence...

It would still be a nightmare. People would still be dying, there'd just be more of us watching.

The smell of blood never left her nostrils, and she was sure that it never would.

Another hour, and the not-especially-reassuring voice of Heather Anderson sounded over the intercom. "Attention all hands, this is the captain. We have destroyed the Dominion forces that tried to take Setlik. With the arrival of replacements from the Third Fleet, we're standing down from red alert. Once warp drive is repaired, we will be setting course for Starbase 375 for repairs."

When the captain signed off, the EMH approached. Lense wondered where Galloway was—she hadn't seen the first officer in quite some time.

"All the patients are stable, Doctor. And—oh, dear."

"What is it?" Lense followed the EMH's glance—it was peering at the floor.

She saw a figure sitting there, next to the corpse of Dr. Cox, staring lifelessly ahead, seated as if she'd plunked herself down there for a quick rest.

Fiona Galloway.

"Dammit, why didn't she let me help her?"

With surprising gentleness, the EMH said, "Because she thought it was more important to help others."

Lense let out a very long breath. Maybe I should have resigned, she thought—not due to outrage at the

way Starfleet treated her, but so she wouldn't have had to face this nightmare ever again.

Anything to never smell the blood.

"Yeah." She shook her head. "C'mon, let's check on our living patients."

## **Androssi Vessel Overseen by Biron**

STARDATE 53678.4

Overseer Biron read through the logs from the U.S.S. Lexington with a mixture of admiration and confusion.

The former came from Elizabeth Lense's ingenuity in accomplishing her appointed task with no staff and limited equipment.

The latter came from that appointed task. In particular, the actions of Fiona Galloway filled him with utter confusion. Why would the Starfleet equivalent of a sub-overseer waste time and energy, and sacrifice her own life, just to preserve the lives of inferiors? It was an appalling misuse of resources. What did a mere engineer matter? Such people were easily replaceable. Someone who can perform the task of second-in-command of a ship—especially one as large as the U.S.S. Lexington — was a person for whom the preservation of life should have been a far greater priority.

Biron was unable to determine why Dr. Lense had been temporarily reassigned to the Federation starbase designated number 314 for a month's time. He did, however, know that she specifically requested a transfer to the Starfleet Corps of Engineers after the war's end.

Furthermore, he noted that she was the only doctor assigned to the U.S.S. da Vinci, aside from an upgraded version of the Emergency Medical Hologram that assisted her during the combat in the Setlik star system. The U.S.S. da Vinci was, after all, a much smaller ship than the U.S.S. Lexington, and did not require as extensive a medical staff.

He mentally stored these pieces of information along with the others he'd gleaned from his reading. Dr. Lense was a critical asset to the functioning of the vessel, given the obscene importance Starfleet placed on the lives of irrelevant life-forms. That was something Biron knew he could exploit.

Biron noted that several log entries were from the Federation starbase designated number 92. He soon realized that Bartholomew Faulwell, the language and cryptographic specialist assigned to the U.S.S. da Vinci's Starfleet Corps of Engineers team, had been assigned there during the time period of the war. Confusingly, Faulwell appeared to be of Starfleet's worker class, even though he obviously had the skills of an officer. I will never understand this Federation, he thought.

Faulwell had not been directly involved in either of Biron's previous encounters with the U.S.S. da Vinci at either the Cardassian station Empok Nor or at the planet Maeglin. Therefore, Biron was unfamiliar with him. Apparently, he was stationed at this particular starbase during the war, and assigned to interpret and translate Dominion communication codes into something that could be read by the Federation.

That is a valuable skill, Biron thought, and began reading.

# Starbase 92

STARDATE 52601.6

Bartholomew Faulwell had been sitting outside Commander DuVall's office for two hours. He had kept himself occupied by reading one of the books he had loaded onto his padd—it was what he intended to use to read himself to sleep that night, of course, but he could always get his hands on another one. And it was a good read—a historical novel about twenty-first-century space travel by a very talented woman named Almira Van Der Weir. Bart had also read many straight histories about so-called “boomers” in the days before the Federation's founding, and Van Der Weir was one of the few fiction writers who captured the essence that Bart had found in the histories. Portraying the frontier spirit was easy enough—pretty much every halfway decent novel set in that time period managed that—but few were able to leaven it with the very real hardships they endured. Then again, in our replicator age, hardship's a tough one to handle—though I suspect the last couple of years have cured us of that little bit of complacency.

Of course, Bart would rather have been doing something productive with his time. Since the start of the war with the Dominion, Bart had been applying his skills as a cryptographer to cracking Dominion and Cardassian codes. With the entry of the Breen into the war, he assumed that his sudden reassignment to Starbase 92 had to do with their codes.

So he'd hopped the first runabout he could get on and reported to the station commander immediately upon his arrival at the large top-shaped station that orbited Calufrax IV.

And then he waited.

Finally, the doors parted and a very short, balding, round human came out. He didn't so much walk as waddle.

“You must be Faulwell. Come in.” Then he turned and went back into his office, obviously expecting Bart to follow him.

No apologies, no pleasantries, just ordering him in. This is gonna be fun, Bart thought with a sigh as he got up, turned the display of his padd off, and followed the commander into his domain.

Said domain was fairly utilitarian. Usually Starfleet officers tended toward a minimum of décor—enough to show that there was a person occupying the space, but not enough to scream out their personality through interior decorating. It was the enlisted folk like Bart himself who tended to make their working spaces over into their own image.

DuVall, however, took the former to an extreme. There was nothing here that didn't belong: the standard-issue desk with equally standard-issue viewscreen/computer on it, the two guest chairs, the computer display on the wall, and damn little else. No pictures, no personal effects, no wall hangings, nothing.

“Have a seat,” DuVall said, even as he fell more than sat into his own chair.

“My orders,” Bart said, “were to report here right away, but not why.”

“Of course not,” DuVall said after snorting derisively. “I won't kid you, Mr. Faulwell. There's a war

on.”

Bart bit back a sarcastic response. It didn't do to antagonize one's commanding officer within five minutes of meeting him.

DuVall continued. “You probably don't know this—and once you leave this room, I expect you to continue not to know this—but the war's going pretty badly for our side.”

In fact, this was common knowledge, but again, Bart refrained from comment.

“With the Breen's damned energy-dampener keeping us and the Romulans out of the battle, we have to rely on the Klingons to hold the border. Now, between you, me, and the viewport, there's nobody I want next to me in a fight more than a pissed-off Klingon, but I want'em backing me up, not going out in front. No discipline, if you know what I mean. And the numbers just don't add up.”

He leaned forward, hitting Bart with what might have been a penetrating glare on a face that wasn't so—there was no other word for it—chubby. “That's where you come in, Mr. Faulwell. Now, more than ever, we have to rely on knowing where the Dominion is going to attack. Unfortunately, they've upgraded their code, and we can't figure it out. Your job is to crack it.”

Bart nodded. “Of course, sir.”

“Don't give me that, ‘of course, sir,’ crapola, mister. Look, I know your type.”

“Type?”

“Yeah, you noncommissioned academic types. I read your file. You enlisted seventeen years ago to go on one of those long-term exploratory missions. Probably figured you'd meet lots of nice little alien life-forms that you could make friends with.”

In fact, the seven-year mission of the U.S.S. *Pisces* was meant to do exactly that, and they made several first contacts, at least one of which was on its way to Federation membership. Bart had joined Starfleet specifically for that mission, serving as the ship's linguist, but he found he enjoyed the challenges Starfleet had to offer, and reenlisted when his term was up.

“Well, this is the other side of the coin, Mr. Faulwell. This is the real deal. The Federation's counting on you to come through, are we clear?”

Unable to resist, Bart said, “So clear I can see right through you, sir.”

“Excellent,” DuVall said with conviction. “That's what I want to hear. You'll be heading up a team of crypto specialists. I understand you've worked with some of them before. Your liaison to me will be Lt. Commander Anthony Mark. In fact, he should be here.” He stabbed angrily at a control on his desk. “DuVall to Mark.”

“Mark here.”

“Why the hell aren't you in my office, mister?”

A pause. Then, slowly: “I've received no orders to report to your office, sir.”

“Well, you do now. Get your posterior over here, Commander, and I meannow . Our crypto spook is here.”

Spook? Bart thought, but didn't pursue it. He just hoped Mark arrived soon.

When he did, about a minute later, Bart tried to keep his jaw from falling open.

Since he was a teenager, Bart had always had a physical ideal in his head for the perfect mate. In the forty years since, he had yet to find anyone even close to that ideal—which, he supposed, accounted for his appalling lack of success with any kind of long-term relationship in those years.

The person who walked into Commander DuVall's office fit most of the criteria of the ideal he had created in his head at the age of fifteen: tall, but not too tall; curly blond hair, but not too curly; hazel eyes; long fingers. The only thing missing was a beard, but looking at Lt. Commander Mark's face, Bart saw that a beard wouldn't work right on that face. (As opposed to Bart's own. He had no appreciable chin, which his slightly scraggly brown beard nicely covered up.)

If he likes swimming and Van Der Weir's historicals, I'm going to start believing in fate....

“About time,” DuVall said, though Bart couldn't imagine, on a station this size, that Mark could possibly have arrived any sooner. “This is Faulwell—he's the new head of the crypto project.”

“So you indicated, sir,” Mark said in a deep voice. “I'll escort him to his quarters and call a meeting of the staff for 1900 hours.”

“Can't be at 1900. I have a meeting with Admiral Koike at 1900, and he'll want a progress report. Make it 1700.”

“Sir, it's 1705 now.”

DuVall blinked. “It is?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Dammit, where the hell did the day go?”

“And sir,” Mark added, “Novac and Throckmorton won't be back from Starbase 375 with the updated files until 1830.”

Bart frowned, wondering why files had to be brought by hand. Then he realized that it was probably for security reasons. Subspace communication wasn't always safe. If it was, Bart mused with a small smile, I'd be out of a job.

He also, as DuVall had indicated, knew at least one of those names, assuming it was Roxana Novac to whom Mark referred. Until the war, she had been on the staff of the Tamarian liaison's office, trying to further contact with the Children of Tamar, a race who spoke purely in historical metaphor. She had done some excellent work in determining how the Tamarians developed their singularly peculiar form of communication, and Bart was grateful to have her on the team.

DuVall pounded the desk with his fist and stood up. “Dammit, what the hell kind of chicken outfit are we running here?”

“Sir, you can tell the admiral that everything’s under control, that our team is together, and that they will work hard to crack the code as soon as possible.”

“We need it sooner than that, mister, if we’re going to win this thing.” He sat back down. “All right, have the damn meeting without me, if you think it’ll do any good. But I expect a full report and transcript, and I want progress reports from both of you twice a day, understood?”

Bart stood up, taking the phrasing as a dismissal. “You’ll have those reports, Commander, I promise.”

“I’d better. Dismissed.”

“If you’ll come this way, Mr. Faulwell,” Mark said, indicating the door to DuVall’s office with his hand.

As soon as the door shut behind him, Bart said, “Let me guess, you deliberately set the meeting for 1900 because you knew he had that meeting?”

Mark sputtered a laugh. “Was I that obvious?”

“No, but he was.”

“Yeah, well. He’s not as bad as he seems.” Mark chuckled. “In fact, he couldn’t be as bad as he seems. But he’s a very good administrator, and he’s run this place phenomenally well for the last ten years. It’s just—”

“What?” Bart prompted.

“He’s got Starfleet in the blood. Mother was Starfleet, grandfather was Starfleet, all four great-grandparents were Starfleet—all the way back to ’61.” Mark didn’t need to explain which year ending in “61” he meant—everyone knew that was shorthand for 2161, the year the Federation was founded. “But they all had pretty impressive careers—ship captains, war heroes, historic first contacts, that sort of thing. All he’s done is distinguish himself as a bureaucrat. And then a war hits, and he finds himself on entirely the wrong end of it.”

Bart nodded as they entered a turbolift. Starbase 92 was about as far from the front as possible, which was why so much important crypto work was being done here, away from the fighting.

“Habitat level.” The turbolift started to move horizontally. “So he makes up for it by doing the tough-guy military act. We all make sure he feels properly appreciated as the last line of defense against the Dominion, and everyone’s happy. Things actually run pretty smoothly here.”

The lift started to move downward. “So who all is on the team? I assume Novac is Roxana Novac?”

Mark nodded. “Terence Throckmorton is her partner—they’ve been working together since the war started.” He grinned, a bright smile that seemed to light up the turbolift. “I also think that she’s going to ask him to marry her, if he doesn’t beat her to it.”

Bart returned the grin. Always good to know some of the gossip going in—

“The others are T’Lura of Vulcan—”

“Good.” Bart had never met the woman, but her work on translating the notoriously difficult Breen language had been invaluable.

“—Ganris Phrebington—”

A Gnalish, his knowledge of sibilants in particular might be useful in this sort of work. Bart had met Phrebington a few times, and found him off-putting, and not nearly as talented as he himself thought he was.

“—and Janíce Kerasus.”

Blinking, Bart said, “Kerasus? She’s still alive?”

Again, Mark grinned. “If you’re very nice to me, I won’t tell her you said that. Yeah, she’s still alive. A hundred and sixty-five, and still going—well, not strong, exactly. She spends more time in the infirmary than any other single place, but her mind’s still as sharp as ever, even if her body’s breaking down on her.”

The lift came to a stop and the doors parted. “So what’s the problem with this new code?”

“Hell if I know,” Mark said with a shrug. “I’m just the liaison officer. All I know about language is that my universal translator mostly works.”

“Fair enough.”

“Here we are, Mr. Faulwell.”

“Please, it’s Bart. Hell, if you want to be formal, it’s ‘Dr. Faulwell,’ but that just makes me feel like a stuffy old academic.” He grinned. “Of course, I am a stuffy old academic, but that doesn’t mean I want everyone to think I am.”

“Bart it is, then. And I’m Lieutenant Commander Mark. Or ‘sir.’” He held the straight face for about a second. “Or ‘hey you.’ I answer to all three.”

“Hey you, it is. Where is this meeting at 1900?”

“The wardroom. The computer can direct you.”

“Great. Thanks, Commander Hey You.”

Mark shook his head. “You’re welcome, Bart.”

\* \* \*

Three weeks later, Bart Faulwell and his team were no closer to a solution than they were when they started.

The meeting on Bart’s first day hadn’t taken too terribly long. Everyone introduced or reintroduced themselves to their newest boss. Novac and Throckmorton were truly a pair, finishing each other’s sentences and talking over each other. T’Lura said very little, but her few comments were incisive. This was in direct contrast to Phrebington, who had several dozen ideas, only some of them worthwhile. And

then there was Janice Kerasus, a frail old human woman who looked like she would keel over at any second.

Bart was sitting in his quarters, going over the latest samples Starfleet Intelligence had provided, these from the few Klingon ships that had survived the attack on Avinall VII. They'd been working for days on end with no progress. Bart hadn't realized that running this team would mostly consist of playing den mother to a bunch of opinionated specialists. Bart had always enjoyed the research for its own sake and for the intellectual rewards you generally got at the end. This group, though, was more interested in justifying their own preexisting theories. Phrebington mostly expounded on his own ideas about everything, whether or not they related to reality; Kerasus spent most of her time poking holes in Phrebington's theories (not a difficult task, as Bart had encountered Swiss cheese with fewer holes than the Gnalish's ideas about cryptography, but Kerasus applied herself to that particular task with special glee), and Novac and Throckmorton were in their own world and had to be repeatedly reminded that there were four other people involved. T'Lura was the only one who had been easy to work with, as she shared with Bart the love of research for its own sake—though, naturally, she didn't express it as overtly as Bart did.

“Mark to Faulwell.”

Only when he almost fell out of his chair, startled, did Bart even realize that he had fallen asleep at his desk. Bart had always preferred to work at his own pace and simply catch naps where he could, but Commander DuVall insisted on a more rigid schedule, and the rest of the team was already locked into it, so Bart was stuck with it as well. It was playing merry hell with his admittedly eccentric circadian rhythm.

“Faulwell here. What can I do for you, Hey You?”

“Bart, no offense, but that joke stopped being funny the first eight hundred times.”

The next words came out of Bart's mouth unplanned. “Tell you what—meet me for dinner tonight and I'll stop.”

“All right, then, it's a date.”

Bart blinked. Then he blinked again. My God, he said yes. He was already in shock at himself for asking in the first place—which he chalked up to exhaustion lowering his resistance—but Mark actually said yes.

“Bart, you there?”

“Uh, yeah. What say we meet at that Trill restaurant at, ah—” he checked the chronometer on his desk “—1930?”

“Will do.”

“Great.”

“That's not why I called.”

“No, you called to remind me that DuVall wants my evening report in ten minutes and I better get it to him before he gives me the evil eye.”



“His eye isn’t evil, it’s just misguided. Even so, I’d rather it wasn’t guided at you.”

“Not to worry, Commander Hey You, he’ll have it on time. I even made sure I spelled all the words right this time.”

“You said you’d stop that if I met you for dinner.” Mark’s voice sounded mock-petulant.

“You haven’t actually met me for dinner yet. I know you officer types, always making promises to us enlisted folk. I want proof.”

Mark laughed. “Fine. I’ll see you at 1930.”

\* \* \*

“The problem,” Bart said between mouthfuls of the yellow-leaf salad the Trills called *grakizh*, “is that there isn’t anything to work from. Anytime you’ve got a code, there’s some kind of base for it. Something to build off of. Every Dominion code up until now has had similar algorithms at the root. Or at least similar enough that we could extrapolate something. Sometimes we’ve been lucky enough to stumble into things, and sometimes they’ve been careless. But this latest one—it just doesn’t match anything—no mathematical or linguistic pattern we’ve seen before, from the Dominion, from the Breen, from the Cardassians. It’s a big mess.”

“Sounds it,” Mark said, leaning back in his chair, having long since finished his meal by dint of not being able to get a word in edgewise.

“I’m sorry,” Bart said sheepishly. “I’ve been talking shop all night.”

Mark grinned. “That’s all right—I would’ve just spent the whole meal bitching and moaning about Commander DuVall. This is a nice reminder that other people have problems, too.”

“Yeah.” Bart took a bite of his *grakizh*.

“Maybe the Dominion’s come up with an unbreakable code.”

“No such thing—remember, if there’s no way to decode it, there’s no way the other side gets the message. Of course, it could just be something straightforward and simple and we’re overthinking it.” Bart chuckled. “Overthinking is definitely an occupational hazard with this bunch.”

“Well, I hope for my sake you come up with something soon. DuVall got a very terse communiqué from Admiral Ross today and—well, let’s just say that the abused tend to kick downward.”

Bart gave Mark a sympathetic look. “I’m sorry, Commander, but—”

Mark laughed.

“What?”

“‘Commander?’”

“Well, I can’t call you ‘hey you’ anymore. I promised.”

Mark nodded. “Fair enough. Anthony will do, I think.”

“Fine, Anthony.” Bart speared the last of his grakizh with his fork. “Actually, one of the more famous ‘unbreakable code’ stories was from Earth—the Second World War. One side’s code kept being broken by the other side, so instead of an actual code, they transmitted everything in an obscure language by a people they’d conquered over a century earlier. That ‘code’ was never broken during the hostili—” Bart cut himself off. “My stars and garters, I think that’s it.”

“What’s it?”

“We’re complete and total idiots.” He got up. “I’ve got to go. I may have stumbled onto the right track.”

Mark grinned. “Then we both have to go.” He tapped his combadge. “Cryptography team, please report to the wardroom immediately.”

\* \* \*

“So you’re saying—what are you saying?” Phrebington said. The lizardlike Gnalish was standing in one corner of the wardroom, pointedly positioning himself as far from Kerasus as possible. The elderly human, for her part, sat placidly at the head of the wardroom table, with Throckmorton and Novac sitting to her left, T’Lura on her right. Anthony stood leaning against a rear bulkhead, with Bart sitting at the other head of the table.

Bart leaned forward. “I’m saying that we need to try investigating a language from the Dominion that’s as obscure to us as the Navajo language was to the Axis powers in World War Two on Earth.”

“Ah, yes, because, after all, we’ve had such tremendous cultural exchanges with them,” Phrebington said with a snort.

“Mr. Phrebington’s sarcasm notwithstanding,” T’Lura said, “he is right. Our cultural information on the Dominion is limited.”

“We know about their language, though,” Kerasus said in a voice that was at once paper-thin and rich with authority. Bart had spent the last several weeks wondering if he’d be able to pull that off when he was that old.

“What do we possibly know about their language?” Phrebington asked sharply.

Her tone now withering, Kerasus said, “Quite a bit, if you actually have paid attention to the recorded conversations and discussions involving the Founders, the Vorta, and other Dominion members. Untranslated, of course.”

“What good would that do?” Novac asked, sounding confused.

Throckmorton added, “It’s not like they’d use a language we’re familiar with for their code.”

“If they had, we’d have found it weeks ago,” Phrebington said, “and I’d be back on Gnala where it’s safe.”

Bart smiled a small smile. “If you give Janice a chance, I’m sure she’ll elaborate.”

Kerasus smiled right back. “Thank you, Bartholomew.” Bart generally hated being called by his full first name, but he couldn’t bring himself to be annoyed when Kerasus did it. “My point is that it can’t be anything relating to the Founders or the Vorta in any case, because their actual language is too simplistic. The Founders didn’t even have a concept of vocal speech until they encountered solids. They communicate with each other through that Great Link of theirs, and only use a very basic spoken language—it’s the one they programmed into the Vorta and the Jem’Hadar as well. It makes them very easy to translate, which can be useful in diplomatic circumstances, though it makes for wretched poetry.”

Bart laughed. So did Novac and Throckmorton and Anthony. Phrebington didn’t. (Neither did T’Lura, but that was to be expected.)

“In any event,” Kerasus said, “that would explain why they haven’t used a purely linguistic base for their codes prior to this. The people running this war have only the simplest of linguistics to go on. It makes sense that only now, when we’ve done such a fine job of breaking through their codes, that they’re trying more esoteric methods.” The old woman’s breathing became more labored as she finished. “If we’re going to try this solution, we—we need to look to another—another member of the Dominion.”

“Hadn’t we already established that?” Phrebington asked snidely.

Anthony, meanwhile, walked over to where Kerasus was sitting. “Are you all right?”

She nodded quickly. “Yes, I’m fine. Just a bit—a bit too much there.”

“As I suspected,” Phrebington said, “talking too much will get the best of her.”

Bart sighed. “The problem is, we don’t have any kind of cultural database on the Dominion member worlds. We can try to compare it to the ones we do have some records on from trips that ships made to the Gamma Quadrant, but I can’t imagine they’d have used anyone that was visited by an allied ship in the past.”

“That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t investigate those languages,” Novac said.

“Just to rule it out,” Throckmorton added.

Nodding, Bart said, “You two handle that, then. I think Deep Space 9 has complete records of all the Gamma Quadrant worlds that have been visited since the wormhole was discovered.”

“It’s a waste of time.” Phrebington started to walk toward the door. “This is an utter waste of time.”

Anthony moved to block the door. “You haven’t been dismissed yet, Mr. Phrebington.”

“Commander, it’s late, I’m tired, and I’m not in the mood for tiresome—”

“I’m not terribly interested in what you’re ‘in the mood for,’ Mr. Phrebington.” Anthony spoke in a moderate tone, the picture of calm. “We’ve all got a job to do here, and it’s an important one. Lives depend on what this team accomplishes here. And by putting that uniform on, you have already committed to doing whatever is necessary to keep those lost lives to a minimum. So what you’re in the mood for really doesn’t enter into it. Now, you’re not leaving until Mr. Faulwell or I dismiss you. Is that clear, Mr. Phrebington?”

In direct contrast to the barking tones with which DuVall had asked that last question three weeks

earlier, Anthony was downright conversational, giving the words no more weight than if he were asking Phrebington for a cup of coffee. Yet it was much more effective, as the Gnalish turned tail (literally) and went back to where he'd been standing against the bulkhead.

"There is a possibility we have not considered," T'Lura said.

"What's that?" Bart asked, grateful to the Vulcan woman for changing the subject—or, rather, getting back to the original subject.

"It is true that the Federation has had comparatively limited contact with the Dominion, and that Romulan and Klingon contact has been even less. However, there are other nations in the Alpha Quadrant."

Novac chuckled. "It's not like the Cardassians or the Breen are going to share their cultural databases with us."

T'Lura steepled her hands together, elbows resting on the wardroom table. "I was referring to the Ferengi."

That got everyone's attention. Bart noted that Anthony had a particularly wide-eyed look, as if he were disappointed in himself for not thinking of it first.

Phrebington, of course, sounded more disappointed in T'Lura. "The Ferengi? If you were anyone else, I'd say you were joking."

"Insults are not necessary, Mr. Phrebington," T'Lura said primly. "First contact with the Dominion was, in fact, made by the Ferengi Alliance, and they have made numerous trade agreements with a variety of Dominion races. It is quite possible that there are those in the Alliance who have the information we need."

"That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard," Phrebington said. "Is this what we've come to? Relying on the Ferengi?"

Grinning, Bart said, "Oh, the Ferengi can be damn reliable. You just have to know how to acquire the information."

Throckmorton frowned. "I don't think Commander DuVall would be able to requisition gold-pressed latinum for this."

"That won't be necessary," Anthony said. Bart couldn't help but notice the mischievous smile on his face. "I think I can find what we need. I'll need a couple of days to track down the DaiMon I'm thinking of."

Novac shrugged. "We'll need that long to go through what we have on the Dominion in any case."

"At least," Throckmorton said.

"All right, let's pursue this," Bart said. "Meantime, the rest of us keep doing what we've been doing. Just because this is a possibility doesn't mean it's the only one. We may get lucky. Dismissed."

Phrebington muttered, "Lucky—that would be a first."

“War’s full of firsts, Mr. Phrebington,” Anthony said with a grin. “I’d say we’re due for one.”

\* \* \*

The next week was chock full of activity.

Novac and Throckmorton went over the known data about Dominion linguistics, paltry as it was, and concluded, unsurprisingly, that there was no connection between it and the new code.

Bart, T’Lura, and Phrebington continued to search for more ways to crack the code, with the same lack of success they’d been having since Bart’s arrival.

Kerasus, unfortunately, spent the week in the infirmary, her inability to catch her breath during the meeting turning out to be a symptom of some lung trouble. The starbase doctor assured everyone that it was routine for someone of her advanced age, and she’d be released in a few days, “if not sooner.” The last was added in an exasperated tone that suggested to Bart that the older woman didn’t appreciate being bedridden when there was work to be done.

As for Bart and Anthony, they had dinner at the Trill restaurant the following night to “finish off” the previous dinner. Then they met again the next night. Soon, it became a nightly ritual. After five days, Bart accompanied Anthony back to the latter’s quarters after the restaurant closed, since they weren’t finished with their spirited discussion (Bart was having far too much fun, and they were being far too civil, for it to be categorized as an argument) about literature. Anthony didn’t like anything written since around 2350 or so, preferring the neo-Gothic books of the earlier part of the century. At the end of the night, Anthony promised to read Van Der Weir, though Bart suspected it was mostly just to shut Bart up about how excellent her work was.

The morning that the Ferengi DaiMon finally arrived, Bart had spent the night in Anthony’s quarters, his happiness with his private life now in inverse proportion to his frustration with the lack of results in the crypto project.

DuVall, Anthony, and Bart met with the Ferengi, a short, rotund man named Bikk. The DaiMon sat his portly form at the foot of the wardroom table, opposite DuVall.

“So,” the commander said, “Mr. Mark tells me that you’re something of an expert on the Dominion.”

“Something like that,” Bikk said with a toothy smile that made Bart want to run to his quarters and make sure all his possessions were still there. “I spent a year living in the Gamma Quadrant, supervising Ferengi interests on the behalf of Grand Nagus Zek.”

Anthony nodded in appreciation. “That must’ve required a hefty bribe.”

“Several dozen, actually, but those have been recouped a thousandfold. The Tulaberry wine business is quite profitable on that side of the wormhole. Not only that, but the person I had to give the most kickbacks to was later stripped of his standing by the Ferengi Commerce Authority, so now I keep even more profits. It’s quite a tidy arrangement.”

“Especially since you’ve been selling information about the Dominion to allied powers,” Mark said. “Not to mention arranging the talks between Gul Dukat and the Vorta that led to Cardassia joining the Dominion.”

Bart swallowed. He hadn't known this. Based on the sputter that came from the head of the table, neither did DuVall.

"You mean to tell me that you're responsible—"

"Now now, Commander," Bikk said, not at all flustered by this revelation. "Don't give me your superior, self-righteous Federation posturing. Outrage that a Ferengi will sell out to the highest bidder is a waste of your time and mine. If you didn't think I could be bought, I wouldn't be here."

"I ought to haul you up on charges right now, DaiMon."

"In which court, Commander?" Bikk stood up. "I see no reason to listen to this. Mr. Mark, I was under the impression that a serious business offer was being made."

"It is," Anthony said with a glare at his CO. "We're looking for a complete linguistic database of all the Dominion member races."

Bikk threw his bulbous head back and laughed before sitting back down. "And what makes you think I have such a thing?"

"Because you're you, Bikk. Because you lived in the Gamma Quadrant for a year making huge profits—yet your personal bank balance when you left was almost exactly the same as when you arrived. To me, that means that you spent your profits. And again, because you're you, you probably spent that money on amassing information that you could sell on this side of the wormhole."

Face darkening, voice deepening, Bikk asked slowly, "How did you learn what my personal bank balance was?"

Anthony just grinned in response. Bart had to hold back a grin of his own. Starfleet Intelligence had impressive resources when they put their minds to it, and a Ferengi who lived in the Gamma Quadrant for a year was definitely going to be a very large reading on SI's sensors.

"Never you mind how we got it," DuVall said quickly. "The point is, we know what you've been up to, DaiMon."

Realizing that he wasn't going to get a straight answer, Bikk leaned back in his chair. "Assuming I have such esoteric information, what would you be prepared to offer me in exchange for it?"

Anthony leaned forward. "You're familiar with the Breen energy-draining weapon, yes?"

"Of course. And only the Klingons can defend against it, which is, by the way, a sad commentary on the state of this little war you're fighting. You'd have been better off entering a trade agreement like we did."

"We're not profiteers, mister," DuVall said.

Bikk shrugged. "Your loss, our gain."

"Your gain, anyhow." Anthony smiled. "We're developing a countermeasure against the Breen weapon. You can have access to all our research—"

"As if I'd need it. We're not at war, Mr. Mark."

“—and to the method for countering the weapon once we have it.” Anthony continued as if the Ferengi hadn’t spoken.

DuVall stood up and fixed a furious gaze on his adjutant. “Are you out of your mind?”

Without looking at DuVall, Anthony said, “Starfleet Command has already signed off on this, sir.”

“Dammit, we shouldn’t be giving these big-eared cretins access to our military secrets.”

Bikk smiled that unctuous smile again. “Your commander has a point. Besides—”

“Don’t kid yourself into thinking that the Dominion will stop with the allies. If we lose this war, Ferengi independence won’t be long for this galaxy. And you never know when you might need a defense against a Breen ship.”

A pudgy hand ran thoughtfully over the edge of Bikk’s right ear. “Perhaps.” He stood up. “I will consult my copious files and see what I can provide.”

As soon as the Ferengi left, Anthony let out a long breath. “That went better than expected.”

“Yup.”

Bart turned to look at Commander DuVall and was shocked to see that the station commander was smiling. It was a sight Bart hadn’t seen in his month on the starbase and found it more than a little disconcerting.

“Good work, Mr. Mark,” DuVall continued. “I think we’ve baited this particular fish lock, stock, and barrel.”

Wincing at the mixed metaphor, Bart said, “You mean to say—”

“Yes, it was an act, Mr. Faulwell. You don’t really think Mr. Mark here would go over my head like that, do you?”

“The thought had crossed my mind,” Bart said dryly.

Anthony chuckled. “Bikk likes the idea of being the cause of some kind of rift between Starfleet officers. Especially if I’m one of them. He and I have—well, a history. That’s how I know he’s got what we need. He’s an information pusher, and this is exactly the sort of thing he’d have access to.”

“I just hope it pans out. We’re still taking a stab in the dark with this whole idea. It could wind up being nothing.” Bart let out a long breath. “I’d hate for us to give away important military stuff for nothing.”

DuVall shrugged. “It’s not like we wouldn’t have shared the data with the Ferengi if they asked.”

“But they wouldn’t ask,” Anthony added. “They’d assume they’d have to pay for it. So we might as well oblige them.”

“Well, good work,” Bart said with a grin.

“Glad we have your approval, Mr. Faulwell,” DuVall said snidely. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have actual work to do. There’s a war on, you know.”

“I’ve heard that,” Bart said with a straight face.

DuVall ignored the crack and left the wardroom, leaving Anthony and Bart alone.

“So, what say we celebrate tonight?” Anthony said. “Maybe do dinner in my quarters instead of at the restaurant?”

Bart grinned. “Works for me.”

\* \* \*

DaiMon Bikk returned the following day with a complete linguistic database of Gamma Quadrant aliens known to the Dominion—and known to nonaffiliated people such as the Dosai and the Wadi—and Anthony provided him with all the data from Starfleet Headquarters on their progress in combatting the Breen weapon, with the promise of more to come. The morning’s dispatches had told of a Jem’Hadar ship outfitted with the energy-dampening weapon that had been captured by rebel Cardassians and brought to Deep Space 9. Studying the weapon itself would no doubt provide the breakthrough needed. Bikk seemed very pleased with this news, though he was not as thrilled with this transaction as Bart might have expected.

“He’s just cranky because we were able to learn his personal bank balance,” Anthony said in bed that night when Bart broached the subject. “That’s the functional equivalent of peeking into his bedroom. But he’ll get over it.”

A day later, Bart sat in the starbase lounge drinking a cup of coffee, rereading an old Van Der Weir, and lamenting the starbase’s inability to do a proper French roast, when his combadge sounded with the papery voice of Janíce Kerasus, newly released from the infirmary. “Bartholomew, you need to come to the lab rightnow.”

Tapping his combadge, Bart said, “What is it, Janíce?”

“Paydirt.”

Grinning, Bart left his coffee unfinished and went straight for the lab, where the rest of the team was waiting.

“We’ve found our Navajo,” Kerasus said as soon as the doors closed behind Bart. “It even follows the same pattern.”

Bart frowned. “What do you mean?”

“There’s a small tribe of aboriginal types on the Karemma homeworld. They live on a small island in the middle of one of their oceans. They don’t care about technology, or—” Kerasus interrupted herself with a coughing fit.

Novac took over as Kerasus reached into her tunic to retrieve her medication. “They have a ridiculously complex language. The UT can’t make heads or tails of it, but it’s a perfect match for the new codes. All we’ve got to do is build a translation matrix.”



“All we’ve got to do?” Phrebington said irritably. “The universal translator insists that it’s random noise. I’m not completely convinced that it isn’t random noise and that Ferengi cheated us.”

“Even the UT isn’t perfect,” Throckmorton said. “Hell, it sometimes still has problems with the Klingon language.”

Phrebington made a disparaging noise. “That’s not evidence of anything. The Klingon language really is random noise—”

“Let’s get to it, people,” Bart said quickly before another argument erupted.

He and Anthony exchanged a quick glance. Finally, it looked like they were on the right track.

## Androssi Vessel Overseen by Biron

STARDATE 53678.5

According to the remainder of the logs the Yridian provided, Faulwell’s team was able to build a translation matrix for the language and decode the Dominion transmissions. It required manually adding a subroutine to all universal translator devices, which struck Biron as inefficient. Androssi computers were equipped with dimensional enhancers to allow such upgrades to be performed instantaneously on all equipment. Yet another way in which the Federation is demonstrably inferior to us.

It made Biron’s defeats all the more galling.

Biron studied several other missions of the U.S.S. *da Vinci* itself, from their assorted construction missions (an irrigation system on a desert world designated *Elvan*; a subspace accelerator on the crystalline world designated *Sarindar*), salvage missions (a one-hundred-year-old Starfleet starship, the U.S.S. *Defiant* from an interphasic rift in the fabric of space; an alien vessel that the U.S.S. *da Vinci* crew members gave the inappropriate name “the Beast,” but which was in fact a ship belonging to a species known as the *Hlangry*, which Biron himself had also encountered two-point-nine cycles earlier), and rescue missions (prisoners from the malfunctioning prison designated the *Kursican Orbital Platform*; the mining colony of *Beta Argola* from an attack by the species known as the *Munqu*).

He noted several references to Commander Sonya Gomez’s exploits during the Dominion War on the U.S.S. *Sentinel* and decided that it was time to read about some of those missions as well. . . .

U.S.S. *Sentinel*

STARDATE 52646.1

Lt. Commander Sonya Gomez had been wandering the halls of Deep Space 9 since the *Sentinel* docked at the station a few hours ago.

I can’t believe I’m lost. I never get lost.

It was a point of pride with her as much as anything. She had always had a dead-on sense of direction. Within three months at the Academy, the fourth-year cadets were asking her for shortcuts around campus. On the *Enterprise*, the *Oberth*, *Altair IV*, and the *Sentinel*, she knew her way around almost

instantly, and never needed to consult the computer for directions.

Yet this Cardassian-built space station was vexing her.

As she turned a corner from one identical dark corridor into another identical dark corridor, she took refuge in a familiar face heading toward her.

“Chief!”

Miles Edward O’Brien looked up from the padd he was studying to see Gomez. “Sonya! Er, sorry, Commander.”

Gomez grinned. “Sonya’s just fine, Chief. How’ve you been?”

“About like you’d expect,” the taller man said with a wry smile.

“Are Keiko and Molly doing all right?”

“Just fine, all things considered. Keiko’s not thrilled with being this close to the front, but with the way things are going, no place is all that safe.”

Remembering the images of the Breen attack on San Francisco that she saw in the Sentinel’s observation lounge, Gomez was forced to agree. “I know what you mean.”

“Oh, and Molly has a brother—Kirayoshi.”

That put the smile back on Gomez’s face. She had always thought the chief and Keiko Ishikawa made a good couple, and she was glad to see that her instincts had proven correct. If only those instincts had been as accurate with Kieran, she thought, then put it out of her head. She and Kieran Duffy had broken up when she transferred off the *Enterprise* to the *Oberth* almost eight years ago. They had promised to keep in touch, but didn’t. At times she missed him horribly, at times she forgot all about him. She idly wondered if O’Brien had heard from him—after all, the chief had remained on the *Enterprise* for another year and a half after she left before he took over as chief of operations at DS9.

Instead, she kept the topic comfortable. “I hope his birth went more smoothly than Molly’s.”

“You could say that. Worf didn’t have to deliver this one, at least.”

Gomez laughed. Worf’s impromptu midwifing of Keiko had happened less than a week before Gomez left for the *Oberth*, and had gotten her a lot of storytelling mileage on that one-year assignment. She had forgotten that the Klingon, too, was now assigned to DS9. It’s like it’s old home week. . . .

O’Brien continued. “But, ah, it was actually Colonel Kira who carried the baby to term. It’s a very long story,” he said quickly, obviously not wanting to get into it.

Taking the hint, she said, “I wish I had time to hear it, but I need to get to the meeting in the wardroom.”

“I won’t keep you, then,” O’Brien said.

“Actually, I need you to tell me how to get there. I’ve gotten completely turned around.”

Chuckling, O'Brien said, "Cardassian architecture." He quickly gave a series of clear directions that included a turbolift ride two levels up.

"I really did get lost, didn't I?"

"A bit, yeah," O'Brien said with a smile. "Don't worry—I won't tell. Your reputation's safe with me."

"Thanks. And give my love to the family—oh, and in case I don't see him, say hi to Worf for me."

"Will do. Take care, Sonya!"

Following O'Brien's directions brought Gomez to the wardroom in under three minutes, and only five minutes after the meeting's official start time—which meant, of course, that not everyone was there and it hadn't begun yet. Gomez's CO, Captain Anna Maria Amalfitano, was already present, along with the Sentinel's first officer Lt. Commander Kuljit Patel. Gomez took some satisfaction out of the fact that she couldn't see their tactical officer, so she wasn't the last one to arrive.

Of course, given the crowd in the wardroom, she might have missed Grimnar, their Bolian tactical officer, but a two-meter-tall blue-skinned humanoid tended to stand out, even in a room full of Klingons, Romulans, and Starfleet officers. The senior staffs of the *Musashi* and the *Fredrickson* made up the remainder of the Starfleet personnel, and she assumed that the Klingons and Romulans were involved in whatever their mission was.

Grimnar finally came in about two seconds before the arrival of Admiral Ross, Captain Sisko, General—no, Chancellor Martok, and a Romulan general she didn't recognize. As soon as they did, many took seats, with most of the rest standing along the walls, as there were far more people than available seats. Gomez found herself wedged between a surly-looking-even-by-their-standards Klingon and a bored-looking Starfleet officer with full lieutenant's pips.

Sisko began without preamble, speaking in an intense, deep voice. "The mission we have for you all is twofold. The *Sentinel*, the *Musashi*, and the *Fredrickson* will be dispatched to the Dominion outpost in Sector 25013."

Amalfitano blinked. "That's a bit deep into enemy territory, isn't it?"

Martok chuckled. "Not as deep as others shall go."

"A fleet of twelve warbirds, aided by some Klingon vessels," the Romulan general said, sounding almost pained at having to even acknowledge the Klingon contribution, "will be moving under cloak to the Orias system. That system is under constant antiproton scan by the outpost you will be attacking."

Nodding, Amalfitano said, "So you need us to take down the outpost, or at least distract them long enough for the cloaked ships to sneak in and wipe out the shipyards on Orias III?"

"Exactly," Sisko said. "With the Breen energy-dampening weapon neutralized, and the Cardassian resistance sabotaging their ships, we need to strike at a decisive target and start to get our momentum back. We think this attack on Orias will aid in that."

"The timing will be critical," the Romulan added. "We won't be able to communicate with each other, obviously, so you must arrive at the outpost at the designated time so we can begin our run."

One of the other Starfleet captains asked, “What kind of defenses can we expect?”

Ross spoke up then. “Intelligence reports indicate that there are only two Jem’Hadar strike ships guarding it.”

The third Starfleet captain made an irritated noise. “Not to put too fine a point on it, Admiral, Captain, but aren’t three ships a bit—well, inadequate? We’ll be lucky to get that far into Dominion territory as it is.”

There were some rumblings from the Klingons at that, but Ross simply said, “Unfortunately, you’re all we can spare. We’re putting together a massive offensive against the Dominion. This is one of many strikes we’re attempting simultaneously to keep their forces spread thin. We have to press the attack now.”

“However,” Sisko said, “you will have a relatively easy time getting there. Thanks to the Cardassian resistance, we’ve been able to obtain a course that will get you to the outpost without encountering any patrols. It’s a less direct route, so you’ll have to go at warp seven most of the way to get there at the pre-arranged time.”

Patel said, “This is assuming that the patrols stick to their assigned routes. We can’t very well count on that.”

“We’re past the point where we can play things safe, Commander,” Sisko said just as the Klingon next to Gomez made a disparaging comment under his breath about Patel’s lineage.

Before her first officer could say anything else, Amalfitano spoke. “We’ll be fine, Captain, don’t worry. We’ll clear a path for the rest of you,” she added, looking around the room.

Then her gaze fell upon Gomez. This is my moment, I guess, she thought. The chief engineer hadn’t really needed to be at this briefing, but she had come up with an idea that the captain wanted brought up in front of Sisko and the other higher-ups. “Captain, Admiral, if I may?”

“Yes, Commander Gomez, what is it?” Sisko asked.

Both Martok and the Romulan bristled, but Sisko and Ross each gave her expectant looks, as if they were genuinely interested in what she might have to say. Gomez took that as an encouraging sign. “We might be able to do better than just having a specific course. We can alter our ships to make us look like Cardassian freighters.”

“We’ve tried that in the past,” Sisko said. “But at this point, the Jem’Hadar and the Cardassians know to look for it.”

“With respect, sir, those had been changes to the shield harmonics. What I’m suggesting is altering the warp fields of the ships. We’ve tested it on the Sentinel, and it should fool even Dominion sensors at warp speeds.”

One of the Romulans sneered. “And when you come out of warp and are revealed to be a Federation ship?”

“We keep the warp field in place. As long as they don’t do an intensive scan, they shouldn’t be able to tell the difference between it and a hull configuration. In fact, we can also change the shield harmonics to

match. They're less likely to look for that bit of misdirection if the ship's warp field reads as an allied ship."

Ross seemed intrigued by the idea. "Can you maintain warp seven with this reconfiguration?"

Gomez blinked. She hadn't thought of that—but then, she hadn't known they'd be forced to maintain warp seven until two minutes ago. "I'm afraid not. We could only do warp four—any higher and the modified warp field will tear the hull apart."

"Then it won't be practical for this mission. Still, it's a good idea. Send the specifications on that to the station—and," he added with glances at Martok and the Romulan general, "we'll share it with everyone here, see if we can make it work across the board." He turned back to Gomez. "Good work, Commander."

Gomez nodded, but was still disappointed. She was sure that the trick would work—but not at warp seven. She had been hoping for a practical test, and this mission would have been ideal for it.

\* \* \*

The good news was that the route provided by the Cardassian resistance had done the trick, and the three Starfleet vessels arrived at the outpost unmolested. The other good news was that Intelligence was right, and there were only two Jem'Hadar strike ships guarding the outpost.

The rest of the news was rather bad.

For one thing, the outpost itself turned out to be armed with energy weapons of a type Gomez didn't recognize. They plowed through the Fredrickson's shields with little effort, leaving the Excelsior-class ship a sitting duck for the Jem'Hadar. It was destroyed within two minutes of their arrival in the sector.

"Steinberg, give me a reading on that damn weapon!" Gomez bellowed at her assistant chief.

In a voice as calm as hers was frantic, the black-haired lieutenant said, "I'm almost finished with my analysis, Commander."

"Finish faster." She gazed at the viewscreen that showed what the bridge had on their main viewer. The Musashi had gotten some shots into the outpost before one of the Jem'Hadar ships cut them off. Now each ship had the Jem'Hadar on their tail, with the outpost itself taking potshots as well.

The Sentinel's shields were now down to twenty percent.

Patel's voice sounded over the comm systems. "Divert power to shields."

In addition to getting their new assignment, the Sentinel had gotten crew replacements at DS9. One of them, a kid who didn't look old enough to be let out of his house alone, said, "I can't get the power to divert to the shields!" Gomez could hear the panic in the young man's voice.

"Take it from wherever you need it, Ensign, just keep the shields up."

"No, it's not that—the control circuits are fused."

Gomez rolled her eyes. "If you can't reprogram, reroute."

The ensign nodded quickly. “Right, of course. Sorry, Commander.”

“Just keep your head cool.” Was I ever that young and stupid? Gomez thought.

“Commander,” Steinberg said, “if we bring the shield frequency down to the lower regions, we should be able to defend against the outpost’s weapon.”

“Lower?”

“Yes, sir.”

It was a counterintuitive move—which, no doubt, was the Dominion’s thinking.

The baby ensign said, “Shields back up to eighty percent.”

“Nice work,” Gomez said. “Steinberg, bring the frequency down.”

“Aye,” the lieutenant said.

She tapped her combadge. “Bridge, we’re lowering shield frequency—that should allow us to defend against the outpost. Recommend transmitting data to the Musashi immediately.”

“Acknowledged,” Patel said. “Good job, Gomez.”

The Jem’Hadar ship then fired on them again, pounding at the shields.

“At this frequency,” Steinberg said, “we’ve got to keep them at sixty percent, or the Jem’Hadar will rip us to pieces.”

Gomez went through the mental picture of the Sentinel in her head. The Akira -class ship had a compact, retro design, reminiscent of the old pre-Federation Earth starships. There wasn’t a lot of wasted space. Still...

“Bridge, we need to evac decks eight, nine, and ten right away.” Those were crew quarters, holodecks, and recreational facilities—none of them necessary right now, and only minimal staff was there at present.

Amalfitano and Patel, bless their hearts, didn’t even question the request. “Attention all hands,” Amalfitano said. “This is the captain. Evacuate decks eight, nine, and ten immediately.”

“Steinberg, the second everyone’s out of those decks, cut off all power, and divert as much of it as you can to the shields.” Silently, Gomez cursed whichever idiot designer thought it was a good idea to make holodeck systems incompatible with other ship systems. We really could use that power right now. But at least the other power that was used for those decks would be put to good use.

Chatter from the bridge came over the intercom.

“Continuous fire on the Jem’Hadar.”

“Their aft shields are failing.”

“Concentrate fire there, Grimnar.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Tenmei, bring us to 253 mark 9, try to drive a wedge between them.”

“Direct hit—our shields are down to sixty-five percent.”

Steinberg looked at Gomez. “Sir, we can’t keep this up—if we stick with the lower frequency, we’re more vulnerable to the Jem’Hadar.”

“We’re not exactly overburdened with options,” Gomez said.

“Shields are down.”

Gomez turned. “What the hell happened?”

Steinberg checked a console. “Lucky shot—they got through to one of our emitters.”

“The Jem’Hadar don’t rely on luck,” Gomez said. “And neither do we—reroute, get the shields back up to full. Are those three decks evacuated yet?”

“Not yet.”

“We can’t wait, divert the power.”

“Aye, sir.”

Even on as small a ship as the Sentinel, there was considerable waste in the life support system. Even with it taken off-line, there would be enough air just sitting in the corridors to last a couple of hours, and at red alert, they’d probably all have wristlamps in any case. And if they don’t, that’s just too damn bad, she thought, a bit unkindly. They should’ve evac’d by now.

The young ensign—whose name, she finally remembered, was Natale—said, “Shields back up to full. Sir, this juryrig won’t last, request permission to rewire junction 92A5.”

Gomez frowned, then smiled. “Good idea.” That junction was a backup for holodeck systems, and could easily accommodate a shield rerouting, at least for a couple of hours. It would take a few minutes, but the present setup would hold in the meanwhile.

“Thank you, sir.” Ensign Natale moved off, grinning with an enthusiasm that Gomez remembered seeing in the mirror back when she was the dumb young ensign and Geordi La Forge was the chief engineer doling out praise only when earned.

She often missed those days on the Enterprise. She had so many good friends there—Lian T’su, Reg Barclay, Gar Costa, Wes Crusher, Ella Clancy, Denny Russell. Even La Forge was more a friend than he ever really was a CO.

And, of course, Kieran. Lovable, goofy, wonderful Kieran.

One of the other engineers cried out from near the warp core, startling her out of her all-too-brief

reverie. “Commander, containment system’s fluctuating—we’ve got to take the warp drive off-line.”

Dammit, dammit, dammit. “Do it.” She tapped her combadge. “Bridge, we’ve lost warp drive.”

“Not much of an issue right now,” Patel said. “At least you got shields reenergized.”

Gomez pursed her lips. “Yeah, but our hat’s running out of rabbits.”

As if on cue, one of the Jem’Hadar strike ships exploded.

“Maybe yours is.” Gomez could visualize Patel’s toothy grin.

“Sir, the Musashi has lost shields. The other Jem’Hadar ship is moving in.”

“Tenmei, cut them off, draw their fire.”

“Aye, sir.”

The maneuver apparently worked, as the Sentinel started taking dozens more hits, from both the outpost and the Jem’Hadar. “We can’t keep this up,” Steinberg said, the first sign of tenseness creeping into an exterior that was normally a Vulcanlike calm; the noncoms had nicknamed him “T” Steinberg.

“Easy, Steinberg, we’ll be fine.” Gomez tried to sound reassuring, but she was too busy trying to figure out what the Musashi was doing. It looked like...

No!

The Musashi was on a suicide run—headed straight for the outpost.

The Jem’Hadar realized it too, obviously, as it and the outpost both changed their firing pattern to concentrate on the Musashi.

Amalfitano’s voice cried out, “Tenmei, get between them and the Musashi. We have to give them time!”

Two seconds that seemed like hours passed, and the Musashi rammed into the Dominion outpost, annihilating it.

Sonya Gomez learned the most valuable lesson of her life shortly after she reported to the Enterprise, and the Borg carved a section out of the ship’s hull, costing the ship eighteen crew members. When she found she couldn’t get her mind around the loss of eighteen people, La Forge had said the words that she spoke now, over a decade later, to her staff:

“We’ll have time to grieve later. Steinberg, get the shields back to their regular frequency. Ensign, how’s our juryrig?”

“Almost done,” Natale called out from under a console.

“Be done, I want this ship with full defenses.”

“Grimnar,” Amalfitano was saying even as Gomez spoke, “give the Jem’Hadar everything we’ve got.”



Two seconds that actually seemed like two seconds later, the Jem'Hadar ship exploded in a satisfying conflagration, a plume of fire that was quickly consumed by the vacuum of space.

Which left the Sentinel alone amid a cloud of debris that used to be four starships and an outpost, behind enemy lines, without warp power.

"Engineering," Patel said, "how soon can you get the warp drive up and running?"

Gomez and Steinberg walked over to inspect the warp core. "Give us a minute."

Amalfitano said, "Make it a quick minute, Commander—the Jem'Hadar called for backup, and I really don't want to be here when they get here."

Grimnar's voice cut in. "Long-range sensors are picking up a Breen ship."

"Then we're dead." That, to Gomez, sounded like Ensign Simas, a notorious doomsayer whom Gomez had rotated out of the engine room due to the effect he had on morale. She wondered how the hell he contrived to get bridge duty.

She also wondered if there was some way she could change the readings that were now displayed in front of her and Steinberg.

Patel said, "Grimnar, how soon before the Breen get here?"

"At present speed, one hour, ten minutes."

"I was afraid of that," Gomez said. "Captain, we won't be able to get the warp drive up and running in less than two hours."

"What if we do a cold restart?"

Gomez couldn't help but smile. "That estimate was with a cold restart, Captain."

"They'll know we're an enemy vessel a lot sooner than that," Grimnar said. "The debris will mask us for a little while, but the closer they get, the more likely they are to see us for what we are, in which case they may increase speed."

"No they won't," Gomez said without even realizing at first why she said it. Then she spent half a second thinking it through. "Steinberg, get to work on the warp core. Natale, you're with me—we need to bring the warp field on-line and reconfigure it."

Natale frowned. "What's the point of bringing the warp field on-line if we can't go to warp? Isn't that a huge waste of energy—especially if we don't have the matter/antimatter system on-line?"

The ensign's question was reasonable. Without the power provided by the constant annihilation of matter and antimatter in the core, the ship was running on emergency power. But then, Gomez thought, if this doesn't constitute an emergency, I don't know what does.

Before she could explain things to Natale, Amalfitano asked, "Are you thinking what I think you're thinking, Commander?"

“Yes, Captain—we’re going to reconfigure the warp field so those Breen think we’re a Cardassian freighter.”

Patel chuckled. “I guess your idea gets a practical run-through after all, Sonya.”

“So it would seem, sir, yes.”

“Get someone up here to install the holofilter on the comm systems,” Amalfitano said. “We’re gonna need to talk our way through this, too, and I think I’ll be more convincing as a gul than a captain.”

“Yes, sir.”

Gomez sent two of her people up to the bridge, then sat down with Natale and called up her specs for the warp field reconfiguration. Natale whistled. “Impressive work, Commander, if you don’t mind my saying so.”

“I do mind, Ensign,” she said, all seriousness—then broke into a grin. “Say that again after it works.”

“Yes, sir,” Natale said, returning the grin.

Good, Gomez thought, he’s set the grief aside. He’s not thinking about all the people who’ve died today—he’s focused on what he has to do to keep himself from being added to the list. That’s the only way we’re gonna get through this.

\* \* \*

Amazingly enough, the Breen bought it.

Gomez had been far too busy—first getting the warp field realigned, then helping Steinberg and the others get the containment unit up and running so that they could use the warp drive—to know what was happening on the bridge. All she knew was that the Breen ship went away after what she imagined was a tense fifteen minutes.

One hour and forty-seven minutes after they started, Gomez tapped her combadge and said, “Bridge, warp drive is on-line.”

“Two hours, huh?” Patel said.

“We were motivated to speed it up,” Gomez said with a relieved smile at Steinberg, who returned it.

“Good work down there,” Amalfitano said. “But keep that realigned warp field. We’re not on a timetable now, and I’m just as happy to stay at warp four if people will think we’re Cardassian.”

“No problem, Captain.”

She gave Steinberg a glance, and he nodded. “On it.”

Taking a look around at her staff, she took pride in what they had accomplished. In what she had accomplished. The idea of realigning the warp field had come to her in a night of tinkering—one of those inspirations that suddenly slams you behind the eyes. She stayed up all night working out the logistics, then brought it to Patel, who in turn brought it to Amalfitano, who told her to bring it to the meeting on

DS9.

An inspiration that quite probably saved all their lives.

It wasn't until they crossed safely back into Federation space—after being passed by several Jem'Hadar ships that didn't challenge them—that Gomez allowed herself to feel for the hundreds of people lost on the *Musashi* and the *Fredrickson*. The grief was only slightly alleviated by the news that the strike on Orias III was successful. It was a major victory for the Alpha Quadrant.

## **Androssi Vessel Overseen by Biron**

STARDATE 53678.9

Biron was starting to form a clearer picture of what it was that had enabled the crew of the *U.S.S. da Vinci* to outwit and defeat him on two occasions. It was something he never would have deduced based on the empirical evidence he had acquired in his face-to-face encounters.

The crew of the *U.S.S. da Vinci* improvised.

Biron always approached every mission with a carefully laid-out plan. True, there were always variables, but rarely did they impinge upon the plan to a degree that was mathematically significant.

On the other hand, the *U.S.S. da Vinci* crew seemed to be able to adapt to variables with great ease. Where the variables—mostly introduced by the very presence of the *U.S.S. da Vinci*—on the planet Maeglin and at the space station Empok Nor had proven to be too much for Biron to overcome, his opponents seemed to thrive on it.

Perhaps it was because they were so actively involved in military engagements. While Biron did occasionally have to defend his ship and engage in battle situations, they were comparatively rare. Androssi military engagements were handled by the Elite's standing army, supplemented as necessary by members of the worker class conscripted into service.

He would need to factor this ability into his plans.

That and the Starfleet people's inexplicable predilection for forming personal attachments. That was a definite weakness that Biron needed to exploit.

He made a note of these items, and then continued his research...

TO BE CONTINUED...

## **About the Author**

The co-developer of *Star Trek: S.C.E.*, KEITH R.A. DeCANDIDO has written or cowritten five previous eBooks in the series, including the award-winning stories *Fatal Error* and *Cold Fusion*, as well as the two-book *Invincible* (with David Mack) and the *Gateways* tie-in *Here There Be Monsters*. He also wrote the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* novel *Diplomatic Implausibility*, the *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* novel *Demons of Air and Darkness*, the cross-series duology *The Brave & the Bold*, the TNG comic book *Perchance to Dream*, and the DS9 novella "Horn and Ivory." The year 2003 will see the debut of *Star*

Trek: I.K.S. Gorkon—a sub-series that is the first to feature Star Trek’s most popular aliens, the Klingons, in a starring role—as well as a contribution to the Star Trek: The Lost Era miniseries, and more S.C.E. eBooks. In addition to all of this, Keith has written novels, short stories, and nonfiction books in the universes of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Doctor Who, Farscape, Gene Roddenberry’s Andromeda, Marvel Comics, Xena, and much more. He is the editor of the original science fiction anthology Imaginings and the author of the upcoming novel Dragon Precinct, which mixes high fantasy with police procedurals. Find out evil rumors about him by checking his official Web site at DeCandido.net, and start a few by joining his official fan club at [www.kradfanclub.com](http://www.kradfanclub.com). He has long since abandoned the outmoded notion of “sleep.”

## **Coming Next Month: Star Trek™: S.C.E. #22**

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by Keith R.A. DeCandido

Concluding the exciting untold tale of the Dominion War!

To prevent his being defeated by the S.C.E. crew of the U.S.S. da Vinci a third time, Overseer Biron of the Androssi has decided to learn about his enemies by studying their adventures during the conflict with the Dominion...

Following the battle at Chin'toka, the Federation captured a small ship inside a Jem'Hadar war vessel. Theda Vinci's S.C.E. team—led by Sonya Gomez's predecessor, Commander Salek of Vulcan—must determine the nature of the small ship. But will the mysterious vessel prove to be beneficial to the war effort—or deadly?

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