

STAR TREK

To Boldly Go...



EPISODE 1 - Ghosts in the Machine

Prologue

Stardate: 9667.2 (.3 per hour)

Earth date: March 26th, 2286

Setting: U.S.S. Columbia, NCC-1830, Light Cruiser

Stonn stepped out into the sunshine of the plaza. He had been inside this Starfleet administration building since their return to Earth two weeks prior, but now he was done. He had not been alone. The entire officer corps of the Columbia had been summoned to the San Francisco Starfleet Headquarters to be de-briefed.

The U.S.S. Columbia had spent the better part of the last year on a secret mission to the Wedge - the area of space between Romulan and Klingon space. The ship had been affixed with special equipment to aid it in its mission by reducing its profile making it stealthy. It also had had an extremely powerful sensor suite that gave it the ability to transit in almost absolute silence without losing its eyes and ears.

All that was history now, as the ship had limped back to Federation space after an incursion into Klingon space in an attempt to stop a Klingon coup d'état and a potential re-initiation of the Federation/Klingon conflict. They had been successful. The crew had stopped a Romulan vessel that had been built to look like a Federation Constitution-class vessel and was to make attacks within Klingon space, thus implicating the Federation. Fortunately the Columbia had also saved a Klingon captain named Vrang of the Bor-Klah and a few of his officers.

Upon their arrival home, and after their debrief, things had gotten strange. Stonn remembered how the Klingons were ushered away in silence and literally had disappeared. No one knew of them being on Earth - only those diplomats from Qo'nos were spoken of and they were currently in fierce debate with the Starfleet Council regarding Captain James T. Kirk. Stonn knew the legend of the captain of the U.S.S. Enterprise and he and his crew's great successes. It seemed to the Vulcan that the small eruption of fighting along the Klingon Neutral Zone was completely forgotten about here on Earth, and the Klingon's were ranting on about a new deadly weapon developed by the Federation. It all seemed illogical.

Stonn's second eyelids, a trait of his Vulcan heritage, aided in reducing the glare from the bright sunlight in the plaza. He watched as Jess and Grahm passed him with a quiet nod. A few moments later came the Trill, Tam; chief medical officer of the Columbia. They all were somewhat puzzled by how everything had turned out.

Captain Steven Darkan and his crew were given commendations in their efforts to quell the potential Klingon civil war. Then of a sudden, word came to them all that a tribunal had been commissioned to investigate the Columbia's breaking of Federation/Klingon law by crossing the Neutral Zone. All of the officers were called back to San Francisco and were once more debriefed, or perhaps it was interrogated. It was then, before the tribunal, that Darkan requested that his officers be released from any further investigation. He was taking full responsibility for the actions of the U.S.S. Columbia and no officer below him should be held accountable. To Stonn's surprise, the tribunal agreed and restored all of the Columbia's personnel back to operating status, save Darkan. Stonn now stood outside the building where his captain was being tried and most certainly losing his commission.

The Vulcan remembered the drink that they had had two nights prior. Darkan had quietly spoken, "Stonn... their just running through procedure. It is all a show. I am sure that when it is done, and things quiet down, I will be restored to active duty... but there is no sense in all of you being held up by this. You are a fine officer, and we had a fine crew... you all need to be out there doing what you do best. So, don't fight me on this, okay?"

Stonn did not. Now, with new orders in hand still within a sealed envelope, the Vulcan silenced his thoughts of what had been and made his way to a place that wasn't so trafficked by administrative Starfleet personnel. He found a bench that sat under a tree in the small park that was set in the center of the picturesque Starfleet campus. He broke the seal and pulled out his orders.

|| TO: COMMANDER STONN
|| FROM: STARFLEET COMMAND - ADM DEVEREAUX
|| STARDATE: 9667.2

////EYES ONLY////

COMMANDER STONN, YOU ARE TO REPORT TO THE USS COLUMBIA NCC-1830 WHERE YOU WILL TAKE COMMAND AS CAPTAIN. NEW CREW ASSIGNMENTS TO FOLLOW. ORDERS TO FOLLOW AFTER REPAIRS COMPLETE AND SHAKEDOWN IS PERFORMED.

ADM DEVEREAUX

The Vulcan lifted one eyebrow as he read the orders. Due to his people's art of controlling emotions, he made no other apparent sign of how his career with Starfleet had just changed save to say, "Interesting."

It was a half hour before Stonn could get the next shuttle up to high Earth orbit, where the Columbia was currently dry-docked. He collected the few personal things he had brought planetside and made his way to the shuttle launch. When he arrived, he saw some familiar faces, all carrying duffle bags full of their own possessions. The officer crew of the Columbia was returning to their ship.

Stonn let Graham and Townshend enter first, and then followed by Tam. He then entered and made room for the rest - Pushkin, Ramos and a Vulcan that no one had seen before. The shuttle pod was a bit cramped with everyone, but no one made any complaints. For most, the thought of their captain being left behind on Earth to face the tribunal alone filled their minds. Each wondered who the new captain would be and if they were even still assigned to the ship. Stonn, of course, knew the answers to most of their thoughts, but he did not yet share any of the orders that had come down from Admiral Deveraux.

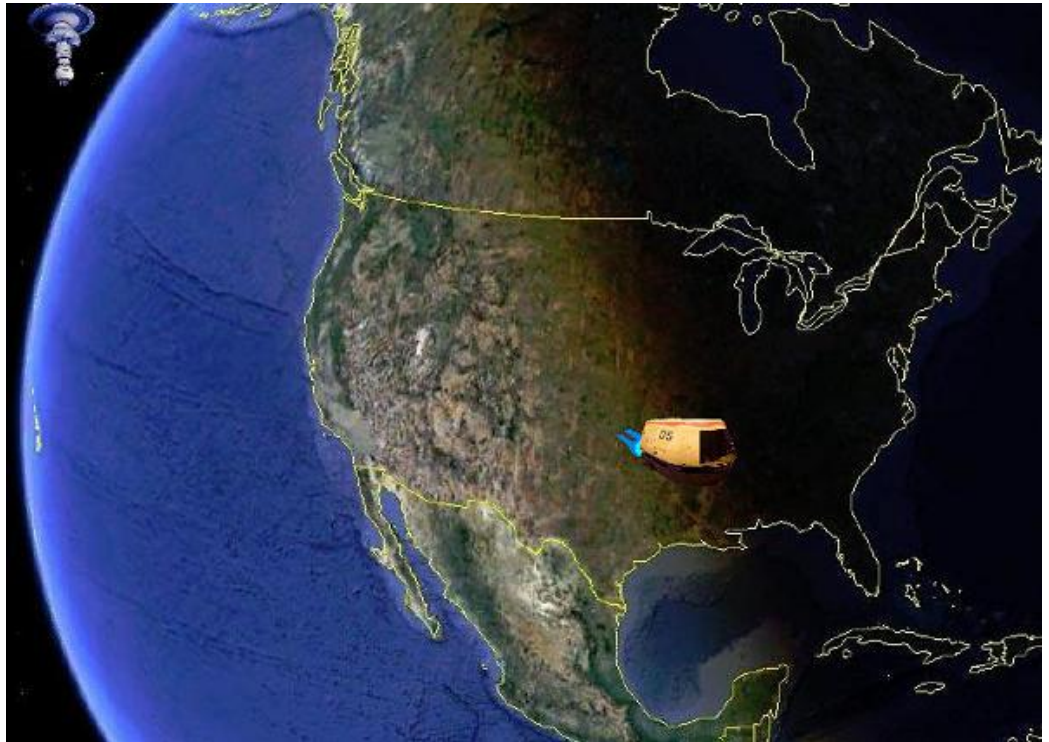
It was Tam that broke the silence, as the shuttle pod lifted off with a shake. "I want to let you all know that I have been re-assigned. I am returning to the Columbia for one more trip... back to my homeworld of Trill. It seems that the officer exchange is revolving in a new set of officers from both our worlds and one will be taking my place. I don't know if any will be assigned to the ship, but you never know. I also would like to add that it was a pleasure to serve with you all - through good and bad. We were really put to the challenge and I think we came through pretty good... except for a bump or two." The doctor rubbed his head and laughed a bit, jesting over the concussion and coma that he had barely survived in their battle with the Romulans. His friends and fellow crewmen also smiled and laughed, but it was bittersweet. In truth, the Columbia had lost over fifty of its crew in that battle, and the laughter that they shared was healing. As officers, none would forget the lives that were lost in service to the Fleet, under their command, but they knew that they must let go of any fears and doubts. The laughter helped with that.

There was an awkward silence that Tam had not intended on creating, but Stonn put an end to it with his monotone voice, "Ms. Townshend, when we arrive on the Columbia, I would like you to call a meeting of all senior officer staff to the main briefing room on deck two."

"Yes, sir," replied Jess. She thought Stonn's request a bit moot, seeing as most of the ship's remaining officers were on the pod, but she said nothing.

The shuttle broke through the Earth's thermosphere and began to make a sweeping turn. Out the front viewscreen, Earth Starbase could be seen just beginning to drop over the horizon and when the pod had completed its turn, the crew could see where day was giving way to night in North America.

The trip continued for another twenty minutes until at long last the massive dry-dock appeared, glinting in the light of the sun. Within



its mesh, the Columbia hung moored there with both tractor beams and mooring cables. As they fast approached, the crew could see where great palettes of the ship's skin was removed and suspended above the main body, while crews in EVA suits and workerbee shuttles made finishing repairs. The Columbia had been in dry-dock now for over ten weeks, going through refits, repairs, and removal of equipment from its previous mission.

This was home to some of those aboard the pod; for others it was a ride home; and for a few it was a quick stop before they were off on new adventures of their own.



Graham thought the Miranda-class a sleek vessel and the Columbia had served her crew well. Yes, some of his shipmates had not come home from their previous mission, but still the ship had fought well. Now with her superstructure re-engineered and systems repaired, she looked ready to take once more to the heavens. He hoped that he would be able to be part of her next journey.

The shuttle passed over the dorsal side of the great saucer and the crew saw the huge bold letters NC-1830 U.S.S. COLUMBIA just before her bridge dome. The ship's running lights were not yet lit, but still the insignia was plainly visible underneath the spacedock assembly frame's massive lights. Pushkin could see where the plasma scoring had been cleaned away and fresh new navy gray paint covered the hull. The small shuttle pod then went left, passing over the glowing bridge dome and then the starboard phaser array. The saucer disappeared beneath and the pod dropped down, reversing course as it did coming under the ventral side of the Columbia.

The crewmembers could see the yawning doors of docking port 4 wide open and the docking collar well lit for the pilot to navigate. The matter was irrelevant as a voice came over the speaker of the pod, "Shuttle Pod 223, we have your approach now and have taken over remote command. Sit back and enjoy the ride." The pilot leaned back from his console as the Columbia took over navigation of the small pod which shook slightly as tractor beams also locked on. The view changed again when the shuttle was turned around 180 degrees, then slowly it was drawn back into the docking port until its collar mated with the Columbia. There was another shudder, a cessation of movement, lights blinked green and then a hiss of air.

The pod doors opened and the crew stepped onto the bustling deck 8 of the Columbia. Mr. Stonn looked to the crew, "I will see you all in the briefing room once you have taken your personals to your quarters and have settled in." The senior officer staff nodded a confirmation and each moved off on their own course. Behind all, the pod doors shut and outside the mammoth doors slid closed leaving only their outline as evidence of their presence. The Columbia's hull was now completely 'buttoned up' and she was ready to be released from her dry-dock. The ship would need to be *run out* to assure there were no major issues that could not be taken care of in deep space. Otherwise, except to take on any new crew, she was ready.



Dylan closed his eyes and leaned back into his shuttle seat as the craft glided over the hull of the *Columbia*. At last, a Starfleet posting again! His brief career began seven years ago with an assignment straight out of the Academy to the newly refitted USS Yorktown, a *Constitution* Class heavy cruiser (NCC-1717) captained by Joel Randolph. That ship's saucer gleamed the same way as he boarded it in dry-dock near the end of its maintenance cycle. His two fellow cadets beamed with pride as he did at their prestigious posting, though he knew the First Officer's family had vast and varied business interests on his home planet of Deneva. Dylan's family, the Downers, could trace a storied political dynasty back near four hundred years on Earth in Australia, to the foundation of the United Federation of Planets, to his own parents which were labor leaders on the long-established Deneva colony.

His Academy days were filled with hints at the power and position that awaited him if he provided favor to the simmering underbelly of corruption that gripped parts of Starfleet. Deneva's position as a safe crossroads between Klingon and Romulan space made some covet his family's influence. He had long sworn off any interest in politics though, and sought escape in Starfleet. He was tactful and careful enough to sidestep any ties, though it cast the rising star that placed him in such a grand first deployment into a precipitous fall. Especially with the disastrous result of the Yorktown's first mission...

That was the past though and the previous five years as a Starfleet liaison officer aboard the S.S. Silver Isle, a Class III Tanker converted to a passenger liner, made this posting to the *Columbia* that much more sweet. This post was earned and he was determined that nobody would pull his strings again.

Lieutenant Downer stepped from the large Aladdin-class shuttle that had just transported him to the Columbia from Earth Starbase. He had spent the last week and a half within the massive facility waiting for his orders and was quite pleased when he received the PADD. Dylan had watched as the Silver Isle departed Earth's orbit for a destination of its own, leaving him to his new adventure.

Now he was here. The huge hangar within the Miranda-class vessel was bustling with activity. Yellow lights flashed overhead as repulsor-lifts moved different stores of supplies that had been unloaded to the Columbia. He dodged out of the way of crewmen and machines until finally he made it to the exit door. Standing there was an operations ensign with a PADD in his hand observing the seeming chaos within the hangar. He saw Downer looking at him and went somewhat rigid when he saw Dylan's rank. "Sir! Welcome aboard the U.S.S. Columbia."

Dylan gave a nod in acknowledgement and asked, "Ensign, where is the ship's commanding officer?"

The Ensign gave a blank stare back, looked down at his PADD, and replied, "I apologize, sir, but I do not know who the commanding officer of the ship is yet. Captain Darkan was relieved upon our arrival and Starfleet Command has not yet signaled us... I do know that Commander Stonn, the XO, is on board and he has ordered all senior officer staff to the briefing room on Deck 2. Sir."

Dylan thanked the young man and left the chill of the flight deck behind him. "Deck 2," he said when he entered the turbolift. It was the best place to start.

Sorek had not gone unnoticed on the shuttle pod ride up to the Columbia. His fellow Vulcan, Stonn, had given him a nod, though the other officers seemed tied up in their thoughts. Humans. They were always so involved with the immediate, never relaxing and letting their minds dissect the many influences that were going on around them. The science officer knew that Stonn had been amongst this crew for most of a year and he wondered how he handled his emotional colleagues.

The Vulcan had not said a word to anyone as they departed the pod. He checked his PADD to see his quarters assignment, made his way there to unload his belongings, and then went to the turbolift. As the doors opened, he saw a brown-haired man standing there with a duffel bag at his feet. The man was wearing insignia of operations and communications on his dress uniform and Sorek could see he was a lieutenant.

"Going to Deck 2," said Downer to the Vulcan that entered his lift. "That is my destination as well," replied Sorek. And so, the Columbia's two new officers rode together the remaining way in silence. The

turbolifts doors opened with a hiss and they followed the corridor around until they saw the briefing room entrance. Upon entering, the two officers saw the other senior officer staff sitting around the table chatting quietly. They took seats of their own and began to make acquaintances with their fellow shipmates. The process was interrupted five minutes later as Mr. Stonn and Mr. Ramos entered the room.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Stonn calling the room to order. It sounded a strange greeting from the emotionless voice, but the room quieted down. The chief engineer found himself a seat, as Stonn continued, "We have a lot to do so I will not take unnecessary time from you. First let me start by saying by order of Starfleet Command, I have been given command of the U.S.S. Columbia." There was a chorus of soft congratulations that Stonn quickly dismissed as unnecessary. "Second our ship has gone through a refit and removal of highly confidential equipment. Mr. Ramos and his staff have been hard at work getting the ship back together and we have been given the green light to perform a few trials before we leave for our new duty station. Before we depart, there are some staff re-assignments most of which you are aware of within your departments, but also some of you have been given new orders. Dr. Tam, as he announced earlier, has been ordered back to his homeworld and the Columbia shall be taking him home, as that is the direction of our next mission. Also, Jess Townshend, you have been ordered to Earth Spacedock prior to our departure where you shall be receiving your new assignment."

John and Jess both looked at each other with the announcement. They knew something like this might happen to one of them, but it did not make the moment any easier. Still, they were officers and so did nothing more than quietly nod at one another.

Stonn's voice filled the room again, "Our new ship's doctor has not yet reported in, but we understand that he is on his way." The Vulcan captain then looked to the new arrivals, "Lt. Townshend, your replacement is Mr. Downer, here. Please go over all departmental information that you feel necessary before you depart. Our other new officer is Sorek; he will be taking my position as ship's Science Officer." Stonn looked around him, "That is all for now... if there are no questions, we have our tasks before us."

Grahm looked on as the room began to animate and the officer staff began to collect their things. So, Stonn was captain. The Tactical Officer was not sure how he felt about that. John always thought a captain needed to be able to make any command decision at any time, even if it defied logic. He hoped that their new commanding officer would not be constrained by the philosophies upon which he followed. With these thoughts left behind, Grahm went over to Jess and walked her out of the briefing room. He wanted to spend as much time with her as he possibly could before they were sent on their own ways. He promised himself that no matter what, he would see this relationship flourish... after all, he had fallen madly in love with her.

Dylan sat through the briefing with composure, nodding and acknowledging those named with practiced tact while he scrutinized faces. Years of obligations in a political family put him at ease in these situations and he idly made small talk before the announcements began. Some of the information seemed to be newly revealed and he studied the reactions of the existing crew as the details were laid out. His mind drifted back...

2279, Briefing Room, USS Yorktown...Rear Admiral Cartwright had just finished pinning the Captain insignia on the shoulder epaulette of Joel Randolph, the newly appointed Captain of the Yorktown. The ship's officers crowded in ranks, sharply dressed in the new style of uniform that had just come into fashion. Dylan and his fellow cadets smartly

saluted after receiving their Ensign pins, the simple bars that marked them as Officer Cadets with no real standing within Starfleet were forever gone. Speeches and acknowledgements were made before the ceremony broke for refreshments.

Dylan met with his section head and a lieutenant in engineering who would be supervising his post at the secondary controls deep in the ship's bowels. They espoused the advanced and cutting edge mission ops systems the refit had brought in, though Dylan had thoroughly briefed himself on the changes. He listened politely and asked the proper questions - these two seemed capable enough and well-versed in their duties. He confirmed his first watch rotation and he even wrangled a preliminary job shadow for later in the day.

Dylan recognized the First Officer's raised glass from across the room with a nod. A slight uneasiness gripped his stomach at what the future might hold, but he had marked the First Officer as a military man through and through and thought he could easily maneuver around his forthcoming requests without promising too much. The man clearly thought his family could influence matters on Deneva with far greater ease than in truth and that his own influence with his parent's decisions was far greater than it actually was. Yes, these entanglements would have to be managed, but he was confident in his ability to navigate the rough waters ahead.

He turned to see a familiar face, Lt. (j.g.) Valeris, an upperclassman two years ahead of him who had been the first Vulcan to graduate the Academy at the head of her class. She returned his salute with a cool smile and congratulated him on his first posting. She reminded him of the prestige and honor of serving on the Yorktown, asked idly about some old instructors and excused herself to talk with Rear Admiral Cartwright before he departed. Dylan was suitably impressed. There was a lady with big events in her future...

"Also, Jess Townshend, you have been ordered to Earth Spacedock prior to our departure where you shall be receiving your new assignment." Reassigned? Dylan thought Lt. Townsend was pegged for promotion, not a reassignment. Perhaps he hadn't assessed the mood of the ship as clearly as he had thought. As the meeting broke, Dylan made his way over to her, "Lt. Townshend, best wishes in your new posting. I was hoping you could debrief me on some of the new systems and procedures you have in place before you ship out. Anything you could pass along would be greatly appreciated... Commander Grahm." Dylan saluted smartly as the Tac Officer approached and excused himself. Something was going on there too. Yes, he had misjudged some things about this assignment. He had known since a child that information was power and the little bits he discovered today would be filed away to be fit together once he knew the crew's history a little better.

Jess turned to the man that was taking her position on the bridge of the Columbia, and then quickly glanced back at Grahm with a sad hint to her eyes. "Yes, of course I can. Give me a second and I will take you up to the bridge." She looked back at John and the Tactical Officer smiled saying, "Don't worry... I will find you before you transport out." John Grahm turned from the two operations officers and went about his duties - getting busy helped to keep his thoughts away from Townshend's departure.

The Columbia's former Ops officer led Dylan up the stairwell and onto the bridge. Once there, Jess proceeded to go through her station with him, showing him crew itineraries, ship's power distribution, communications, and transporter activity.

Sorek remained seated for a minute longer, his human heritage wanting him to ask for traditional greetings and for him to get to know the rest of the crew. However he blinked his eyes a couple of times and

realized that logically he would get to know the crew in time and that would be more efficient.

He stood up as the rest of the apparent officers had done and made his way to the turbolift. Stepping in, he went to the bridge where he thought it best for him to familiarize himself with the science section. On the way there, he couldn't help but think that Stonn had used a rather peculiar method of introduction for a Vulcan. *"If the commanding officer of this vessel is using emotional greetings it might be best if I try to, but it's illogical to do so,"* he thought as he walked onto the bridge.

Doc Sherman ran a hand through his messy white hair and leaned back against the bulkhead of the shuttle. He was alone, most of the senior staff having already arrived at their new assignment on the USS Columbia. He didn't bother looking out the portal. Doc had been reassigned so many times now that every new ship looked the same as the last. Long ago he had lost the feeling of wonder at seeing the giant Federation vessels from the outside.

The last assignment had not gone well. The young captain had done everything by the book, and had little tolerance for Doc's unconventional, but effective approach to medicine. "Kids", he blurted out to the empty passenger cabin. "This fleet is run by damn children." For a moment he thought of his own daughter, an administrator within the fleet. Shaking his head, Doc realized that she may even have been responsible for this last minute reassignment, to get him away from Earth, and her, as quickly as possible.

After an uneventful docking, the airlock slid open to reveal a young ensign waiting beyond. "The senior staff are meeting, sir. I will take you to them, but you have arrived late." Doc knew the 'sir' wasn't out of respect for his rank, but simply an acknowledgement of his age. While waiting for the medical officer to collect his duffle bag, the ensign could not conceal his look of disdain at the non-regulation white laboratory coat that Doc wore over his uniform. Emphatically stuffing a medical tricorder into a pocket of the coat, Doc blurted out "These new uniforms don't have any pockets. How can I be a doctor if I don't have any damn pockets!" Without a response, the ensign turned and headed down the hall.

"Kids", Doc muttered as he followed the ensign into his new home.

Dylan paused a moment as he entered the newly refurbished bridge. The cleanliness of the lines and the sense of efficiency permeated the space, even though the ship was not yet underway and only a skeleton crew performed last minute checks and diagnostics. Too many of the past years were spent on a merchant marine vessel with the lack of discipline and colorful characters that went with it. He quickened his pace to fall into step with Lt. Townshend and followed closely as she broke down the station and routines. A few inefficiencies he could tweak later, but all-in-all it was well run and managed. He discussed some of the changes the refit brought, having only seen the literature on the new capabilities. But that was something he could dive into during the shakedown. He was curious about some things before Jess Townshend left the ship.

Being tactful and careful not to pry into something that would stir an emotional response in her, he asked offhandedly during their technical discussion. "From all reports the *Columbia* had a successful mission. There seems to be quite the turnover in crew. Is there as much of a change in the enlisted ranks as for the officers? I'd like to know how green the sections are - any ideas why the ship was given such a shakedown?" ...

2279 - USS Yorktown, Engineering-Secondary controls - Dylan's first few shifts were busy as he tried to absorb the scope of his duties under the watchful eye of the duty engineer, Lt. Talbot. He was a rare officer who rose from the enlisted ranks and had been posted on Constitution-class vessels since their initial launch. He would never rise higher than Lieutenant, but the respect and trust afforded him went in both directions up and down the ranks. He was demanding, but cool and efficient and tested Dylan daily with mock situations that seemed impossible to imagine let alone ever actually happening. He would always calmly break down where Dylan needed to improve and what could have been done better. The initial chagrin of being tested quickly gave way to gratitude for the pace he was learning and being prepared. He realized Lt. Talbot saw something in him worth spending time on and began spending some of his downtime trying to puzzle out what might be thrown at him next. Yes, task-wise, life aboard the Yorktown was more than he had hoped for.

The Yorktown's first mission was an inspection of the antenna relays, Echo 1, 2 and 3 in the Beta quadrant. The circuitous route would take them to Sirius, Vulcan, Orion and, ultimately, Deneva. Dylan had not been home in some years, dating to when he joined Starfleet, and the prospect of shore leave was unsettling for some reason. More unsettling was his misread of the First Officer, Cmdr. Blake. He had thought him simple and opportunistic in his attempts to curry favor, but soon saw he had tendrils in many members of the crew. Dylan's scope was limited to Engineering and the off-duty decks, he was so busy he had little time for much else, but the First Officer seemed ubiquitous and locked in private conversations with all manner of crew encompassing the full spectrum of rank and task. It might be the mark of a man efficient at his job, but Dylan marked the effect these conversations had on the crewmembers. Even Lt. Talbot would grow tight-lipped and perspire after being called aside by the Commander. It wasn't long before Dylan heard whispers of crewmen who had asked for a transfer to a lesser vessel because of the First Officer, but such snippets needed to be pieced together and any details only alluded too. Which was why Dylan's hackles were raised when he got the dispatch to dine in the Commander's quarters one evening...

While the *Columbia* was buzzing with excitement, as returning crewmembers roamed the halls and new ones stumbled about them for the first time, Juan Ramos was exhausted. Unlike so many of his shipmates, Ramos didn't have much time away during the refit - as Chief Engineer, it was his duty to be present and oversee the *Columbia's* repair and restoration - and it was far more taxing and time-consuming than normal starship duty.

But the ship was ready, Ramos was certain of that, and he had taken the liberty of beaming down for a few days last week to see his mother in Barcelona. She was as hearty as ever despite her advancing age, and Juan enjoyed being able to spend some time with his *familia* again; it had been too long.

Walking the streets of Barcelona and admiring its legendary architecture had always inspired Juan as a youth, and he was pleased to find that it still did. On a sun-dappled day, passing by Gaudi's iconic Casa Milà, and looking across the square to his masterwork, the city's famed Sagrada Família, Ramos found that the now-360-year-old structures still awed him; the first with its stout curvatures and the latter with its soaring spires, defying gravity and now time itself.

He always found the same breathtaking beauty in starship designs, and when he returned to the *Columbia* (with some authentic Spanish wine in tow, of course - *Madre* insisted), he remembered how

proud he was to have the job that he did. Even though he was exhausted.

Stonn was... *relieved* that his self-introduction as captain had gone by without incident. He had not expected any, of course - Starfleet officers were professionals - but the circumstances of Captain Darkan's removal were unusual, and he assumed that many of the crew had questions about it. Unfortunately, he was in no position to answer them.

Stonn had not sought command, but it had been thrust upon him, and he would perform the role to the best of his ability. Challenges lay ahead for him, he knew that; even though he had become accustomed to working with humans, he was not human and did not think like one. He knew that humans needed emotional support from their captain from time to time and wondered how he would meet that particular challenge. Such situations cannot be predicted, he surmised, and so logic dictated that he put those notions aside for now - he had more pressing matters to attend to.

Stonn thought it advantageous that the *Columbia* was seeing so many turnovers among the crew; while ordinarily, many ship commanders saw this as a negative, he saw it as an opportunity to start anew. The *Columbia's* previous mission was a disjointed one, shrouded in secrecy that had still not been completely unveiled. Perhaps it was best to gain fresh perspective. Stonn thought so, at least.

He had been in contact with Lt. Cdr. Ramos, who had assured him that the *Columbia* was ready for flight. Ramos didn't seem to have any reservations about Stonn's promotion, which he deemed unusual; many humans found it difficult to serve under Vulcans. Perhaps Ramos, whose mechanically-oriented mind was necessarily driven by logic, found it to be less... intimidating. Nevertheless, Stonn was satisfied that his working relationship with his Chief Engineer would be a productive one.

Still on Deck 2, Stonn stood outside the briefing room quietly watching as his staff left and went about their jobs. It was then that an ensign, followed by a white-haired older man exited the turbolift and came walking up. The Vulcan knew by the description that this was his ship's new doctor. He had hoped that the new ship's doctor would also be driven by logic, as many diagnosticians were. Those hopes were dashed when he saw him...

"Doctor Sherman," Stonn said flatly as he walked to greet him. "Welcome to the *Columbia*. I trust you have found Sickbay equipped to your satisfaction?" He would mention the uniform code later. Perhaps the doctor had not had time to properly settle into his quarters. Stonn posited that this was his first command opportunity to be... *flexible*.

"Oh Lord, a Vulcan..." he thought, dropping his duffle bag to the deck. Sherman saluted his new captain awkwardly, never really understanding the need for the formality of greeting other officers. "Well, to be honest I haven't seen sickbay yet. This young fellow was bringing me to the meet an' greet but I seem to have missed that." The doctor appeared to be sizing up Stonn, but the fact that he was a Vulcan had clearly thrown him for a loop. "I guess I should stow my gear, then, and we can check in with each other later."

Turning to the ensign, Sherman continued "If you could take me to sickbay, I'll take it from there." Another awkward salute and he followed the ensign back to the turbo lift. *This is going to be an interesting assignment ...* "Kids and Vulcans", Doc muttered under his breath as the lift doors slid shut.

John walked through the doors to transporter room 2 and saw Jess sitting there in the lounge. At her feet were all of her personals that she had kept on the ship. The two gave each other a wan smile. It was hard to believe that they would no longer be serving together on the *Columbia*.

All personnel, save Townshend had been transported off of the ship in one fashion or another, and now it was time for Jess to go. Earth Spacedock had made its circuit of the planet and was rising over the eastern horizon, so she could now be easily transported to the station. For both Jess and John it seemed too soon. They both would give another day, week, month, before they wanted this time to come, but it was here and the *Columbia* was in midst of unsecuring from its moorings.

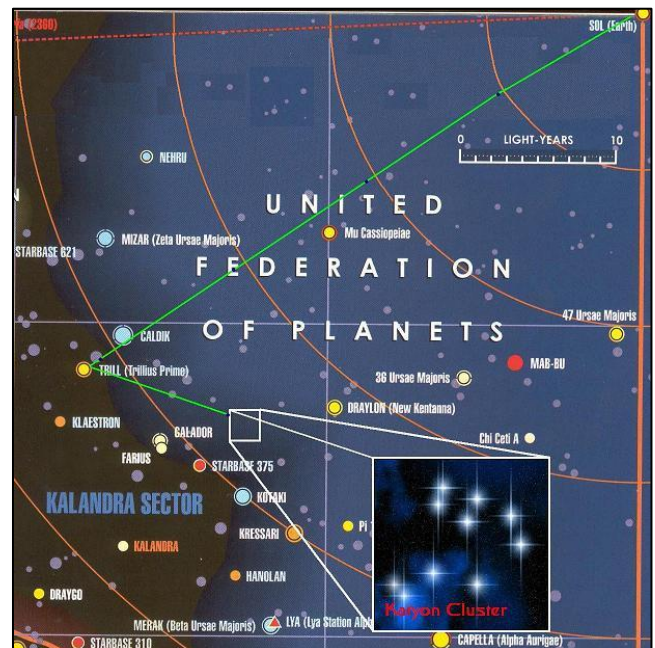
Townshend gave Graham a long hug and they kissed. It was one of only a few that they had shared so far. John spoke, "I'll be seeing you soon, okay?" Jess nodded and her eyes began to well with tears. The tactical officer smiled, as he swallowed hard, "Don't forget me, okay?" To that Jess laughed, "Don't you forget me neither."

"Never," was all John could muster. He knew that they would be together, but first he and his assigned ship had a duty and so he let her go. Townshend backed away and they grabbed up her things. They walked them into the transporter room and set her bags on one pad, while Jess took the one just next to it. They heard the transporter tech speak to an unknown, far away on the station, "Earth Spacedock, one to beam over." An unattached voice replied, "Columbia, we are ready to receive Lt. Townshend."

Graham stepped back from the transporter area and Jess smiled and gave him a wave. Suddenly the loud whine of the machine was heard and Townshend began to dematerialize in a sparkle of energy.

Then she was gone.

Graham breathed in deep, adjusted his uniform tunic, and turned away from the transporter pads. Without a word to the staring transporter techs, he strode from the room and walked towards the turbolift. They were now ready. It was time to go.



New Courses

Stardate 9687.3

Stonn stood by the chair. He had sat in it since his promotion, but the activity that now filled the bridge was too much for him to be sitting. The Vulcan hoped that his Human colleagues would not interpret his position beside the chair as some kind of fear or nervousness to take command. But knowing Humans the way he did, Stonn was sure that some probably would.

Around him, the senior officer staff had all taken their bridge positions. Pushkin and Anderson manned the helm; Grahm stood at tactical; the new science officer, Sorek, was behind him and adjusting his console; and Downer sat where Townshend once worked, his earpiece in and listening to broadcasts from local traffic around Earth. The Columbia had cleared all moorings and was beginning its departure from dry-dock. Pushkin applied only a fraction of impulse power to start forward momentum and soon the sleek vessel was outside of the massive framework and was swinging about to lay in a course away from Earth.

She had a long way to go to get to her new assignment in the Kalandra Sector - over 40 light years - which would take almost all of their first two months on duty. Their first stop would be Trill where Dr. Tam would be returned home and then the Columbia would make the final ten light year jump to the Katyon Cluster. The cluster was a unique opportunity to study stars in close proximity and how their affects on one another impact space around them. But before even this, the Columbia needed to be *run out* to make sure that all of her repairs were sound enough to no longer need to be anywhere near a space dock.

The bridge waited for their captain's orders.

Dylan looked around the control room as everyone worked at their stations. He monitored the radio traffic and the ship's systems. Nothing of note on the first front and everything was running smoothly on the second. The Captain *stood* at the ready...well his prerogative, he

supposed. "Captain, Starfleet wishes us a good journey and the area is clear for departure. All systems are online and operating normally."

Grahm chimed in with his own report of station, "Though we are at normal alert, tactical shows a green board, sir."

"Thank you, Mr. Downer; Mr. Grahm," Stonn replied. "Navigator, please set a course to take us out of the system and then engage cruising speed to Trill."

Stonn then sat down stiffly in the Captain's chair and thumbed the ship's intercom as he looked at his old science station. *Change was the natural order of things*, he remembered. "All stations please monitor your systems during shakedown procedures and prepare your reports. We will be underway momentarily. Captain out."

He turned back toward the viewscreen. "Helm, if you please."

Mr. Anderson, Billy to his friends, finished setting the proper astrogation and spoke out, "Course to Trill has been laid in Mr. Stonn." He then turned to Pushkin who gave him a nod, "Going to cruising speed Warp-6, sir."

With that, Alex hit the commands on his console that brought the ship first to full impulse, which allowed it to clear the Sol system in mere minutes. Second, Pushkin toggled his command that took the ship to supra-luminal speed. The helmsman paid close attention to the controls. He scrunched his mouth, frowning, and thought to himself "*Is she feeling a little sluggish? All that work better not slow up the old girl. I had her right where I wanted her.*" He looked up and back towards their new Captain, "We are at warp six, sir."

On the screen the stars momentarily stretched and then disappeared as the ship entered subspace. They were on their way.

Sorek was sitting at the science console looking at the instruments and familiarizing himself with the layout, as the captain issued a general order to prepare reports. He touched a few keys and had the computer bring up all information regarding the ship's final destination - the Katyon Cluster.

The science officer let his mind wander as he waited for the data to collate. Sorek was one of only two half-Vulcans that he was aware of, and he had grown up with the ridicule having a human mother. He



often wondered if the legendary Captain Spock had also dealt with such things.

His mother was a former Starfleet communications officer once serving as a liaison on Vulcan to help build relations. By the age of nineteen, and against his father's wishes, he joined Starfleet to follow in his mother's work. Yet Sorek took the path of scientist, as many Vulcans did, and spent the majority of his first four years out of the

academy on Earth's spacedock. He had served as an instructor in science classes and the occasional test programmer. Now here he was nearing age thirty and finally given a post on a starship. Sorek had attained the rank of Lieutenant Commander and was assigned the ship's head science officer station.

His wandering thoughts were brought back to the present when his console signaled the completion of it collating. Sorek read through

the information and then turned to Stonn, "Sir, I have the information available from the ship's database on the Katyon Cluster. It is located in the Kalandra Sector, and covers an area approximately two light years by two light years. Due to the close proximity of the stars in the area it should prove to have radical fluctuations of not only gravity, but radiation and gravimetric shear.

"Due to the effects of radiation we may experience problems with our transporters as well as our tractor beams. Of note the star KC-9, being larger than most, has a higher gravitational pull and is drawing the gas from nearby star KC-8 into it. This is having the effect of making KC-9 more active and rotating much faster causing massive jets of gas out of the cluster at fascinating speeds.

"While none of the planets are habitable, they are a source of valuable minerals and metals. It should also be noted that due to the number of stars in the cluster and the gravitational pull there is an incalculable number of asteroids and particles orbiting the area, causing a halo of sorts. This will create problems in closing on the cluster and require a good amount of piloting skill to avoid."

He then relaxed slightly allowing himself a bit of reprieve from his logic and almost smiled at having given his first of what was sure to be many reports as a starship officer. Sorek quickly recovered from this, however, and resumed a stoic sitting position waiting for further orders or for further need of his skills.

"Thank you, Mr. Sorek," Stonn replied. "The cluster should provide ample opportunities for valuable scientific observation and study."

USS Yorktown - 2279, Day 7, off-hours - It was with trepidation that Dylan prepared for the private meal with Cmdr. Blake. Normally he was able to negotiate his way through these situations without entanglements, but he felt he had misjudged the Commander. The way he had cowed much of the crew spoke to his tenacity and to his slipperiness. How had he got his tendrils in so deep and yet never have been checked? Dylan thought of dozens of excuses as the hours drew near yet found himself smartly in his dress uniform outside the quarters of the Commander at the prescribed time. His finger hovered fatefully over the call button, before pressing it with a sigh. A quick call of enter and the door slid open with a hiss for Dylan.

The Commander's quarters were spacious and unlike what he would have suspected. Large leafy plants broke up the room and art objects and neatly organized shelves of books were scattered throughout. To Dylan's mostly untrained eye they were all of good quality and covered a broad spectrum of interests and taste. Cmdr Blake was casually dressed and lounging near a holovid fire reading through briefing reports. He smiled at Dylan and looked less menacing out of uniform and within the confines of his lair. It seemed to raise Dylan's hackles all the more.

"Punctual and respectfully dressed. Well done Ensign Downer, you have already confirmed much of what I thought about you." Further pleasantries were exchanged, Saurian brandy offered, and a meal delivered by an enlisted crewmember. Cmdr. Blake enquired about how Dylan was settling, how he found the ship, the honor of serving on the Yorktown and their mission over the days and weeks ahead. The meal was a rare Capellan delicacy that Dylan had only seen once before and certainly had never tried nor suspected such could be obtained on the starship.

Talk turned to Denebian politics and Cmdr. Blake became very sharp, testing Dylan with questions of his opinion on various issues in the past. His command of the history and his understanding of the intricacies of the behind-the-scenes workings of the colonial government far surpassed Dylan's. Conversation turned to recent events and current labor troubles amongst some of the biggest

manufacturers and raw material suppliers on the planet. It became clear that the Commander's family was a very large silent partner in many of these, a shadow conglomerate that pulled the strings of the bulk of industry on the planet.

Dylan began to feel more and more cornered as Cmdr. Blake continued discussing things over drinks, as another crewman had come to remove the dinner implements. He hinted and alluded to information concerning his parents that could crush their reputations, though he never put it so bluntly. He was a clever linguist and buried his intentions in layers of innuendo that would be inconspicuous to any but the target of his malice. Dylan quickly realized it was malice and he had already entered into a trap that was hard to back out of without real consequences to his family and his career.

All he could do was listen and try to find some room for maneuver. Nothing was discussed outright, but the Commander recognized a worthy opponent in this duel of words and seemed to relish the challenge of bringing Dylan under his thumb. It was left at mere hints of what future discussions would entail as Dylan rose to leave with the Commander's permission. As his mind swirled over what was gained or lost this evening, the tone in the Commander's voice changed with the first request...the first hook, "When we reach Echo 1, Lt. Manolis will require a boost of power to the science instruments. He will send you the parameters through an encoded message, the key to which you will receive beforehand. Meet his request and erase all traces from the ship logs. I fully trust your capability in this matter, Ensign Downer." The door closed behind him with a quiet hiss.

Mr. Ramos stood and looked at the huge pillar warp core that hummed and flickered blue. She was a marvel of advanced engineering and she was purring perfectly. The engineer watched and listened closely to his engines making sure that nothing was behaving strange. The Columbia had some shake down maneuvers to perform and engine tests, but he was sure that his baby was ready for anything the bridge could ask of her.

Sherman walked into the sickbay, the doors hissing closed behind him as he did. The room was neat and clean and the staff of medical personnel moved around quietly, performing their assigned duties.

The new chief medical officer had just come from his quarters and stowed his gear, making the Columbia home as much as any ship could be. Once done, he gathered the few things he always carried with him while on duty, and made the journey to his medical facility. As much of a codger as he was, Archibald was impressed. He noticed a man... well, not a man... but a doctor approaching him. The 'man' was speckled along the side of his face and down his neck and around his throat. He was a Trill, and Sherman knew that this must be the former CMO that he was replacing.

Tam put out his hand in the fashion of humans, "Dr. Sherman, I presume?" The Trill could not help but smile at his own pun - a line from ancient Earth history.

Doc Sherman took the hand offered by the former CMO. A reasonable greeting... good start. "And you must be Tam." Instinctively, the doctor looked at the Trill's head, to the location where the report indicated he had been severely injured on the Columbia's previous mission. Sherman had read many injury reports before, but this time the details were sketchy, as if they had been 'edited' by Starfleet. This ship had been through an interesting time of late.

"And how has that healed up?" he asked, gesturing to Tam's head. Tam was momentarily taken back by his replacement's bluntness, but could tell that Sherman's concern was genuine.

"It is coming along nicely," said the Trill, his hand going to the scarred tissue along his scalp. "No worse for wear, now, although I have to admit that it was touch and go there for awhile - at least from what Dr. Chan has told me of the ordeal. C'mon, let me show you around."

The sickbay was set up like most facilities, on most starships, and so was very familiar. Tam left the CMO's office, leading Sherman into a lab, then an exam room and into the ICU/treatment room. They followed around the half-circle sickbay passing medical storage lockers on their right and the operating room to the left, until they came at last to a second office where worked the chief nurse and doctor.

Tam entered the room with Sherman on his tail, "Chan, Barlow... I'd like to introduce you to Doctor Archibald Sherman, your new CMO." There was an oriental man and a tall, dusty-brown haired woman standing in front of him. Both were older, Sherman could tell, at least older than the average cadet that Starfleet seemed to place in charge of everything - and he liked that. Having a more mature staff made for a much easier command... unless he found these two too set in their ways. Well, he'd just have to see how well they all worked together.

The Trill doctor spoke again, "I am officially released from Starfleet, sir, but until we reach my homeworld, my skills are at your service."

Doc Sherman greeted each of his new staff, and then allowed Tam to continue with the tour of the facility. He was impressed with the orderly ICU and storage facility. The well stocked shelves would undoubtedly be depleted during the mission, as they always were.

At the conclusion of the tour, the new CMO held an informal briefing with the senior medical staff, introducing himself and providing some details of his previous assignments. Everyone noticed the lack of explanation for his short stay aboard many of those vessels. After the briefing, it was clear to everyone that Doc, as he preferred to be called by his staff, was highly competent but ran things his way, and he most definitely wasn't the amiable CMO that his predecessor had been.

At warp factor six, it would have taken the Columbia thirty-seven days to make it to their first destination - Trillius Prime. The actual time was forty-two days, as Stonn had taken good advantage of the length of the journey to run the starship through many shakedown tests.

From emergency stops and warp factor eight accelerations to simulated system breakdown and malfunctions, Pushkin, Anderson and Ramos were taken to measure. Downer was also hard pressed to deal with the emergencies, having to handle ship power allocations and losses to simulated complete decompressions of entire decks. The new doctor was then handed his challenges as the tests created injured personnel, and so 'Doc', as he liked to be called, was made to race about the ship with his medical teams to give aid. Finally, Graham had to set aside his thoughts and feelings for Townshend when Sorek announced that the Columbia was ambushed by three Orion pirate ships, the ship's computer creating the 'attackers' and reacting to the human controller. Photon torpedoes were loaded into tubes by the ship's auto loaders, though none were actually shot. The imaginary phaser fire and torpedoes struck both the Columbia and her foes, but in the end Graham turned the tables and brought the starship to victory.

The Columbia herself had been put through the stress of the tests. Her warp core was brought to high speeds and she was thrown about with evasive maneuvers, but she held together with only a few real

breakdowns. Ramos had his teams quickly respond to the incidents, but after the five days of rigorous training, the engineer brought his report to Stonn. The Vulcan looked down the status reports, structural stress reports, and power management. All looked to be well within the standards that were to be expected of any starship in both normal operation and under emergency situations. Stonn handed the PADD back to Ramos and ordered full speed to Trill.

USS Yorktown - 2279, Day 9 - Downer fell back into his routine in the days that followed his dinner meeting and had no contact with the First Officer. They were only a couple days from Sirius and a rendezvous with a supply vessel where they spent some time in the system running final diagnostics on the newly refitted Yorktown. Dylan pulled double shifts in Engineering and even had a watch shift on the bridge as the round-the-clock testing shook out the final bugs. They left Sirius for Vulcan - barely a 48 hour hop and orbited the planet to take on some science personnel from an orbital space station.

T'Mir was one of the scientists that came aboard. She was not from Starfleet, but had unfettered access to the ship and spent much time in Engineering. Lt. Talbot gave her a wide berth as her presence was a bit disconcerting and her attitude somewhat standoffish. She pushed Dylan much like Talbot, but not with his gruff manner and genuine concern. She tried to make him feel inferior, put him on the spot, but Dylan held his own and felt a small thrill when she fixed him with a gaze and tried to catch him up on a technical point. He usually came out on the losing side, but not without scoring a few points. She had great insights into the ship's operations and Dylan learned from her at an accelerated pace despite the checks and barbs. Lt. Talbot was more and more scarce as the days passed and Dylan found himself drawn to T'Mir who still treated him as though she thought him a fool.

They left Vulcan for Echo 1, the decade-old third replacement of the subspace amplifier that was a priority target for invading forces eager to cut communications capability during their incursions in this neck of the woods. It had been behaving erratically and the Yorktown was tasked with bringing it back online. The USS Eagle had originally been tasked with this mission, but was called away for unknown reasons. The task fit well with the Yorktown's primary mission of investigating energy readings in the Briar Patch, an easy month's travel beyond Echo 3.

That was the future though and Dylan knew already not to question Starfleet orders let alone try to comprehend them. Instead he found himself working more and more with T'Mir, a coincidence he noted, but was not altogether upset about it. Her demeanour had not changed, if anything she was harder on him and he struggled to meet her challenges. He could swear he sensed a fire behind her cool demeanour. A smile that danced just behind her eyes that made him feel she enjoyed this as much as he, contrary to everything he had been taught about Vulcans. So it was on an off-hours shift that they had the system ops secondary controls in engineering to themselves. Readings were normal and routines in place as Dylan turned to move to another panel. He nearly bumped into T'Mir, breathing in her closeness as he loomed over her small frame. Her eyes were wide, her face flush and her breathing noticeable. He murmured an apology, searching for a hint he should take her in his arms, but she looked away and tucked a package into his tunic before hurrying out of the department. He exhaled and sat for a moment wondering what had transpired before pulling the package out. It was an override bus, a section manager's attachment that fit onto a system lock to enable temporary enhanced security clearances for station operations. He spun it around in his fingers for a moment thinking of the trouble he would be in if it was found on his person and considered his course of action. Thoughts drifted to T'Mir, her closeness, her look, her near touch. Then his

stomach cooled and hardened. He realized he had just been given the promised key to enable him to carry out Cmdr. Blake's orders. They would reach Echo 1 on his next duty shift.

One month and a half after leaving Earth, Tam looked down upon his homeworld. The purplish-blue color of her oceans was clearly visible out the forward port, which the doctor now looked. The Columbia had just made standard orbit and would remain there long enough to deposit its charge back amongst his people.

"Transporter room 4 calling for Dr. Tam. We are ready to beam you down, sir." Tam looked up at the intercom that just spoke. It was time for him to leave. He exited the forward science labs, his duffle in hand, and made his way to the transporter room. Upon arrival, he saw his crewmates standing there waiting to say goodbye. He had become good friends with many of them, and there were some there that he had just learned their names.

Grahm walked up to the Trill and shook his hand. "Been a pleasure, Doc. Thanks for everything - you took good care of all of us." Tam knew what John was hinting at - it was very evident to most of the old crew the feelings that Grahm and Townshend had for one another. The Trill doctor remembered the days that the tactical officer had spent bedside of Jess, helping her recover.

Tam went through the rest of the old and new staff until he came at last to the two Vulcans. Stonn stood rigid, as was his nature, his hand up in the characteristic fashion of Vulcan greeting. "Dr. Tam... it has been... a *pleasure* to serve alongside you. Live long and prosper." Tam smiled to himself at the term used by the Vulcan, "Same here, Stonn. Live long and prosper." With that, the Trill walked into the transporter room, climbed on a pad, and disappeared. Moments later, the crew got back to their jobs.

Twelve days passed.

USS Yorktown 2279 - Day 10 - Downer lay on his bed staring at the ceiling lights as he twirled the override bus in his hand. His rank only afforded him a double berth, but his roommate, Ensign Rogers, was the newly appointed A&A Officer and spent most of his off-duty time in the lab or library. He seemed an amicable enough fellow, but Downer had hardly the opportunity to get to know him with the stark differences in their duties and shifts. For the most part the room was his and left him with free time to ponder his situation. His shift reminder alarm sounded and he responded to the computer that he was ready and would be on time.

Although the ship ran continuous shifts of three per standard twenty four hour Earth day, the concepts of morning, noon and night were still respected as the senior officers preferred a common schedule for planning and conference purposes. Downer usually drew the 'night' shift and the halls were quiet as he made his way down several levels to Engineering. He took over his post at the secondary mission ops controls which were isolated somewhat from the bulk of the department within its own (sealable) space. There was only a skeleton engineering crew milling about as some techs had been rescheduled for warp maintenance when the Yorktown arrived at the Echo One beacon for a few days. He kept hoping that T'Mir would show up, but he had not heard anything from her since she gave him the bus (tucked securely inside his tunic).

He ran his shift protocols, settled into the station routines and began running the scheduled diagnostics. He kept an eye on the navigation log and noted they were less than two hours from dropping out of warp to approach Echo One. Time passed normally and he

relaxed into the comfort of routine until his console momentarily went blank and he was locked out of the controls. A single screen flickered to life and unintelligible text and numbers quickly filled the screen. Some columns slowed and settled on a singular letter until a line of text was centered on the screen:

'Engage Override Bus'

Dylan hesitated a moment, but looked around to see no other personnel and pulled out the bus and fit it into the terminal. The screen blanked again before a second message flashed:

'On the designated mark... increase shield power 58%... increase gamma range subspace scanning power 92%... open conduit from warp core power bleed to main deflector dish... erase logs within 34 second window'

The yellow alert sounded with five minutes to warp drop and all duty stations reported in. Downer found himself wiping sweat from his brow with shaking hands as he worked feverishly to ready the required power needs. "Warp core power to the main dish? What had he gotten himself involved with here?" The alert for dropping out of warp was sounded and the ship smoothly returned to subspace power. Ship systems appeared normal as the shields came online and the requisite short and long range scans were performed from the bridge. Suddenly the RED ALERT sounded and power demands spiked. His message screen simply flashed 'Mark.' and he initiated the program to put the power diversions in place. The demands taxed the power grid and numerous warnings of auxiliary system shutdowns indicated the automated safeguards had initiated to ensure tactical and life support systems received priority designation. Power balanced and the noticeable surge and flash from the warp core transfer signified the deflector dish had released a burst of some sort.

The next moment was filled with blackness and confusion as the Yorktown seemed to inexplicably tumble. Artificial gravity momentarily clicked out, only emergency lighting engaged, and the warp core suddenly dropped off line. Downer found himself on the floor as his control sealed itself and the core breach alarms went off. He was helpless as he saw the engineering techs scrambling for their suits as those closest lay motionless on the floor. System failures across the ship filled his screen as the ship struggled to restart and damage reports flooded in. He regained his chair and began to respond while noticing his message screen simply flashing:

33... 32... 31...

With a curse he engaged the computer database. The override bus allowed him access to the logs and he quickly parsed his actions from the logs as the timer continued to tick near zero. He finished and closed out, disengaging the bus as an afterthought just as the timer reached '0'. His station returned to normal and he spent the next hours sealed in his room, furiously responding to changing power levels as he could only watch the rescue and salvage operation in engineering on the other side of his window. The faceless techs and medical personnel in their suits paid him no heed and he had no time himself to do anything else aside from focus on his tasks.

Eventually the engineering section was cleared and the ship returned to normal with numerous wounds to nurse and a casualty count unknown to him. Near the end, he only learned the Yorktown had experienced the effects of a polaric ion blast as they dropped from warp. He cared little for the details or what part he played in it. He could only collapse into his bunk after an exhausting eighteen hour shift. His debriefing was scheduled for the following day.

Anderson, having just come on duty and taken his position at navigation on the bridge, called out, "Mr. Stonn! The Columbia is about to drop from warp. We are currently one light year outside of the Katyon Clusters sphere of influence."

On the main viewscreen, real space suddenly appeared and the image of countless stars and space clouds could be seen, but prominently in front of all, the cluster of stars shone brightly. Sorek enhanced the view, zooming in for a better look at the galactic chaos that raged within the area of the close proximity stars.

"Excellent. Thank you, Mr. Anderson," Stonn replied. "Though, on the bridge, *Captain* is a more appropriate form of address."

Stonn didn't personally care much, of course, but Starfleet rules were rules, and the fact was that requiring officers to defer to their superiors in rank often created more efficiency in a crisis. He had observed it in the past. "Mr. Sorek, please commence initial scans of the cluster."



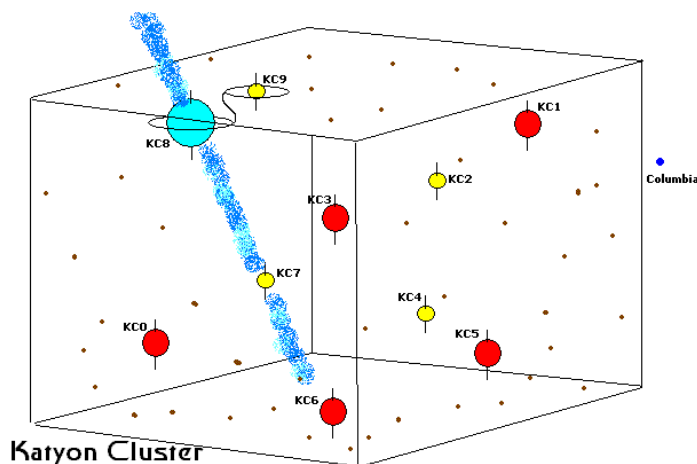
Sorek activated the Columbia's full array of sensors and swept space around and in front of the ship with countless bandwidths of radiated energy, as well as allowed the massive palettes to absorb every type of radiation that was emitted by the surrounding sector of space. On his overhead monitor, a three dimensional box appeared with the cluster laid out and the stars floating within. Distances, radiation levels, heat, and gravity was all listed in relation to each star. Finally, smaller objects that were planetoid-size or greater floated in a huge orbit around all. Smaller particles were too inconsequential, or were too numerous for the ship's computer to plot them without the final image result being a blotted out rectangular square of space.

Stonn sat in his chair, wheeled around to face the science station, and reviewing Sorek's initial data scan on the monitor above his head. Mr. Graham spoke out from Stonn's right, "Captain, based on the readings, the Columbia is at no particular threat from radiation at this time, but it might be advisable to go to Yellow alert and bring shields online."

Columbia data reads: KATYON CLUSTER
Star brightness ranges highest 0 to lowest 9

KC1: M5 V - Red Giant 5Brightness Main Seq
KC2: G2 V - Yellow Dwarf 2Brightness Main Seq
KC3: M7 V - Red Giant 7Brightness Main Seq
KC4: G1 V - Yellow Dwarf 1Brightness Main Seq
KC5: M5 V - Red Giant 5Brightness Main Seq

KC6: M4 V - Red Giant 4Brightness Main Seq
KC7: G2 V - Yellow Dwarf 2Brightness Main Seq
KC8: B1 Ib - Blue Supergiant 1Brightness
KC9: G3 V - Yellow Dwarf 2Brightness (*being crushed and purged of hydrogen by KC8*)
KC0: M7 V - Red Giant 4Brightness Main Seq



The sensor data began to spread to each bridge station, as it related to that station. Graham looked at the readings and watched as the radiation levels within the cluster spiked to deadly levels. He quickly made status checks of the Columbia's shielding and saw that the starship might not be able to compensate for long exposures within the cluster. The tactical officer was not sure if they would even enter into the mass of stars, but if so, he would have to make some adjustments to the shields. Perhaps Ramos could look at these numbers and offer up some thoughts.

"Captain, based on the readings, the ship could be in danger based on how deep we penetrate the cluster. I am going to need to work with Mr. Ramos to make some modifications to allow for extended exposures."

For Pushkin, the readings were displayed as gravitational stresses and windows, kind of like a picture of a ball of yarn with wrapped pathways of low and high gravity. The helmsman's mind immediately began to see routes he could follow and weave the ship into cluster. It would take some serious piloting, but he could make egress.

Across the bridge from where Graham sat, Downer now sat in Jess Townshend's station. The new comm officer listened with his earpiece to the sound of the stars. The massive balls of gas not only gave off light but also radio frequencies in a constant hiss that was unique to each star. He amplified the sounds so that others around him could hear the hypnotic sound.

SSSSSSssssssssSSSSssssssssssSSSSSSssssssssssssssSSSSSSSS..
. ssssssssssaaaaaavvvvvve usssssssssss..... SSSSSSSssssssss

Lt. Downer ran some filters to ensure the sound was clear and unaffected by background noises. He input a sample into the computer for further analysis.

Pushkin looked back to his controls as the information started appearing. He scrunched his mouth at the cluster's effects upon the ship, and studied the scans carefully for a path through the heavy radiation and gravity that the stars were throwing out. He turned his head as the noise was piped through the speakers.

Starfleet Command, do you read me? If you read me, we are going to attempt time travel. We are computing our trajectory at this time... [signal fades out]

"And results are back on the first message. It's definitely coming from the Cluster. Near KC1. The red giant ahead of us, sir." Downer sent the results of the location scan to Sorek so he could focus his instruments if desired.

Pushkin finished up the calculations in getting back to Earth. He looked up to inform the Captain of the information when the message of Admiral Kirk came up on the screen. He lifted up his eyebrows at the message, "Humpback Whales? Time Travel?" Alex shook his head before looking to the Captain. "If we can sustain Warp 8, it would take 13 days, Captain."

He turned to look towards Downer before going back to his console, bringing up the information on the Red Giant in question. He already began making the calculations for getting to the giant safely to give the Captain options.

"Thank you, Mr. Pushkin," Stonn replied, his face an emotionless mask despite the horror that now unfolded in the Sol system. Thirteen days was far too long; whatever was going to happen at Earth would be long over by the time they could get back; logically, they should follow Starfleet's orders and keep investigating the Katyon Cluster in the hopes that they may find something of value there.

As for what Admiral Kirk was doing (wasn't he returning to Earth for court martial?), time travel was tricky, even if the former Enterprise captain had managed it successfully before. Regardless, it was out of Stonn's control, so he simply hoped that whatever Kirk was trying turned out well... and without damaging the space-time continuum.

Although, if he did, Stonn would never know, seeing as he'd be affected by it as well. While he would love to ponder such ramifications further, he set them aside and focused on his role.

"Admiral Kirk is attempting to rectify the situation on Earth," he said to the bridge crew, hoping that the mention of the legendary officer might provide some comfort. "As you know, Kirk has built a career on finding success in even the most unlikely places, and Starfleet could not hope for a finer officer to take command of such a difficult situation.

"The Columbia is too far away to assist Admiral Kirk, and our orders stand. We will monitor the situation on Earth as best we can, and continue to investigate the signal originating in the Katyon Cluster." He turned to Pushkin once more, "Mr. Pushkin, if you have the latest coordinates from Mr. Downer, please proceed toward the source of the distress signal at safe cruising speed given the radiation and distortion in the Cluster." Stonn stood and walked over to Graham. "Given the threat against Earth, the distress signal here, and the capricious nature of the cluster itself, I think it prudent to signal Yellow Alert. Please notify all personnel."

"Aye, Captain, Yellow alert," replied Graham. He turned back to his tactical console and tapped a command.

The Columbia's status alert changed from the soft green to flashing amber. There was no klaxon that sounded like red alert, but immediately the ship became active throughout - sleeping personnel were awoken and stood ready; the ship's weapons were armed; and Downer began to immediately reallocate all non-priority ship functions. The Ops Officer knew the protocol well and began to run a level-4 diagnostic of the ship. Lastly, the shield grid came online and the Columbia was blanketed in the protective energy field. In the meantime, Pushkin and Anderson commenced to plot a course into the Katyon Cluster, towards KC1.

Doc sat idly in his office, monitoring the staff as they performed their routine tasks in sick bay. Over the past few weeks he had drilled them relentlessly until the group operated like a smoothly running machine. This hadn't endeared himself to any of them, he knew for sure, but they would appreciate his training when the first crisis hit.

The yellow alert beacon flashed on the wall opposite Doc's desk. "Looks like that first crisis will be arriving sooner than later," he mumbled as he got up and walked to storage to again verify the quantities and organization of their supplies.

Downer kept monitoring the ship systems as others performed their tasks to make sure resources were being used as effectively as possible while keeping an ear open for subspace chatter. He initiated the level 4 diagnostic to establish a baseline to measure the ship's performance against. It was a lengthy computer-assisted test, but he used all of the tricks he knew to speed it along.

As the program ran and data prompts filled the screen, Downer received another message over the comms. Again it caused pause, but he couldn't waste time pondering it. He informed the Captain of the new message and broadcast it to the bridge:

To United Federation of planets and all Starfleet personnel, this is the President. We are securing from our planet-wide emergency. By the efforts of Admiral Kirk and his gallant crew, the probe has been given a response and has ended all critical transmissions. Earth atmosphere is returning to normal and interrupted power is coming back online. Though we are still standing ready, the crisis at this time seems averted.

The implications of time travel were best left to scholars. A crisis averted that let them focus on their present mission was welcome news. Downer was sure some great stories would come of the exploits of the Enterprise, but for now he turned his full attention back to the Columbia.

USS Yorktown 2279 - Day 12 - After a fitful sleep, Downer was awakened hours before he would have liked by the computer's alarm giving him a half hour warning for an officer de-briefing. Downer waited for the second chime before hurriedly rousing, shaving, and dressing in his spare duty uniform. The tail of the lanyard on the override bus stuck out from the tunic in the crumpled pile of clothes he had left on the floor the previous day. An unconscious check revealed his roommate was not there (had he even been in the room at all?) and he palmed the bus and dropped it in the incineration disposal before leaving.

The hallways were chaotic, filled with crewmen moving equipment and repair details hurrying to their destinations. Lighting was reduced and automated messages and pages seemed to play continuously over the loudspeakers. His briefing was in the tactical ready-room which was up several levels and towards the core of the saucer. He reached a turbolift but a security crewman waved him off, "Lifts are still down, sir. Maintenance only. You'll have to take the stairs." Downer regretted the extra few minutes sleep as he double-timed it up several levels in the crowded stairwell. He was just catching his breath after detouring through the halls when he arrived outside the ready room.

Ensign Jablovenic waited at the door, a classmate of his from the academy. She was a comms specialist and had been appointed directly to the Captain's liaison group. "Hi Dylan. They're a few minutes behind. Quite the shift you had. Word is you and Lt. Manolis saved us," she dropped her voice, "I heard the Captain talking about some kind of Romulan booby-trap. Banned technology or something, but I'm sure you'll hear more..." Downer was about to question what she heard he

had done, when the door slid open with a quiet hiss. Lt. Manolis exited with a firm jaw and a quick glance at the pair of them standing in the hall. Dylan had not formally met the lieutenant and was about to introduce himself when Cmdr. Blake's voice called him to enter. Lt. Manolis marched off with a set jaw without uttering a word.

Downer entered the room and was surprised to see the First Officer beside the Captain, Joel Randolph, the chief science officer, Lt. Cmdr Jeffries, the Tactical Officer, Lt. Cmdr Reijik, and the chief navigator, Lt. Cmdr Dufferin - a full tribunal board - this seemed more than a debriefing. Downer smartly entered to present himself and found he was to remain standing in front of those assembled at the slightly curved (and raised) table. Support staff cluttered the wings of the room, recording the proceedings and receiving messages from across the ship which they often relayed in whispered tones to the various department heads assembled at the front.

After a few moments, the group turned their attention to Downer. Cmdr Blake was the first to speak and Dylan dearly hoped he was not about to be sold down the river by the First Officer, "Ensign Downer. This Captain's Commission endeavours to determine the circumstances surrounding the events of yesterday that endangered our ship and destroyed a Klingon merchant vessel in the vicinity of Echo One. Please state your full name, rank and serial number for the record."

Dylan did as ordered.

"You were on duty in the secondary Mission Ops in the Engineering department upon our drop from warp? You were working alone?"

Dylan responded in the affirmative.

"Precisely 7.2 seconds after warp drop, Lt. Maolis's scans indicated an energy anomaly that presented an immediate threat to the ship. His system requests were mysteriously bounced from the bridge station to your secondary controls. In which you pulled off an engineering miracle by re-routing power in record time to precisely contain and divert the polaric ion blast that decimated everything in the area...including a Klingon vessel we were to receive some stranded Federation crewmen from." Cmdr. Blake rose his fist hitting the table, "How did you do it, Downer? How did you configure three separate systems in the time it took the pulse to reach us? Manolis himself said he thought the request was hopeless. He thought the ship was doomed instead of only the forty-two souls who perished."

Dylan licked his dry lips. Forty-two? That threw him. He had not considered the lives lost. What was Cmdr. Blake going for here? Was this an operation gone wrong for which he was trying to shift blame onto him? Did he trust Downer would keep his head and talk his way through this? Think man, think! "T'Mir... T'Mir developed some protocols to streamline such requests. She... tested me hard... and I guess the procedures, luckily, stuck in my head."

Lt. Cmdr Jeffries spoke up, "T'Mir? You learned all of that in three days?"

"No sir. It was just the other day and most duty shifts I've had..."

Cmdr. Blake spoke again menacingly, "Ensign Downer. T'Mir left the ship before we left Vulcan. What are you saying she worked out these protocols with you while we were in transit?... Computer, locate T'Mir."

{sultry Computer voice}"The Vulcan scientist T'Mir departed the ship prior to departure from Vulcan."

So many questions spun in Dylan's head. Only ten days in to his first posting and only images of the brig flooded his mind. And T'Mir? What was going on...? "No sir. T'Mir initiated the protocols and Lt. Talbot drilled me on them. It's been a busy time in engineering. A lot has changed with the refit and some things are working with surprising efficiency."

Lt Cmdr. Reijik looked at him coolly. She had penetrating eyes and seemed to be measuring him. How many at the front sided with Cmdr Blake? What was he pushing him towards? He doubted he could implicate the First Officer in anything. He knew nothing of the layers he had put in place. And what was the problem anyway? The ship had been saved. He only had done his job. "Well Lt. Talbot is dead." the cold numbness lumped in Downer's stomach again, "The preliminary diagnostics show things on the up and up, although you shouldn't have had the clearances to enable what you did. Perhaps the message bounce gave you bridge permissions. There is nothing in the logs to say otherwise." She finished with a pensive look to the others.

Lt. Cmdr Dufferin chimed in, "C'mon Blakey. Talbot - God rest his soul - said the boy was a crackerjack. Count your blessings he did his job. He kept his head and his training saved him. We should be giving him a commendation, not dragging him here like he was to blame. He saved the bloody ship. Captain? There is so much work to do. Can't we end this and get back to our departments?"

Captain Randolph had sat quietly, his eyes locked on Downer. "Ensign Downer. Preliminary reports seem to indicate measures were put in place that protected our ship from certain destruction. None of those measures exist in any Starfleet manual or directive. You come to us highly recommended, all logs support your actions, but I never seen such efficient operation in a time of crisis as what saved this ship yesterday. Someone tried to destroy my ship, Ensign Downer! And until two plus two equals four, you, like Lt. Manolis, will be restricted to off-duty areas until we can conduct a full security review. I may be shaking your hand in thanks one day, Ensign Downer, but I didn't get to be Captain of this ship by leaving rocks unturned. This hearing is closed. Everyone back to your stations."

Downer stood dumbfounded as everyone filed out of the room. Aides quickly updated the section heads with status reports as Cmdr. Blake and the Captain walked side by side in discussion. Blake shot Downer a disarming look that didn't convey anything of where he stood in the First Officer's eyes. An investigation? Balls! Downer went back to bed.

Sorek sat at his console looking at the instruments, trying to determine the original destination of the transmission from with the cluster. The problems with the cluster and his instruments would have been frustrating to almost anyone else, but his upbringing on Vulcan allowed him the fortunes of having little to no emotion.

He took a deep breath and began reading his monitors trying to determine with mathematical accurateness and logical conclusions included the information he was seeking.

The Columbia began to move forward at sublight speed, but rapid none the less. It quickly began to close the distance from its position of arrival at the cluster towards the sphere of floating rocks and planets around the patch of stars. The bridge crew worked together like a well-oiled machine and each took advantage of the efforts of the others. Sorek scanned with both forward and lateral sensors, piercing deep into the Katyon with the ship's electronic eyes and the multitude of space debris began to be plotted. The Vulcan also determined radiation strengths and gravitational wells and shear which were then transferred to the appropriate stations around the bridge.

Grahm read the sensor readings and immediately began to punch in commands that requested extra power from the engines so that the shields could be reinforced to keep the deadly radiation from killing all life aboard. Across the room, Downer's console registered the extra

power pull and the Ops officer monitored the station for any potential conflicts.

For Anderson and Pushkin, the data feed gave them pathways and the navigator set the course, making continuous, but minor, adjustments to the coordinates, while Pushkin accelerated the ship. He too drew upon the Columbia's power sources and Downer kept an eye to assure that between the impulse engines and the warp core, power was distributed evenly.

In his central chair, Stonn sat quietly, his hands steepled before his chin. The captain knew all that was going on around him, but understood it was as it should be, otherwise these men and women would not be here.

Downer was still going over the strange transmission, having left Starfleet and its emergency call behind, when his console flashed a red light along with IFF codes. IFF - Identification Friend or Foe - was a system that was put in place on all Earth ships from the earliest times of technology. It was adapted for Starfleet and the many ships that were a part of the United Federation of Planets to signal friendly ships. If a ship did not transmit an IFF, it was determined unfriendly and a potential threat. In this case, a code was being transmitted and it was recognized by the Columbia's computer core. Downer's console display scrolled up data:

U.S.S. Merrimac NCC-1715

Constitution-class Starship

Commission date: 2268

Re-fit date: 2278

Disposition: Disappeared with all hands on five-year tour of duty within the Alpha Quadrant, 2282

Downer ran the required protocols to authenticate the IFF code, but knew there was no known precedent of one ever being fabricated. The computer challenges proved the ID. *'The Merrimac!'* Wow, he knew a few officers assigned to that ship and its recent disappearance had only just slipped to a Category Two Starfleet priority. He certainly felt to be the harbinger of strange news today, "Captain Stonn, IFF beacon received, sir. It is the U.S.S. Merrimac."

The Ops officer kept the report short and to the point. Everyone on the bridge would know the IFF signal was a close proximity broadcast and would definitely know the status of the Merrimac. He continued monitoring the ship Ops to head off any issues as the systems were challenged by the harsh Cluster environment.

"Excellent work, Mr. Downer," Stonn replied. The Columbia would have to traverse the Cluster carefully and engage in rescue operations, once they had ascertained the status of the vessel and the reason for its disappearance, of course.

"Helm, please set a course for the *Merrimac's* last known position, taking the most direct route possible that keeps interference with sensors and communication to a minimum. Coordinate with Mr. Sorek and Mr. Downer as necessary to maintain clear signals. We do not know why the *Merrimac* was disabled, and caution is advised."

Pushkin kept a steady hand upon the controls, making sure the Columbia didn't get hit by the worst effects coming from the cluster. He wondered for a moment if it was possible for anything to live out here before shaking his head to keep his focus upon the controls. He listened up as the signal was finally received and deciphered. "A Federation ship, huh? It must have gotten too close and was dragged in," he said out loud to himself. He nodded his head to the order. "Aye, Sir. Heading into the Merrimac"

Stonn turned to Graham. "Maintain yellow alert and please notify Engineering that we will be proceeding into the Cluster for recovery and rescue operations immediately." Stonn intended to evaluate

Graham closely on this mission; he was the most senior bridge officer on the Columbia, excluding himself, but Graham was often the most emotional, as well. He did not doubt the man's dedication or professionalism, or his standing under Captain Darkan, but now that *he* was captain, he preferred a more... *detached* demeanor from the person in charge of the ship's weaponry.

Stonn had not requested any personnel additions or transfers upon his promotion, even though it was traditional for captains to do so; he trusted that Starfleet had made the most logical decisions possible regarding personnel assignments, and accepted that. But now that they were underway, it was his duty to constantly evaluate the ship's personnel, and where possible, help them improve as officers. He had to decide if Graham was still the right person for the role.

"Aye, captain," answered Graham. He tapped his comm on his panel, "Mr. Ramos, the ship will be entering the Katyon Cluster within the next ten minutes, or at least within its outer sphere of influence, to conduct recovery and rescue of the starship Merrimac. Please have a party ready on standby to transport to the Merrimac and be ready for shifting power needs. There is a lot of radiation within the cluster. Graham out."

Graham then looked over to Downer, "Mr. Downer, contact sickbay and inform Doctor Sherman of the situation." The tactical officer turned to his console bringing up the duty roster for his department. He browsed down the names to see who had just come on duty and saw it was a Lt. (j.g.) Devon Phillips. He tapped his comm once more, "Lt. Phillips, please report to Commander Graham on the bridge."

Downer relayed the message to sickbay along with some parameters of radiation levels within the Cluster. He continued to ensure power demands were balanced and all priority systems were functioning at expected levels. Additionally, he tried to correlate the IFF transmission with the earlier message to see if they originated on the same bearing and range.

Flash message: Dr. Sherman - Potential emergency EVAC operation of U.S.S. Merrimac. IFF transmission received and possible radio contact. Columbia moving to investigate. Condition and number of survivors unknown. High levels of ionizing radiation in the Cluster. Cmdr. Graham requests a landing party readied.

Doc read the message and immediately opened a communication channel to his staff. "All right people, we've got an emergency evacuation of the U.S.S. Merrimac on our hands. I want trauma teams A and B prepped in rad suits ready to transport in 10 minutes. Team A will transport first with me and team B will be on standby to offer assistance when required. Make sure your kits are well stocked for radiation treatments."

Switching over to broadcast to sickbay only, he continued, "Let's be ready folks. You know the drill and you are prepared for this. Dr. Chan will coordinate sickbay while I'm with the away team. I want extra rad trauma packs set up at each station." Sherman got up from his desk and found Dr. Chan amidst the bustle of sickbay. "Please inform the next shift that they may be required as backup."

With a final nod to Chan, Doc grabbed his own kit. He stuffed in extra radiation packs until it was bursting, and headed towards the transporters. "Too bad about the suits", he mumbled to no one in particular, "Can never get my damn lab coat tucked in properly."

As the turbolift ascended to the bridge, Lieutenant, j.g. Devon Phillips couldn't believe the awkwardness of the situation, and so close to almost running late for his duty shift. *'Can't believe that conversation with Jessica ran that long that I almost forgot that I had duty shift... never been this...'* He swore to himself that he would in the future try and be more attentive when it came to his scheduling, and would

apologize to the Commander for any disrespect and delays that he may have caused. Taking a deep breath, and getting his composure, as the turbolift stopped and the doors opened to the bridge, Devon walked in, preparing for what awaited him. "Lieutenant Phillips, reporting for duty, Commander."

Grahm was busy when he heard the voice behind him. He turned to see a bright looking, young officer wearing the standard uniform of Starfleet's Security department. The fact that Phillips may have been running behind did not seem to be an issue, so he relaxed a bit as Grahm began to speak.

John knew many of the personnel on the ship, but with the changeover of staff at Earth Spacedock, there were some faces and names that he had not yet put together. "Devon... new to the ship? Right? Well I am sorry if we have not had a chance to talk directly." Grahm moved onto the business at hand without waiting for any reply, "Phillips, I need you to form a landing party to support both Chief Engineer Ramos's team as well as Doctor Sherman's. The Columbia has identified a missing starship within the cluster and we do not know the condition yet of the ship or the crew. I want phasers issued to your team along with communicators. Lastly, depending on the shape of the Merrimac, we may need to also prep with EVA suits. Any questions?" John looked back to his console and then back to the young officer waiting to see if he had any comments.

Devon looked at the Commander, trying to hide his excitement, and his curiosity at already given the honors in setting up a security detail for the mission. But growing up on Belle Terre, and the dangers that he constantly faced, growing up on a colony world, brought a lot of alert signs to the forefront. "Commander--," he began to respond, "I do not wish to undermine your decision in selecting me to prepare the landing party for the mission. But shouldn't we have a security detail go over to the ship first? Securing it, before sending over other department personnel? We don't exactly know what we are dealing with over there, and I don't want to risk people until we have the situation well in hand, Sir..."

John smiled at the Lieutenant, "The idea is sound, Phillips. Your security team will be the first to beam over, but we will also be relying on Mr. Sorek to provide with information as well. I am not going to have you and your people beaming over into a blind situation. But get down to the transporter room on Deck 7, and prepare the equipment you will need. I estimate we will be in range of the Merrimac in about 20 minutes."

Stonn overheard the discussion between Grahm and Phillips and noted the young officer's boldness in questioning his orders. Phillips had handled it with delicacy, and had shown initiative in his desire to ensure the safety of his shipmates. The young man had made an interesting first impression on his new captain. Stonn made a mental note to look further into the lieutenant's record when he had an opportunity.

"Aye, sir," Devon replied, nodding respectfully, then dismissing himself. He moved to the turbolift. Once inside, he tapped the lift comm panel, "Security? This is Lieutenant Phillips. I need a detail in full EVA gear, Deck 7, transporter room. In ten minutes. Also inform Commander Sorek, as well...Ten minutes people...Phillips out."

Ramos looked up at the speaker mounted in the wall when he heard Grahm's voice, "Mr. Ramos, the ship will be entering the Katyon Cluster within the next ten minutes, or at least within its outer sphere of influence, to conduct recovery and rescue of the starship Merrimac. Please have a party ready on standby to transport to the Merrimac and be ready for shifting power needs. There is a lot of radiation within the cluster. Grahm out."

Like Downer on the bridge, Ramos had been paying close attention to the power demands being made throughout the ship. It was Grahm and the ship's deflector system that was now making the highest demand, but it did not surprise Juan - the radiation of the cluster could kill everyone within minutes if the Columbia's shields were to fail.

"The Merrimac?" was the next thought that bloomed within the engineer's mind. "What's going on?"

"All right, everyone," Ramos said in a voice that rang out through Engineering. "We'll be entering the Cluster itself within minutes on a rescue mission, so no station is to go unmanned at any point. Shields have top priority. Notify me with any changes of note immediately. The ship may be on Yellow Alert, but down here, consider yourself on Red - stay sharp!"

Juan went to his desk to double-check the data on the cluster; if the ambient radiation was apt to pose any risk to transporter use, he wanted to know about it in advance. He pulled up the readings that Sorek had collated with his sensor scans, tapped a few buttons and then numbers and words began to scroll - percentages of radiation in every form. Ultra-violet, x-ray, gamma-ray, and more were displayed along with the intensity in which they bathed the Columbia. A three-dimensional schematic of the starship was also displayed and visually illustrated how the ship's shields would be deteriorated by the higher levels of radiation. Inverse to this was the power requirements needed to augment the shields so that they would be able to protect the starship and all of her inhabitants.

Ramos also allowed the data to run up against standard operating levels of radiation with other ship functions such as sensors, transporters, and tractor beams. The transporters were his primary concern (after the shields) and the engineer tapped in a few variances that the Katyon Cluster would impose. The computer responded with answers that were still within the safe zone. Juan nodded and turned away, content that the transporters would safely carry any crewmembers back and forth between the two ships. What Ramos did not realize was that in his urgency to get an emergency team together, along with watching the ship systems fluctuate, he had run his safety data comparison in error by a factor of 10.

The engineering staff gathered the equipment that might be needed upon arrival on the Merrimac, and a six-man team was chosen to make the initial transport over. Ramos watched as his team gathered the gear necessary, but something nagged at his ever-processing mind. It was not the team he had picked, nor their activity of getting ready. Neither was it the Columbia and her ability to withstand the amazing energies that even now played against her shields and helm. It was something...

Juan turned around and his eyes glanced back at the computer console still showing the data that he had just processed. The word transporter was bold across the top of the monitor along with a green [SAFE]. The engineer furrowed his brow and walked back to the panel, and it took only the second glance for the blood to rush from his face. Ramos saw the percentage carry-over in his hypothetical and it was off by a zero. He felt a momentary wave of nausea as he realized that he might have just potentially killed six members of the ship's crew. His hands danced across the keyboard and he corrected the calculation, which changed the green [SAFE] icon to a crimson [DANGER].

With beads of sweat now on his brow, Ramos hit the comm connecting him to transporter room 1, where even now Phillips and Sherman readied their teams.

USS Yorktown 2279 - Day 12 - Dylan awoke again and was perturbed to see only six hours had past. He felt dog tired, yet could not make himself sleep. He straightened his bunk area and glanced through some

personal belongings he had not touched since boarding the Yorktown. He thought of writing a message to send home but to say what? - "Hi Dad. Watch out. My crazed First Officer is trying to pin the first volleys of a war on me and ruin yours and mom's life unless I play his game." He didn't have the patience to sit and began to leave, nearly bumping into his roommate in the door. Ensign Rogers looked surprised to see him and mumbled a greeting before pushing past into the room. Dylan stood in the doorway a moment before leaving, shaking his head.

The hallways were still active, the lifts were still down, and Dylan had to take a circuitous route to reach the junior officer's lounge. He was turned back several times by security personnel who all seemed to know about the restrictions placed on him. He grabbed a drink and sat with his datapad, hoping at least to catch up on his reports, but found his access to even the rudimentary note-keeping aspects of his job had been locked out. With resignation he sat looking out of the ship into the emptiness of space.

"May I join you, Mr. Downer?" Lt. Manolis' voice startled Dylan and it took him a moment before nodding in acknowledgement. It did not take long for Dylan to realize the Science Officer was well ahead of him in the drink count as he unsteadily found his seat. He sat in silence for an uncomfortable time before Manolis finally spoke, looking only into his empty glass, "I told myself I wouldn't let him get me like this again. But here I am...shafted again. You should get out while you can. Request a transfer. Get off this ship before he gets too many hooks in you."

Downer looked around uncomfortably, but there were few patrons and none close by, "Lieutenant. Perhaps this isn't the best time to talk about this. Perhaps we shouldn't even be seen together...with the circumstance and all."

Lt. Manolis leaned close and gripped Downer's arm, "He wants to start a war, Downer. We weren't supposed to be here. The USS Eagle was supposed to be on this mission and he and those Vulcans planned that booby trap to destroy the Klingon vessel along with a Federation ship. Polaric ionization is Romulan technology. He's trying to implicate them and destroy the truce...and why? Because of his business interests. He would plunge us into war because his family controls more weapons' manufacturers than you can count. But I know enough to get out. He still needs me for now...I just need the time to pull things together and I'll bring him down...you can help."

Dylan's mind was spinning as some pieces fell in place. He thought of his homeworld, Deneva, it was not out of striking distance from Romulan space and would certainly be a key world if the wars picked up again. It angered him that lives were thrown away for personal gain. He missed the last part of Manolis' tirade and snapped back to listening at the suggestion of being pulled into another web.

"...and Blake is getting careless. He barely gave me enough warning of the threat at Echo One. With some time to run some simulations I could have configured the pulse to completely deflect the blast with no harm to the ship, but I think he wanted some damage. Some Starfleet deaths to fan the flames..."

"Lt. Manolis," Downer interrupted, "I don't want to get drawn into anything else. I'll take my chances with his requests and find my own way out. I've only followed orders so far. I won't conspire against a senior officer. He will slip up. One man can't drag the Federation into a war."

Manolis broke in, his voice a harsh whisper, "Talbot just played along, looking for an out. Twelve years under Blake's thumb and an officer's commission, but now he's dead. Cmdr. Jefferies use to run things, but Blake leaped past him in seniority and power. Now he's just a lapdog. T'Mir ran the Vulcan side of things, but now she's dead...disagreed with Blake once too often."

With an uncomfortable frequency, Dylan again felt cold in the pit of his stomach, "T'Mir? ... She's dead?"

U.S.S. Merrimac Stardate 9?????

The Columbia pressed closer as the crew prepared to rescue the survivors of the Merrimac. Doctor Sherman and the medical team that he organized made the quick walk from Sickbay down the hall to the transporter room. Inside, Phillips and his team had already arrived and were in the process of donning EVA suits. The security personnel made room for the medical team as they filed in so that they, too, might get ready.

Devon walked to each member of his security detail and made thorough inspections of each officer, making sure their gear and weapons were at top efficiency. Turning to the medical staff, as they walked into the transporter room, he nodded respectfully. Devon introduced himself, having not gotten the opportunity earlier to meet Doctor Sherman. Only when he first arrived on board did he report to sickbay for the routine medical check-up, but that had been with another ship's doctor.

"I need to know all priority department staff," he thought. Phillips quickly regained his focus, "Alright people, we are going first, before the science and medical teams, to secure the area and make sure that nothing out of the ordinary is going on." Devon turned to the medical staff assembled, continuing, "After the vessel is secured, then the medical and other personnel that may be required, will follow."

"We're right behind you son. Just send the word," Doc replied to the young officer whose name escaped him at the moment. He was stuffing the last corner of his lab coat into his protective suit, noticing that the outfits looked rather good on all the younger, slimmer members of the away team. On him it just looked bulky and bulged in odd places. With a sigh, the doctor fastened the final clip and slung his medical satchel over his shoulder.

Sherman inspected his A and B away teams. They looked well prepared. Ordinarily, he wouldn't include himself on such a mission (especially when protective suits were required), but he planned to keep an eye on everyone to judge their responses and evaluate their effectiveness in a genuine emergency situation.

"Alright everyone, I want no slip ups, or anyone trying to be a hero." Devon spoke, as he walked to each of his officers, making sure their EVA suits and weapons were in functioning order. He changed direction and walked towards the transporter operator on station and continued, "I want a constant transporter lock on us at all times... in case something out of the ordinary happens." He then turned to the Doctor, adding, "Doctor? In case we run into wounded individuals onboard the Merrimac, is sickbay ready to receive emergency casualties?"

Doc gave the young officer a look that implied this was a question that did not need asking. He bit back a sarcastic reply, however, and said simply "Sickbay is ready."

The U.S.S. Merrimac hung quietly within the field of asteroids and planetoids, her hull still flashing some lights. She was at a range of 92.58 million miles from KC1, but still the red giant seemed to loom. The Columbia approached the ship, Pushkin weaving her between and around large pieces of metal and rock that hung in perpetual orbit around both KC1 and the entire cluster.



The Merrimac was a Constitution-class starship, commissioned in 2268, well after many of that class of ship had run five year tours of service. The Constitutions had proven themselves a hardy vessel and quite versatile. Starfleet had ordered another run of the class and Merrimac's keel was laid. She served her first five-year mission from 2270 to 2274, and most of the way through her second tour was called back to Earth for a re-fit. Like Enterprise and most of the other remaining Constitutions, the Merrimac was upgraded with the new formats improving upon the already excellent ship.

By 2280, and under new command, the Merrimac was again sent on a five-year tour within the Alpha Quadrant to continue exploratory missions, but to also serve within the near Earth defense fleet. She and her crew were involved in quite a few incidents with the Orion Pirates, but Merrimac served the fleet well and brought many of the pirate captains to justice. Three years into her tour, in the year 2282, the Merrimac and all her crew disappeared. There were no calls for aid. There were no enemies that claimed victory for her disappearance. The Constitution-class vessel merely vanished with nothing to tell of the reason... until now.

The U.S.S. Columbia made her way to the location where the Merrimac's transponder code was steadily broadcasting.

Stonn watched with interest; his mind absorbing all the data circulating around him in search of any possible patterns. The crew was operating efficiently, and he would allow them to do their jobs without any interference from him for as long as possible. He had but one request, "Mr. Downer, please keep the open channel to the Merrimac boarding party on speaker."

Sorek looked at the science console intrigued by the fact that the ship that had been missing seemed intact and in logically working order. He punched in a few commands on the console then began reading through the information that came up. He figured logically that if the Merrimac's crew were aboard her, they would have attempted to communicate with the ship once more, however he also realized that the previous communication was in poor condition.

He decided to run a scan of the Merrimac as best as he could to determine if any life signs were indeed showing on the vessel. He knew that while in the cluster the readings wouldn't be completely accurate, but it might help Stonn with a better understanding of the situation and who might best serve in a landing party.

Pushkin brought the *Columbia* into the small system, maneuvering in the direction of the lost Federation starship. He eyed the asteroid ring and took the ship in, banking around the large pieces of rock. As they

approached the *Merrimac*, Alex looked up and grimaced painfully at the damaged ship. "The poor girl has been through a lot," he mumbled under his breath before moving to bring them in.

He looked to the controls, knowing the others would be ready on the deflector, as well, to push the rocks away. At least maybe in this little system, they might have more protection from the radiation... hopefully.

The *Columbia* made its approach to the Merrimac. Pushkin felt the ship suddenly shift in its flight path, gravitational effects of the stars grabbing at her, and he quickly made adjustments keeping the vessel from colliding into a huge asteroid.

They came about the mountain of stone that hung in space and the Merrimac filled the forward viewscreen. She was heavily damaged, but no evidence showed what had caused it. Stonn began to speculate what could have happened. Was the ship attacked and left? Did it get caught within the Katyon Cluster and fall victim to gravitational shear? Radiation? Or the random asteroid? The Vulcan captain cleared his thoughts understanding that guess-work solved nothing - only real data would put the mystery together.

With no spoken command to do so, Pushkin set a standard orbit around the derelict ship.



The transporter control operator watched as Phillips and his security team entered the circular beam chamber and each took position on one of the pads. The operator then tapped a few commands to bring up the coordinates of the Merrimac and her bridge... seemed the best place to start.

It was then that the operator noticed the inordinate amount of 'noise' that displayed itself on his console. The white noise was coming from all the stars and the radiation that they emitted in multiple wavelengths. The danger they posed to the individuals that would soon be disassembled and then beamed through it was immense. He nervously wiped his hand across his nose and nudged his companion to aid him in clearing all of the distortion.

Still, the team was ready and he needed to inform the bridge, "Transporter room 1 to bridge. Security team 1 is ready to beam."

Observing the damage as the *Columbia* closed within range of the crippled *Merrimac*, Stonn found himself stifling an instinct to peer into his old viewer at the science station. Of course, that was Sorek's now. "Mr. Sorek, please scan the *Merrimac* for damage consistent with weapons fire," Stonn asked. It seemed logical to ascertain any potential danger to the *Columbia* first and foremost. "If

there is none, then please try to identify the primary cause of the damage; whether by collision, internal malfunction or even possible close exposure to radiation."



Sorek looked over the readings coming up on his screens and analyzed them going through the logical possibilities. The Columbia's sensors had scanned the primary and secondary hulls and were detecting carbon scoring on the surface of the vessel. There was damage to the hull that definitely had come from physical impacts - most likely of asteroids - but there was also evidence of energy weapons striking the Merrimac. What Sorek could not determine was what had caused what. Did the Merrimac get attacked and then the attackers left her to slowly be drawn into the cluster's gravitational well? Or was it one of the giant floating rocks that disabled her and then left her easy prey to the pirates that prowled this sector, close to Orion space? The thought brought back a bullet of data that Downer had recovered regarding the Merrimac and her current mission, and how she had participated in the corralling of a number of pirates. The science officer then took note of the strange readings that were coming from the secondary hull.

He took a deep breath before turning to look at the captain, "Sir, it would appear that the damage to the ship had occurred due to a space anomaly... as it would be most illogical for any ship to attack the Merrimac and rupture the hull as has been done. Sensors show there are biological matter readings on board but none seems to be alive." He turned his attention back to the screen and then continued. "It would appear that the primary hull of the ship is damaged from what could only be collisions with debris, although I wouldn't rule out the possibility of weapon scarring on her. While the remainder of the hull is open to the vacuum of space, the ship still has working power to life support and other basic systems, but she has been rendered immobile. There is also an unidentified and unclassified anomaly of an energy source and physical matter in the secondary hull. I would advise extreme caution to the away team."

Stonn considered this latter part of Sorek's report; it was the most troubling. Certainly, navigating the Cluster was difficult and a

devastating collision was a likely reason for the *Merrimac's* condition, but an unidentified energy source was not likely to occur naturally. "Mr. Sorek, please focus all scans on the energy source and surrounding matter. We must determine its origin and if it poses any danger to our boarding party - or to the *Columbia* - as soon as possible.

"Mr. Downer, please contact Lt. Phillips and Dr. Sherman. Inform them that initial scans show no signs of survivors at this point, but to continue the search with caution." Then Stonn's mind queried, "*Someone sent the distress call... or something.*"

Grahm lifted his head up from his console to examine the Merrimac as it hung silently on the screen. Both its port and starboard running lights still shone, but her ship insignia and name lay in darkness. Grahm could even see view portals still alight from the internal systems. He had a quick shiver as he thought about the interior of the vessel, normally kept comfortable by the computer core and environmental systems, now empty and unable to sustain life. The Merrimac's gravity still functioned as well, so all would be in place as the crew had left it prior to the attack or impact of whatever destroyed her. The auxiliary power reactor on Federation vessels had enough nuclear fuel to operate for roughly 100 years. The reactor could never bring the ship to supra-luminal speeds, and thus the ship would never leave this place, but had the hull remained intact people could have survived.

"*Not with the radiation,*" Grahm thought to himself. "*The APR would not be able to create enough power to reinforce the shield grid...*" The thought made Grahm shake his head, and then turn to Sorek. "Mr. Sorek, what about radiation?! We are about to beam 18 people into that vessel and there is no operational shield grid to fend off the killing radiation!"

Across the bridge, Mr. Downer received message, "Transporter room 1 to bridge. Security team 1 is ready to beam."

Suddenly, Chief Engineer Ramos broke into the communication, interrupting the transporter operator and transmitting to the bridge and transporter room simultaneously. "Belay that order, transporter room," Ramos barked. "Bridge, I've been running the numbers and I'm no longer comfortable with beaming our people back and forth here. The ambient radiation is simply causing too much interference for reliable transporter operation. In my opinion, it's not worth the risk. I recommend using shuttlecraft for travel to the *Merrimac*."

"Captain, Chief Ramos has concerns about the fluctuating radiation and maintaining a transporter lock. He recommends using a shuttle instead, sir." Downer continued his ongoing scans of the Cluster and the Merrimac for continued or further transmissions. He checked the status of the initial broadcast to see if the computer had been able to isolate a bearing and distance yet.

Stonn considered both this and Grahm's concerns. "Mr. Downer, please tell the transporter room to await further instruction before beaming. Mr. Sorek, can we ascertain if our people will be safe from radiation once on board the *Merrimac*?"

The data from the Merrimac's damage was still displayed on Sorek's console when Stonn made his new request. The Vulcan leaned over to change his readings of the ship, trying to determine how much radiation was bathing the Merrimac and what affect it would have on an away team. Sorek raised an eyebrow and then ran the test again. The result was the same. He then took measure of the readings he was getting and attempted to place the focus. Running the scan one last time to confirm the results, Sorek was satisfied. The Merrimac was free of radiation. It seemed the ship was sitting in a bubble of energy that dispersed the multiple wavelengths, emanating from the stars, away from the vessel. The bubble was only as wide as the primary and secondary hulls, and it apparently originated from the strange reading that was picked up in the initial scan.

Still unaware of Sorek's findings, Grahm was pondering over Ramos' cancellation of the transporter use. He walked over to Stonn, "Captain, the Aladdin-class shuttle on board should have enough shielding to protect the passengers that make the transit. It is a warp-capable craft and the unnecessary warp power could be diverted to reinforce its shields."

Sorek turned back to look at Stonn before looking at the image of the *Merrimac* on screen. Once he was satisfied that however illogical his conclusion was, it had to be indeed the truth, "Captain, it would seem that the anomaly is somehow shielding the *Merrimac* from radiation, so there should be no danger to the teams sent over to investigate."

"Mr. Sorek, in light of the peculiarities we've encountered thus far on the *Merrimac*, I want you to take command of the rescue party," Stonn said. "Assist Dr. Sherman in recovering any survivors if possible, but otherwise, please observe these anomalies personally. If you require additional science personnel, have them report to you on the hangar deck." Stonn thumbed a toggle on his chair and spoke directly to the transporter room, while patching in Engineering. "This is the captain. Chief Engineer Ramos' concerns are noted and Science concurs. Though scans show that radiation is not a concern on the *Merrimac* presently, the rescue party is ordered to report to Science Officer Sorek on the hangar deck, where a shuttle is being prepared. Emergency radiation suits will be stored onboard in case the situation changes. This is a rescue mission, but caution is advised, and Medical personnel are to be accompanied by Security officers when possible. Keep an open channel to the *Columbia* at all times and report back with anything deemed... unusual. Captain out."

Sorek activated the com portion of his console, "Lieutenant Marshal, report to the bridge to take over temporary duties as science officer. Crewmen T'Plek, Howard and Jemmission report to the hangar bay to assist with an away team mission." Without awaiting a response he moved over to stand near Stonn's chair, he clasped his hands behind his back and looked at Stonn. "Captain, I assume my choice of temporary replacement for my position is logical, if there is nothing else required of me on the bridge I'll go meet the rest of the away team and make sure the preparations are in order." He looked back at the view screen awaiting a response.

Stonn nodded in agreement with Sorek and then spoke, "Mr. Downer, please request that Mr. Sorek's duty replacement report to the bridge immediately." He turned to Grahm. "Maintain Yellow Alert until we know exactly what transpired here. The safety of our rescue party is our top priority."

"Aye, sir," was Grahm's response. Behind him, Sorek walked from the bridge.

In the aft portion of the *Columbia*, its massive u-shaped hangar became active. There had been no order yet given, but still the hangar crew was informed by Downer to prepare the ship's one Aladdin-class shuttle for departure. The large craft was drawn out on hoversleds, into the center of the flight line for Hangar 1, where it was immediately connected by heavy-duty power couplings. The ship had a warp-capable engine within it, but the miniaturized warp-core was not kept energized while the vessel was in storage. And so the couplings would begin to warm up the tritium and deuterium which were essential for the matter/anti-matter interaction, all focused through the dilithium crystals.

A flight check officer opened the shuttle's main hatch and climbed inside to prepare environment and to spool up the navigation system.

Everything looked normal. If Captain Stonn gave the order for the emergency teams to travel via the shuttle, the craft would be ready.

Phillips led his team up one deck, from the transporter room towards the aft of the ship. Sherman and his people were in tow. They passed through an environmental bulkhead and entered the wide expanse of the shuttle bay. The hangar was three decks high and literally wrapped the ship's engineering section. Because of the amount of lofty, open space, it was difficult to maintain any warmth within.

Sherman saw the long Aladdin shuttle and grimaced. It was bad enough to be sub-atomically disassembled and transported across the many miles, but to get into that thing and fly it... he wondered which was worse! Phillips and the security team took the lead and clamboured into the shuttle, moving towards the back as they did. Unlike a *Galileo* craft that could hold up to a maximum of eight, the Aladdin could carry twenty including the pilot and navigator, and so all teams would be able to traverse the distance at once to the *Merrimac*. The medical team entered next, stowing their gear as they found seats, until at last the engineers climbed aboard. With the passengers preparing to sit, the shuttle pilot walked a circuit around his ship while the navigator spooled up the systems.

Sorek and his fellow science officers entered the hangar and walked over to the shuttlecraft where they were pointed to EVA suits. The bay technician aided each one in donning the equipment and then helped them to enter the vehicle. Behind Sorek came the pilot, satisfied with what he saw. Crewmen ran to pull the power couplings and draw them back out of the direct flight path.

A few minutes more, the shuttle hatch closed and the hangar bay began to clear of non-essential people. Hangar Bay door 1 began to slowly open and the vastness of space was visible to all. The Aladdin gently lifted off of the deck on its repulsors and began forward motion as the pilot applied power to the impulse engines. To his right, the navigator performed two functions - making sure the pilot knew where he was going, and reinforcing the shuttle's shield grid with immense power from the warp core. It would not be a long trip, but without the added protection from the radiation, the shuttle passengers and crew would suffer terribly.

Phillips became more excited but worked to hide his emotions, due to the top ranking officers within the confines of the shuttlecraft.

"*This is it,*" he thought, running through the security game plan once they arrive aboard the *Merrimac* wreckage. "*Into the abyss... I just pray that everything goes to plan.*" He looked over towards the pilot, refocusing himself, "Same plan guys... Security and Science in first to secure ourselves a rally point. Once that has been achieved, then the rest will follow. Understood?"

Doc stared straight ahead from his seat on the shuttle, his face a mask of concentration. The rough ride was having a significant effect on his stomach, and he preferred that the rest of the medical staff did not realize the problem. An unbidden thought crept into his mind ... there are few things more disgusting than vomiting inside an EVA suit.

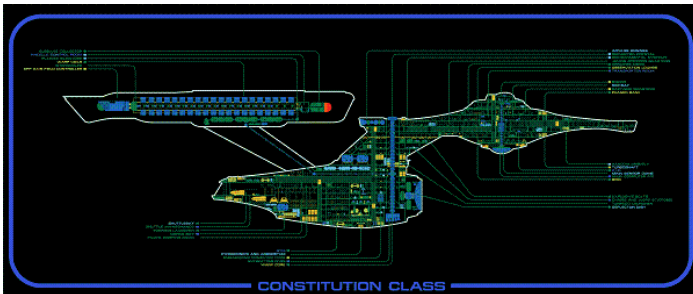
The *Columbia*'s tactical officer checked his console to assure there was no immediate dangers around the starship, and then set about the next task at hand. All Federation vessels were configured with a prefix code that allowed one ship in the fleet to override the command controls of another. Looking at the *Merrimac* in the viewscreen and seeing the presence of power still flowing throughout, John made the assumption that the ship's computer core still had to be in operation. It was the mind of every vessel, whereas the warp core

was the heart. If there was enough autonomy still functioning with the Merrimac, then the prefix code would allow the Columbia to take semi-control of any of her still-operating systems.

Grahm brought up the Starfleet database of all ships, tapped the screen for the Constitution-class, and then selected the Merrimac's registry. He typed the word p-r-e-f-i-x-c-o-d-e, and a numeric override came up. He looked over his shoulder, "Dylan... sending you the Merrimac's prefix code. Transmit it and see what we are able to bring up on controls. We'll need that shuttle bay hangar door opened first."

Downer had relayed the order to Lt. Marshall (*Marshall... Marshall... why did that name seem familiar?*). He had continued to monitor comms and ran some checks to make sure the radiation levels would not cut communications with the away team. A glance over the ship systems showed everything in the green. He logged the results of the Level 4 diagnostic and began to review the report - not the summary of course, the raw data always told the whole picture. Grahm's announcement brought him out of his deep train of thought.

Dylan's panel brought up the basic information of the Merrimac along with the prefix code. A Federation interface screen opened up on another quarter of his console panel and he entered the sixteen-digit code. The Columbia's computer core immediately identified the sequence and then from the Miranda's main sensor array began to transmit an encrypted signal waiting for the Merrimac's computer core to receive and link up. Downer hoped that the Constitution's sensor antenna, computer core, and a significant power source all were still available - a green light appeared on his console and he smiled to himself. They were.



It took a few minutes while the Merrimac's debilitated computer fed to the Columbia all system statuses. On the LCARS schematic, which was centered within the quarter of Dylan's console, showed a lot of flashing symbols in red, amber, and green. All of them signified destroyed, inoperable systems, or systems still functioning. Fortunately, the shuttle bay doors were painted in amber - they were damaged but not offline. The Aladdin shuttle would be coming within range of the Merrimac in another ten minutes and so Downer sent the command for the Constitution-class vessel to open its rear hangar bay doors. Knowing what he was doing, the rest of the Bridge crew all held their breath and waited, hoping that the damaged ship would react. Dylan then went about reading the details of the Merrimac's other conditions.

```
U.S.S. Merrimac NCC-1715
Constitution-class Starship
SENSORS:
lateral... 38%
navigational... offline
long-range... offline
WEAPONS:
phasers... offline
photorps... offline
PROPULSION/POWER:
```

```
warp... offline
impulse... 2%
apr... 78%
SHIELDS:
grid... offline
ENVIRONMENTAL:
gravity... online
life support... online - multiple hull breach
OPERATIONS:
transporters... 36%
hangar... 75%
sickbay... offline
```

Downer scanned the report for completeness and summarized it for the Captain, "Captain. The Merrimac has three-quarters auxiliary power and just a touch of impulse engine ability. Warp core is offline as are most sensors and weapons. Life support is operational but multiple breaches are reported. Artificial gravity is active. The hangar is functional and transporters are operating at a third of capacity."

Pushkin glanced back as the information was relayed about the Merrimac. Impulse was still there; so were shields and environmental systems. He spoke to the Captain and Ops, "Maybe we will be able to tow her back to a safer location?"

Dylan left that decision for his captain and instead he transmitted the status report to the shuttle. He also tried to access the Merrimac's logs to see when and what was contained in the last entries. It took only a moment and then Merrimac's log journal was found and the data was non-corrupted. The last entry dated back over three Earth years ago. The Ops officer saw the long list of logs from every department and decided that he would filter the data and look at the Merrimac's captain's and first officer logs only. They would have been the most pertinent in recording what had happened to the ship. Dylan also figured the last log entry made would contain the proverbial smoking gun.

He tapped his screen, selecting the last entry, and the right-side upper quarter of his console displayed a video screen. On the screen a young, blonde woman in what was probably her mid-30's sat in the captain's chair.

Captain's log, stardate 8067.7

Lt. Commander Blair Jones acting captain, as both Captain Morrison and First Officer Kravitz are both dead.

It is now day 22 of the appearance of the object within the Merrimac's secondary hull atrium, and no matter what we do, we can't stop... [screeccchh!]... [sqqqqwwwaacckk!]... aking the crew members. The ship's living crew now number 33 and sooner or later the atmosphere will finish bleeding out and there will be nowhere left on the ship to keep us alive. All attempts to transmit emergency calls have failed - whether from interference with the object, or due to the Katyon Clusters immense radiation. ... [screeccchh!]... [sqqqqwwwaacckk!]... sssssaaaaavvvve uuuuusssss ... [screeccchh!]... [sqqqqwwwaacckk!]... only say that. The medical staff is all gone, so there is no one else to try and figure out why the ship's remaining crew is dying. We still have air, and for whatever reason, the Merrimac is being shielded from the radiation by that thing. As I said earlier, all attempts to communicate with the alien object have failed... yet still it draws us.

This may be my last entry... we are moving down into the secondary hull where there is still pockets of the ship not exposed to the vacuum of space. Jones out.

Downer listened to the whole log via his earpiece, all the while staring at the sad, scared woman's face. When it ended he felt cold. It

had been her last entry, along with the ships. He looked at the list of the next few log entries that preceded the one he had just watched and knew that this was not going to be a pleasant task.

What if that thing's still there? Was that the 'Save us' message cut into the log recording?

"Captain, I'm receiving some of the Merrimac's logs. Last one first. Some unknown object was in the ship. Sounds like it was the cause of their troubles and nothing they did had any effect. It may still be there, sir. It could try to attach to us."

The shuttle pilot and navigator made short, but skillful work of the flight from the Columbia to the Merrimac. The journey had taken over twenty minutes, but at last the Aladdin shuttle started the approach vector to the Constitution's hangar bay. The away team members looked through the forward port and each took in the terrible damage that was visible. For a moment, each lived a private nightmare within their thoughts of what it had to have been like aboard the ship when all failed.

In a standard orbit around the Merrimac, the Columbia was not seen, but aboard her, Downer commenced to send his commands via the new link that had been established via the prefix code. On the Aladdin, the team members all watched as lights activated around the great bay doors and within the control booth that sat above. Eerily, the small booth was empty, but as if a ghost had ordered it, the hangar doors began to glide back slowly in the absolute silence of space. Light from within the hangar now suddenly shone, but nothing moved within, again creating feelings of apprehension in some of the less experienced crewmembers.

"Uh oh," hissed the pilot, causing the navigator to look up. The doors had split open following the tracks in which they lay, but the right door had come to a halt and was jerking back and forth. The motors that drew it back fought to wrench it free from whatever the obstruction was. But it was the entire door that had been misshapen when it was struck by whatever had caused the Merrimac's destruction, and now the door could no longer roll back into the ship's hull.

"Abort landing?" asked the navigator.

"I don't know... I think I can get it in there," was the reply. The pilot looked to the two highest-ranking officers - Sherman and Sorek, "Sirs, I should have enough room to maneuver us in. Do you want me to proceed?"

Sorek looked out the view port at the carnage of the Merrimac up close. Noticing the jammed hangar doorway, he began calculating the chances of a successful entry and exit if need be from the hangar. He cocked an eyebrow and looked over at Sherman briefly before giving what he deemed the logical answer to the question. "It would seem logical that even with the hangar doors at less than optimal efficiency we shouldn't be hindered in our continuing with the mission. Unless Commander Sherman would prefer otherwise then continue with piloting us into the hangar."

Still trying to calm his stomach, Doc took a peek out of the viewport at the damaged landing bay. Then he took a moment to study the face of the young pilot. For the most part, these kids were pretty green, but they were certainly good at what they did, and Doc could read the confidence in the face looking back at him. "Well, if you think you can get us in there in one piece, son, let's go."

Devon spoke a silent prayer as he looked over at the wreckage of the vessel that was once lifeless in space, now lit again with life. "*What could have done this?*" he thought. He shook his thoughts loose, refocused on the mission at hand, then turned to his team, "All right

people, get yourselves ready. Check your gear and weapons. Once we hit the deck, Security out first to secure the hangar area. No slip-ups. Pilot? Commanders?" he continued, after excusing himself with his superior officers, "I believe it would be wise, once we're down to keep the Aladdin in orbit around the Merrimac. We can't afford our only way of emergency escape to be - if anything occurs - stuck and grounded... defenseless."

"I can get us in," said the pilot. He nodded to Mr. Sorek in confirmation of the Vulcan's command and turned back to his controls. The navigator spoke next, "It seems prudent, what Lt. Phillips has suggested, sirs. Unless you tell us otherwise, once we set down and unload, we'll take her back out and orbit the starship."



The Aladdin started to maneuver into the shuttle-bay, passing through the damaged entrance. Through the portals, the hangar door was jerking violently back and forth as the powerful motors that drew them back fought with the deformed shape. The disquieting thing was that the spastic jerking was in absolute silence. With no air to disturb, normal sound waves were absent in space. Only the sounds within the shuttle cabin gave any evidence of life around them.

But even with the one door inoperable, the opening that they passed through seemed efficient. In front of them, the landing pad of the bay was clear, save for one Galileo-class shuttle sitting on a starting launch point. There was nothing abnormal about that, and even with its presence, the Aladdin had plenty of room to maneuver. Doc let out a sigh of relief as the last side-view portal passed into the hangar bay.

BAM!

What had been a semi-normal flight approach suddenly turned into a frantic, chaotic scene of noise and light. Sparks showered within the Aladdin and screams came from the away team. The shuttle navigator cried out in pain as electric sparks burst in his face and a small console panel gouted flame, scorching him.

The shuttle heaved violently and careened left, its tail end spinning out causing the forward view screen to tilt off the horizon at a terrible angle. Centrifugal force pulled at one side of the craft, slamming people into walls as it yanked the other side's passengers from their seats. The pilot, with incredible skill, pulled hard on the shuttle's flight controls jerking it back up, while forcing it into a very hard landing. The Aladdin hit the flight deck with a boom, still in mid-spin, and slid a few meters to finally come to rest just opposite to the Galileo. That the two ships had not collided was amazing luck.

The cabin lights flickered, smoke filled throughout, and moans came from the wounded team members.

The Aladdin's crash landing was relayed back to its base ship within moments. The shuttle's onboard CPU maintained a direct link with the Columbia, constantly conveying the craft's status. When it slammed to the deck on the Merrimac's hangar, multiple bridge consoles began to flash urgent data. Science, tactical, ops, and helm all were relayed the same information - the Aladdin just went down.

Downer saw the state of the Aladdin, but little could be done with it from here. He continued to try and maintain a positive comms lock on both the craft and the personal communicators of the crew. The logs continued to come in and he scanned them as best he could amidst the sudden chaos of the bridge.

Pushkin looked surprised as the shuttle crashed upon the Mac's flight deck. He looked to his own controls, making sure it hadn't been some gravitic wave that caused the trouble.

"What the--," Devon spat out, getting up slowly at first, making sure that he didn't move too quick, fearing he may bump into other members of the away team. He looked over towards the pilot, continuing, "Pilot? You okay? What happened?" Not waiting for a response, Phillips began to move so he might check the others, but he, too, was feeling the effects of the shuttle crash, and attempted to regain his bearing. Pain coursed through him and he gave a wan smile as he thought, *"Should've stayed seated."* Devon looked over towards the others, hoping the rest fared better than he had.

With the adrenaline and the shock of the incident beginning to abate, the shuttlecraft pilot heard Phillips call and replied, "Yes, sir, I am okay."

The pilot pushed back on his seat and slid out of the command chair. He tapped a couple controls on the instrument panel and the Aladdin's cabin lighting went from flickering amber lights, to a soft white glow. There was a haze of smoke hanging in the chamber and the pilot next hit the command for the ventilation system to blow harder and circulate out the potential hazard. He then moved to where his companion sat, holding his arm and hand that had been badly scorched by the fire.

"Is the Doc okay?" he called.

Once the shuttle came to a stop, Doc performed a quick self-diagnostic. He was winded, and still a bit queasy from the ride over, but for the most part everything seemed intact. After a quick assessment of his team, he assigned uninjured medics to tend to the most serious cases, and then he moved forward in the cabin to check on the injured navigator.

The Aladdin seemed a cramped space for so many to be working - but the craft had never been intended for such things. The rest of the away team went to their perspective friends and crewmates. The outcome was grim as there had been a number of injuries and even a loss. The science officer, Howard, had not been secured in his seat when the shuttle was hit and he was thrown into the opposite bulkhead. The injuries sustained to his neck and skull were mortal and there was nothing that even 23rd century medicine could do for him. Two of Phillips security team handled the dead man's body and carried him to the back of the shuttle where he was laid until better arrangements could be made.

Doc examined the navigator and looked at his burns. They were serious. The man's right hand and arm had been seared with third

degree burns and the outer dermis was badly damaged or even gone in some places. The left hand was in bad shape, but nothing near what the other arm had sustained. Sherman gave the man a sedative and sprayed the wounds with a local anesthetic while he called out to his team to begin triage on those most wounded. In all, out of the twenty-four people on the Aladdin, one was dead and seven others were injured to the point of being ineffective for the exploration of the Merrimac.

While the medics did their things, the engineering crewmen set about taking diagnostics of the Aladdin to see what had happened to her. The shuttle pilot looked through the forward port and saw that the huge hangar door that had been jammed while being drawn back was no longer and looked like it had returned to its closed position.

"I guess the gears in the hangar door motors gave way and that door slammed back closed... hitting us in the process." The pilot spoke to no one in particular, the shock of the moment still making him feel as if he were in a dream land. He looked down at his console, and then over to the navigator whose face was a mask of pain, until Doc administered the drugs. He shook his head and remembered he was a Starfleet officer. He touched a control on the flight console, hoping it worked as he spoke aloud, "Columbia. Columbia. This is Lt. Marsden, flight officer of the Aladdin, reporting in. We have a situation here... seems our ship was hit and may be damaged. Landing party disposition to follow, although I know that we have one casualty thus far. Marsden out."

An engineer spoke up, "Well... we're not going anywhere soon. Looks like the right nacelle has been fractured and so doing it cut the ionic-flux displacer, which renders the repulsorlifts inert. Without those, we can't lift off vertically and maneuver out of here. I think we can get the line re-linked, but it will be a while. As for the rest of the ship... we have environment and power. Shuttle sensors have been taken offline, but the comm antenna is still intact and working. We can live in her, but she won't be going anywhere for at least 36 hours."

Sorek closed his eyes for a few seconds. He shook his head to clear away any confusion before opening his eyes and looking around. Everyone seemed to be fast at work at their jobs as best they could and he didn't intend to do any differently. He took hold of his tricorder and began scanning the Aladdin, as well as the exterior Merrimac hangar.

Devon tended to his injured crewmen, trying to keep them encouraged, knowing that they felt like the third wheel due to being sidelined. He then looked over at the dead crewman, *"My God... It all happened so fast,"* he thought. The young officer looked over towards the doctor first, then the others, giving them a reassuring face that the security team was still ready and able. He wondered if it was affective.

Phillips had five of his people available - the sixth sat in her seat with a broken arm. Not wanting to be in the way, but wanting to help, they waited until there was a need for them and then quickly stepped in to assist. The security team members paired off with the medics to be an extra set of hands.

Doc and his team treated the wounded as best they could considering the situation they were in. For the most part, the milder cases were able to continue with their duties, but those that were badly injured in the crash presented other difficulties. Sherman was frustrated that the best they could do was stabilize the patients and make them as comfortable as possible within the remains of the shuttle. They would all require evac to the Columbia for proper treatment. He looked about the shuttle cabin for an officer to report to, and then he realized he was the most senior officer on the away team. With a sigh he opened a

channel on his suit communicator to the bridge of Columbia. "Captain, in addition to the one casualty, we've got seven serious injuries here. They're stable for the moment, but we can't do much else for them until we can get them back to sick bay. Sherman out."

Captain Stonn's calm voice came back over the speaker, "Doctor Sherman, we are readying an evacuation shuttle as we speak and will be able to launch within minutes. However, we must determine the status of the hangar bay doors before we can proceed with evacuation procedures, lest the same accident re-occur. Within what time frame do our injured need to be returned to the Columbia's sickbay?"

Just like a Vulcan ... needs a scheduled itinerary for a medical evac. The doctor sighed, "As soon as we can get back, Captain. We're stable for the moment, and we certainly don't want a repeat accident. Let's get these doors fixed then. Sherman out."

Devon, in an attempt to regain his composure and focus, walked over towards the Doctor, speaking, "So what's the game plan, Doc? Are we going to scrub the mission? Or evac the wounded, and continue on?" He looked over towards the dead security officer, holding in his remorse, and trying not to show his anger.

Sherman gave a look, but ignored the young tactical officer, focusing on his work instead. "*He's a mass of nerves,*" he thought. "*That may not be good.*"

The medical staff worked diligently in tending to their charges. Wrists were wrapped, cuts sutured, and bruises and burns were anointed with medicines to control pain and swelling. The Aladdin became a triage room with more urgent cases towards the back section of the ship, and easier patients closer to the flight deck.

As the away team members were made whole once again by the good doctor's administrations, they began to get busy with tasks that were within their realm of expertise. The engineers began to check on their *patient* - the Aladdin shuttle itself. Work would be necessary outside soon, but for now the technicians worked within the safer confines, pulling up access panels and crawling into tight repair ducts.

With nothing to do but sit at his station and run the occasional requested test, the pilot, Lt. Marsden, sat and watched out the forward viewport. The Aladdin had been spun 180 degrees when it was hit and was now positioned so that it faced out of the hangar, into space. The view was quite magnificent as he looked at the Katyon Cluster and her myriad of stars, the bright light piercing his eyes and making him squint. It was then that he heard it. A whisper? A song? A voice? He didn't know what it was but he suddenly felt a peace within him. His lips murmured soft words that were incoherent to any that might have heard.

Bang! Bong!

The entire away team stopped what they were each working on, and glances were cast at one another. The sound was heard within the cabin of the Aladdin, but it was softer, as if it had happened outside the ship, but no vibration was felt within the hull. One crewman spoke out, "That was outside the ship." To which another replied, "Impossible... how do you carry sound in a vacuum?" Only to have another chime in, "No. The sound was inside the shuttle. Did someone drop something?"

At the odd sound, Doc started and looked up from the field dressing he was applying to a minor burn on one of the engineering staff. "*What now?*" he thought, as he scanned the cabin for the source of the noise.

Devon, reaching for his phaser as a reflex action, but not drawing it, turned trying to pinpoint the source of the sound. "What in the

world?" he responded, turning now to the command officer, "Sir, your orders?"

Sorek hesitated a moment. Command was his, but he suddenly felt the need to get a senior officer's opinion. He silently shook his thoughts clear, blaming the human side of his biology for the hesitation. The science officer looked to Phillips and then to the shuttle port in front of him. Sorek knew the sound had come from outside the ship - how he could not understand. There was only one way to find out. "Phillips," he said. "You and your available fellow security team, and any engineering staff that are able, prepare to exit the shuttle with me. Doctor Sherman, keep to your efforts here while we take a look around the hangar. We'll be back, but until I return, you are in charge."

Sorek checked his waist for his phaser that hung there; his arm for the tricorder that was part of his suit; and then grabbed his EVA helmet. Stepping over the injured, the Vulcan moved towards the back of the Aladdin where the small air lock was located that would allow them to exit the vessel. Turning back, "Marsden, send word to the Columbia that Phillips and I, along with some of his team are stepping out to investigate the Merrimac's hangar bay."

"Alright guys, saddle up," Devon responded. He immediately began checking his team's EVA gear, weapons, and other checklist procedures before turning back to their commanding officer. Sorek was then finishing up his communiqué with the Columbia. "Sir, with no disrespect," he began, stepping beside him, "I would like to exit first with my team to secure the area around the hangar bay before you step out. Just following protocol, to ensure the safety of the senior away team officer... Sir..." Devon, knew he was probably stepping the line, with this security situation, but after everything that had happened so far, he wasn't taking any chances.

Sorek looked at Devon and replied in the flat, unexcited manner of Vulcans, "Your idea is logical Lieutenant, but the time and energy it will take for the Aladdin to vacuum the airlock, re-compress, and then vacuum again would be too much time for us to spend. Also, by the time all is said and done, the culprit of these noises might be gone, or worse. No, we shall go out together but feel free to have your team fan out and secure the hangar as necessary. I promise that I will be doing nothing more than evaluating the chamber with my tricorder." That said, Sorek entered the airlock and moved to a position that allowed more of his fellow crewmen to join him. Besides Phillips, two engineers and the remaining four security crewmen joined the Vulcan, and the chamber sealed itself. A voice crackled to life within their EVA helmet - it was Marsden. "All right. Starting decompression now. When the back lock turns green, you may open the airlock and exit the ship."

Phillips took up a position to be the first man out, and he listened as the shuttle's internal environmental systems did a back draw of the air within the lock, drawing it back into the ship so it would not be lost to space. Their EVA suits began to register information of temperature and the total dispersal of all environment. There was a clunk sound and the back door of the ship illuminated green. Devon touched the command console and the door slid open and a stair ladder extended down the few feet to the hangar deck below.

Nothing moved throughout the hangar. The Merrimac was still producing gravity that gave them easier and safer freedom of movement, but the huge chamber was void of any environment. Everything lay about the deck as it had since the last living people were aboard the ship.

"Defensive Pattern Zeta," Lieutenant j.g. Phillips ordered his men. Phasers drawn out as they spread throughout the hangar, they took up a defensive posture around the shuttlecraft. "I want constant communication and check-ins around the clock." He went on, "Aladdin, keep our backs covered. Anything out of the ordinary you pick up, let us know." *Now where is the mysterious 'boogeyman'?* he thought, then

refocusing, opened a channel to Sorek. "Sir, we are in the process of securing the hangar area..."

The security team fanned out, while the two engineers made a quick circuit of the shuttlecraft. There were definite signs of damage, but the hull integrity had not been compromised. Using engineering scanners, the two men began to get a more detailed evaluation of the ship and tried to see if they could visibly see where the ionic-flux displacer had been cut. The nacelle was bent and was held to the ship's main body by only one strut - the other being cracked in half.

His arm tricorder scanning, Sorek heard Downer's voice come through his EVA communication system. The Ops officer told him that Captain Stonn wished to speak with him. Nodding to no one, Sorek re-broadcast back, "Captain? This is Lt. Commander Sorek reporting as ordered." Graham's voice came in answer over the speakers in the shuttle, as well as within the helmet's of the EVA's, "Galileo 042 launched and inbound to the Merrimac. ETA is 20 minutes."

"Aladdin acknowledges," was the reply from Marsden.

Meanwhile the five security personnel, including Phillips, finished a complete inspection of the hangar. There was nothing, or no one, there. Items lay strewn about and the Galileo-class shuttle was perched and ready on the flight line, but no other evidence of the Merrimac's crew could be seen. Large containers lay about, some on their sides, evidently yanked from their pallets when the bay doors were broken open.

The engineers were in deep discussion of what to do with the damage, so Devon signaled his men and the quartet began to move towards him. Phillips turned in the direction of the passage, its doors closed, that led into the Mac's hull. He walked over to the doors and saw that they were active. Moving closer, the door sensor detected his presence and they opened - the usual hiss unheard due to the vacuum.

Phillips suddenly heard a whisper that seemed to come from behind him. He turned, but as he did, something moved down the hall he was looking. The young lieutenant suddenly felt gooseflesh rise on his arms, as he saw that the Galileo's inner lights now glowed. Devon quickly looked back down the hall and there was nothing there.

"What in the world?" Devon asked himself. He tapped his communicator, "Security team, Phillips. Anyone hear or feel anything out of the ordinary? Sorek? Sir? I think you might want to head over towards my position... the strange sound... I believe that I am hearing it over here. And to add to the weirdness, I felt something, as well."

Heeding the young security officer, Sorek finished up his scan and walked over to where Phillips stood. "What has you so agitated, Lieutenant?"

"Sir," Devon turned towards Sorek, then back into the direction where he heard the mysterious voices. "I apologize for the sudden quick reactions, but I just heard something. I can't explain it correctly, and I know it sounds crazy, but... I think something is in here with us."

Sorek looked at Phillips with a stone face, typical of a Vulcan. "It would be illogical of us to assume that a *living* creature could not live within the vacuum of space, but our sensors do not support your claim, Lieutenant, that something is present. Thus your statement is based on a lack of empirical data, not a mental state - but what was it that you heard?"

Both Vulcan and man suddenly took notice of the corridor, revealed by the open door that Phillip's proximity had triggered. Crewmen of the Merrimac could be seen laying about the deck, their bodies frozen and lifeless. In a pattern of speech as cold as those that lay dead, Sorek called to the Aladdin, "Doctor Sherman, your presence may soon be necessary out here. With the Galileo on its way, prepare all the wounded to be transferred and then join us." Sorek then

directed his communication to the Columbia, "Captain Stonn, we have found the first of the crew of the Merrimac. Also, it may be that Mr. Phillips has had the first experience with our unknown."

Doctor Sherman and his team were very busy working on the wounded. It was much easier now that there were fewer bodies within the confines of the shuttle. Sorek's voice suddenly came through the inner speakers, "Doctor Sherman, your presence may soon be necessary out here. With the Galileo on its way, prepare all the wounded to be transferred and then join us."

"Acknowledged," Doc replied over his suit com. Switching channels to the rest of the medical team, he continued "All right folks, they're sending over another shuttle to pick up the wounded. I want everyone prepped for moving. Priority cases go first. I'll let you know as soon as we can start bringing people out." Finishing up with his current charge, Sherman double checked the contents of his field kit, then made his way over to the shuttle airlock and out to join the others.

Sorek began to slowly walk into the corridor that exited the hangar bay and took him deeper into the Mac. He knelt down at the first body that he came upon. It was a young human female. Her skin was a grayish blue, though there was very little decay - such things would not occur in space. Ice particles were apparent wherever there were folds or creases of the skin, and her eyes showed the effects of a vacuumed environment. In truth, it was quite a horrible visage, one that would surely be part of one of Earth's ancient films. To Sorek, it was just an inevitability of living, pressurized tissue being exposed to space. He clicked on his tricorder and began to scan. Behind him, Phillips stood staring at the horror that was once an attractive, human woman. He turned his head and looked down the hall and realized there could be over 300 faces just like this that they would have to see.

"Very well. Proceed with extreme caution," Stonn replied. "Whether it was intentional or not, it is entirely possible that the entity caused the deaths of the Merrimac's crew. Act accordingly and keep an open channel."

"Understood, Captain," was the short reply. Sorek then looked to Phillips, "Lt. Phillips, I will wait here for Dr. Sherman to arrive. I would like you and your men to proceed throughout this deck only and check all primary corridors and rooms. We will not worry about sub-halls and access passages. It is apparent that no one is living on this ship, and we need only the ship's log to determine the total number of lost and their names. The captain can determine whether or not the ship will be brought back into proper Federation shipping lanes and then back to Earth to retrieve the fallen."

Phillips was a little off put by the Vulcan's candor - three hundred lives were lost yet Sorek was so matter-of-fact. The young lieutenant wondered if he would ever get used to working around these people.

In the main hangar bay, the engineering crewmen had their own tasks and they moved over towards the yawning entrance. It took only a few minutes until the needed power was routed to the emergency systems and the charges were activated. The countdown was started and the men moved quickly to cover - none really sure what could possibly happen. Fifteen seconds passed and then a very non-dramatic thing occurred - twenty charges flashed and then extinguished, burning hot enough to cut through the hull steel of which the door hinges were made. Compressed air then blasted out causing the now loose doors to blow out and away from the Merrimac's tail end. The pressurized air was strong enough to create enough force that sent the huge doors drifting away, clearing the path for the inbound shuttle.

In all the commotion of the moment, no one saw as the lights within the empty Galileo-craft that sat next to the Aladdin, went out.

Doctor Sherman stepped out of the Aladdin and was amazed by what he saw through the opening of the hangar bay. It was like you could step off and out into the infinity of space. It overwhelmed the man who dealt with tangibles, albeit infinitesimal in themselves when you looked at the number of cells and neurons, etc. that made up a living being. Still, he felt very small and almost a sense of vertigo, and so he turned away from the doors.

He marched over to them, speaking indignantly into his suit communicator, "We've still got injured crew in there you know. What's so important out he... oh." He stopped abruptly when he saw the bodies. That was when he heard the whisper - almost completely unintelligible, but Sherman was sure he heard, *comfffooorrt...*

He looked back over his shoulder and saw the engineer crewmen, the shuttle, open space, and a portion of KC1, as the Merrimac drifted a bit, pulled by the gravity well in which it hung. The brilliant light from the massive red star causing him to squint, but then the Mac was tugged back the other way and the hangar bay dimmed again as light no longer shined inside. Sherman looked down at the body. It was an awful example of a human being exposed to the vacuum and frigid cold of space.

Sorek noticed his approach, "Doctor, I am aware of the fact that crewmen are injured aboard the shuttlecraft, but I am certain that your personnel can attend them. But we need to move along with our mission here, and it would seem best that your time be used to get us some answers of what happened to the Merrimac's crew."

The Vulcan took a moment to observe the crew. Human frailties were certainly a part of his being, but were something that hitherto he had kept in check. The emotional response of the crew to seeing so many dead, Federation personnel dead, might compromise his ability to observe any changes in their mindset caused by this supposed alien presence. They were professional, they were well-trained, and they would do their jobs. Of that he had no doubt. Though, he would certainly evaluate their state of mind more frequently to look for anomalies. Something unexplained happened on this ship, but the safety of the crew under his command was at least as important as unearthing the mystery of it all.

Jessica... Devon thought, looking at the dead human female thinking about his fiancé back home on Belle Terre, *Alone on that dangerous frontier world...*

He then shook his thoughts loose, regaining his professional composure. He activated his communicator, "Anderson? Sanchez? I need you up here now to help with the continued search. Harper and the rest of the team remain here and await the rescue shuttle - assist wherever necessary. Phillips out." Turning to face Sorek, Phillips went on, "Sir, I *did* hear something. Something I can't explain it but something is here."

Sorek continued to calibrate some readings on his tricorder. He was pleased that Dr. Sherman had begun a cursory examination of the bodies so that he could focus on some detailed scans. "Lt. Phillips. The presence of an entity does not alter the need to completely investigate the ship, as directed, to determine if it is possible to salvage. Preliminary indications of such have proven negative through empirical observations. The primary mission still stands until such time as a definitive threat is recognized." Sorek knew he was being hard on the young officer. He felt something was off, too, but refused to give in to speculation until some hard evidence presented itself. He realized he must provide some comfort such that the mission did not fall apart through unfounded fears. "Perhaps it would be best to form larger

teams with your crew and increase the contact frequency. Proceed with caution and take no unnecessary risks. Until we better determine *what* happened here, it would be best if we limit our perimeter. I leave the deployment details to you, Lieutenant." *There...that should put his mind at ease.*

"Aye, Commander," Devon responded, holding his composure in check. *More concrete proof? Vulcan's and their logic. I know I heard and felt something. Why can't he see past his 'logic' and react on instinct?*

Once Anderson and Sanchez arrived, Devon spoke, immediately getting a plan into action. "Anderson. Sanchez. Don't let the dead here rattle you. We have a job to do. I want this corridor swept and secure for the other members of the away team. Anything out of the ordinary report to me immediately. Move out."

Sorek nodded in satisfaction at the security officer's command of his subordinates and turned again to the Doctor. *How does one look rumpled even in an EVA suit?* "Dr. Sherman. I assume it would be beneficial to examine one or more of the deceased in detail. I also assume that such an examination could only be performed on the Columbia. I would suggest the strictest quarantine protocols if that is your chosen path. Thank you, Doctor." Sorek strode off to return to the hangar area to receive a report from the engineering crew.

Doc had paused when he heard the voice. He looked at the others, and assumed they were experiencing similar phenomenon. *I wonder if we're hearing the same words ...* he thought as he did a quick inspection of the scene.

Keeping one eye on the other away team members, to see if they exhibited any odd behaviour, he began a more careful examination of the first body, the young woman near the door. "Such a shame..." he mumbled, pulling his medical tricorder from his satchel and using it to determine cause of death, and to locate any other anomalies.

Sherman's tricorder flashed with light and color as it scanned the dead woman's body. The readings were nothing more than the doctor expected. Massive internal hemorrhaging on the cellular level as internal body pressure was exposed to the absence of external pressure. The doc grimaced to himself when he thought of some of the ancient Earth movies about space, and how the *astronauts* would burst in pulpy explosions if they were exposed to space. It was true in one respect - internal cellular pressure would cause the body to literally burst its seams, but it was not an explosive pressure. And so, certainly in massive pain, this woman died as her body came apart and froze at the same time. "Horrible," the physician thought.

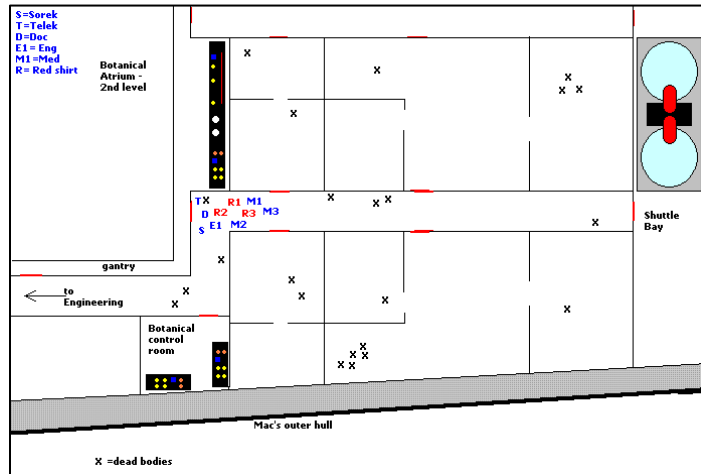
Doc looked down the hall. There were a lot of dead people here. He would need to have them gathered so that they could be identified and a crew manifest drawn up. They were going to need more people here.

Sorek was talking to one of the engineers. "Commander, the Aladdin is definitely grounded for a while. She will need to have that displacer replaced so that we can re-energize the repulsor lifts. We might be able to tow her out with that Galileo-class, right there." The engineer pointed over Sorek's shoulder to the other shuttle that sat on the flight line. As they spoke, movement caught the Vulcan's eye as another shuttle, dispatched from Columbia, appeared outside the open hangar doors. The incoming shuttle was lining up to commence its landing. Sorek looked around and hoped that there would be enough room to bring the craft in. Once landed, he and his teams would see about moving the injured from the Aladdin.

Things would get confused on the deck as more teams arrived and needed to be briefed and assigned. The Vulcan hated the disorder and lost time that would result, but the crew would recover quickly and get

back up to speed. He *knew* what had to be done and had to temper his frustration of depending on others to do something he could do more quickly. He was always more comfortable hands-on. Managing *people* was never his strong suit. Sorek quickly refocused on the engineer team he was addressing. Best to get them on to something before the new arrivals cluttered the deck. "Please evaluate the status of the Galileo, Ensign. Another craft on stand-by may be beneficial." He quickly turned on heel and strode to the side of hanger bay. He observed the teams working as he awaited the arrival of the other shuttle.

"Aye, Commander," replied the engineer to Sorek's request.



Phillips and his people were moving up the central corridor that led from the hangar bay towards engineering. The three security members opened doors as they came upon them, peering inside and taking account of the ship's and crew's status.

It was eerie to Phillips. He knew that two of his team was following behind him, but the young officer felt terribly alone. He stepped over dead bodies, only to look where he placed his foot for fear of stepping on another. The dead faces looked up at him in frozen agony, some with torn eyeballs that were blue or black from the frozen blood that filled them. It was a nightmare.

Devon turned a corner that went to his left and the corridor darkened. The lights above were either blown or they flickered, casting a haunting strobe. He approached a door, maneuvering around a dead engineering crewman that sat upright against the wall in his uniform coveralls. The crewman's face hung slack, the ship's gravity having pulled it down after all life in the muscles had ceased, and now it was frozen. It reminded Phillips of rubber and bile formed in the back of his throat. He breathed deep. Getting nauseous in an EVA was not the best thing to have happen.

The door in front of him silently opened and revealed the botanical environmental control room. Within the central area of the secondary hull of most Constitution-class vessels, right behind the main engineering room, was a botanical chamber. It was large, encompassing three deck levels, and within it were grown plants and some even had animals and insects. The goal was to create a living chamber that mirrored the ecology of the planet that the crew primarily shared. It allowed for R and R, and it also provided the crew with fresh fruits and vegetables. Lastly, it allowed scientists to study the effects of prolonged time in space on vegetation and other fauna. Holodeck chambers could reproduce the same vision of planetary ecology, but Starfleet's physicians and psychiatrists all agreed that a true, living, chamber within a starship aided in crew morale and well-being.

Phillips looked at the readings that were displayed within the control room. All seemed normal... but... Phillips suddenly realized all was normal. The botanical room had an environment!

The Science Officer heard his communicator, "Commander... Phillips, here. Sir, I believe that the botanical atrium has an environment."

The Vulcan raised an eyebrow at the statement. Neither their local sensors, nor the Columbia's, registered a breathable atmosphere on board the Merrimac. Sorek's attention was drawn back to his surroundings and he began to move back as the Galileo from their ship entered the main hangar bay, slowing as it did and coming to a gentle landing.

In the botanical environmental control room, Devon began to adjust controls to get as accurate a reading as he could. With his attention drawn to the panels, he did not notice the doors to the chamber slide silently closed. He was not aware of anything until the lights suddenly went out.

The Galileo 042 came to a rest on the deck and a moment later, the ship's hatch opened and eight crewmen, of varying departments, exited the ship. Sorek saw that he had three more engineers, three more medics, and two security personnel. The newcomers fanned out and went to their perspective senior officers to inquire what was needed. The engineering officer approached Sorek, "Sir, I'd like to take my team to Engineering. We might be able to do something about the ship not having a workable environ."

Behind the man, Doctor Sherman was directing his staff in the offloading of wounded crewmen from the Aladdin and moving them to the Galileo for a return trip to the Columbia. Already the pilot and navigator were rotating the small craft with the ship's repulsor lifts so that it might launch directly out of the Merrimac's hangar. The wounded crewmen's EVA suits were buttoned up and then they were assisted across the landing deck to the awaiting shuttle. Once done, the pilot closed the hatch and re-activated the ship's internal environment. That completed, he proceeded to launch.

Lt. Sorek's mind was drawn back to the question at hand, from the engineer officer before him, but first they needed to know that the path to Engineering was safe. Which reminded him of Phillips... and his last communiqué. Sorek hit the transmit button on his comm unit, and waited for the reply from the young lieutenant.

None came.

The Away Team's command officer waited a moment with impatience before activating the suit's comms again, "Lt. Phillips... report." Nothing. He transmitted again. "Security Team. Report in. Is anyone with Lt. Phillips?"

Sorek looked around as the Columbia's Galileo glided out of the bay on its return trip. Things were in hand in the bay. The Engineering officer was still standing there. *What was his name?* Telek. His personnel file reported him a competent, promising young officer.

"In time, Lt. Telek. We haven't secured the ship yet. You have crews working on the Aladdin's ionic-flux displacer and another checking on the Merrimac's Galileo. Coordinate their activities until we are able to move through the ship."

Sorek disliked disorder. Where was Phillips? Where was anyone on his security team?

Doc watched the tail end of the rescue shuttle as it slid out of the hangar, satisfied that there were no further problems and those onboard would be quickly stabilized once they reached a proper medical facility onboard Columbia. He was pleased with the efforts of the away team medics. They had done well in a difficult situation.

There's hope for these kids yet, he mumbled to himself as he returned to his investigation of the horrific demise of Merrimac's crew.

Gathering up a team of uninjured medical staff, Sherman led them to the hall at the back of the hangar bay, instructing them to begin recording the identities of the deceased. Once his team was busy, he found Sorek. "Did I hear that young lieutenant say there was atmosphere somewhere onboard this ship? Makes no sense to me considering the entire crew died from lack of it out here."

Sorek turned his attention to the Doctor as the engineering officer left. "That was the initial report, Doctor, but I am unable to contact him for confirmation. Until we can hail the security team you should ensure all of your team who exit the hangar are under guard. I trust it won't interfere with your initial work, but some caution is prudent until we account for our personnel." Satisfied, Sorek edged towards the connecting hallway. *Was a trace of anxiety entering his voice?* Certainly not. It was natural to show concern for missing crew. They were under his orders and locating them would mean lost time and redeployed resources. He was fine. He was in control. Punching the transmit button on his suit communicator perhaps a little too harshly he fought to keep an even tone, "Security Team. This is Commander Sorek. Report in."

Sorek finally heard a voice, "Sir? This is Ensign Anderson... Lt. Phillips is not with me, sir. He moved ahead us going around a corner." Another voice confirmed, "Sanchez, here sir... Lt. Phillips is not here with me either. Nothing here but the dead." The Vulcan could hear a lost sound in the voice of Sanchez, maybe even fear. The young crewman was alone in a large ship surrounded by the bodies of the Merrimac's crew. Sorek was certain it was fear.

With a look at each other, both the doctor and science officer knew it was time to move into the ship. "Anderson. Sanchez. Return to the main corridor. We will advance together to the Botanical Atrium." Sorek turned to the Doctor, "Doctor. Your team with me, please." He again activated his communicator to talk with the Engineering officer, "Lt. Telek. Report with a team member to the main corridor. Someone with experience in environmental controls." The team re-assembling, Sorek sent a message to the Captain, "Captain Stonn. We have lost contact with Lt. Phillips. We are advancing in force to secure the botanical atrium...and to try and locate Phillips."

Sorek's hand grazed the phaser attached to his suit, but instead activated his tricorder. If the botanical section was still operational, he should be able to detect the life readings emitting from it, even through the internal bulkheads. If anything was preventing an accurate reading, it might be as telling.

Sorek started calibrating his tricorder as the security personnel appeared from side rooms further up the hall. The light flickered around the corner but their goal was the atrium door directly ahead. Lt. Telek arrived with a crewman to form up behind Doctor Sherman. He hoped the tricorder scan at a closer range would produce some result. "Ready everyone." (more a statement than a question) "Let's move."

Doc did not like the sound of this plan, but somewhere in this ship one of their own was down. "Med Team Alpha, you're with me. The rest of you continue with the identification of the bodies in this section." As his staff assembled, Sherman took a long look down the imposing hallway filled with the dead and hoped he and his crew from Columbia weren't about to join them. With a sigh of resignation he trudged after Sorek and the others.

The landing party members moved up the corridor gathering the two security officers that exited from doors on either side. The door to the botanical atrium was before them as the corridor turned left and then made another quick change to the right. To their left was another door

that was closed that enclosed the botanical room environmental controls.

Sorek's tricorder began to give off a faint whine as it began to scan for any life, or biological readings. The Vulcan quickly changed settings on the instrument so that it ignored biological matter that was no longer living. The screen data dramatically reduced as all the dead crewmen were excluded from the scan readings. Still, Sorek raised an eyebrow at the readings that his scanner was picking up.

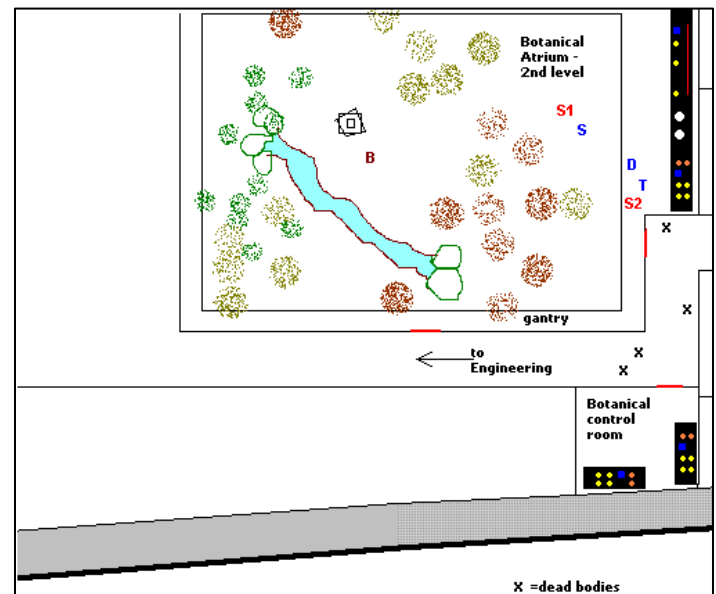
Botanical rooms on starships were always kept lush and even fauna was allowed to live within, but the plant and animal life was kept contained and minimized within the atrium - at least to a level that could be successfully maintained in the space provided. Sorek checked his tricorder's calibration to make sure the readings were correct.

Sorek checked the readings again and was satisfied they were the best he was going to receive. There was interference of some sort, but a source was not evident. Conditions in the atrium were confirmed, but what of the other reading? Phillips? His hand moved again for his phaser, but he stopped. No. There was no indication of other life forms that were a threat. He would move to the control room. No need to explain. This was *his* mission to command.

He gestured to a security crewman, "Stand post at the atrium door," and pointing to another, "Take up a position in the corridor ahead" And finally at the third, "Crewman, you and Lt. Telek with me. Doctor Sherman - stand by. I'm getting a faint life reading from the control room." Walking abreast with the security team, Sorek steps past the bodies into the flickering light of the corridor and heads for the manual door controls if the sensors do not open it automatically.

What does he mean by "faint"? Doc thought, as he turned his medical tricorder on the control room to see what Sorek had detected. Perhaps his practiced physician's eye would reveal more detail about Phillips' condition, if he was still in there.

Doc's eyes widened slightly at his medical scanner's readings. He had pointed it in the direction of the small Botanical Control Room and was receiving the readings of a human male who appeared to be going through coronary arrest. The scanner also was linked to the EVA suit that protected the man, and its bio-readouts identified him as Lieutenant (jg) Phillips. Sherman pressed forward in pursuit of his other three shipmates. He had a life to save.



The doors to the Botanical Control Room opened immediately for Sorek, the hidden proximity sensors triggering them. The room was pitch black save for the numerous glowing lights of the control panels. Suddenly the overhead lighting system flickered to life and the room was bathed in light. On the floor, near the enviro-control panel lay the form of Phillips. He was not moving.

Sorek immediately took stock of the situation and the personnel with him. His immediate thought was to move to Phillips, but the Doctor and his staff would be much more effective. He wanted to ascertain the status of the environmental controls and try to figure out why the atrium had an atmosphere that was not picked up from the Columbia. Telek thought, and his team knew those systems inside and out and could be more effective at getting answers. He did what most good commanders he worked under did. He stepped out of the way and let the personnel do their jobs.

"Doctor, in here. Mr. Telek, determine the status of the controls and see if power and operations are functioning as expected from this room. Crewman... stand ready." He called out to the remaining crew in the hall, "Hold positions while we work in here." He would wait for Doctor Sherman to make a prognosis before reporting back to the Captain. He would give Telek and his team a moment to get a handle on the control functions...why did each second seem an eternity?

Doc barged into the control room, roughly pushing past Sorek and making his way over to the prone form of Phillips. Having already assessed the situation, he dropped to his knees beside Phillips, pulling an injector from his kit, which he applied through the thinner material on the neck area of Phillips' EVA suit.

There was no way to defibrillate through the heavy suit, and despite the reports of a viable atmosphere, Doc was unwilling to expose Phillips to possible toxins. Hoping the drugs would help; Doc took a deep breath and began administering CPR, while keeping an eye on the readout of his medical tricorder.

Doc worked in silence, although the sound of his own breath filled his helmet. He watched the small medical tricorder that he had sat on the deck, next to Phillips, but the displays did not look promising. Sherman realized that he was successfully moving the man's blood by providing artificial cardio pumps, but he also knew that the young security officer was not breathing on his own and there was no way to provide artificial breaths - not through his helmet visor. To open the shield would be immediate death for the man.

Two more of Sherman's team fell in beside him on the floor and tried to give aid as they could. One medic increased the release of oxygen within the suit so that Phillips would have more air to breathe, if they could get him to breathe on his own, while the other reached into his medkit and pulled out his hypo. He loaded a stimulant cartridge that was like the human body's natural adrenaline. The goal was to kick start the man's heart. Between the meds and the CPR given by Sherman, the added air, and the stimulant, it was the best that they could provide for the man within the vacuum of the Mac.

While the doctors worked, Telek, after a moment of watching, heeded Sorek's orders and moved to the command controls. After a moment of cursory glances and quick mental analysis, he had an idea of the ship's environmental situation within the atrium along with a sense of power output.

"Mr. Sorek, based on the displays here, I can see that the Merrimac's auxiliary power reactor has been dedicated to environmental programs. All other systems have been disabled. You can see here, sir... 75% to comp-core, 18% to environment, 4% to lighting, 3% to temperature. I can say that the way it is set up, there is nothing for shields and so the UV radiation would have killed everyone aboard this ship. Also, with the ship opened up the way it is -

structurally - I don't know how anyone could have stayed comfortable with only 3% of the power going to maintain heat. If they didn't suffer from radiation poisoning, they had to have frozen to death." Telek shook his head. "The other strange thing, sir, is that the botanical chamber shows readings of carbon-based life forms... plants to be sure, a livable atmosphere, along with a thermostat reading of 82 degrees. If they ran to the botanical atrium to wait it out, it looks like they would be able to survive. The plant life would provide some sorts of foods. I hear that some of the ships even keep animals - so maybe they had those to use for food, too."

Doc watched the erratic signs on his med sensor, as Phillip's heart violently heaved due to the stimulants that had been given by the medic. He continued to pump but no normal, natural rhythm was happening and Phillips slowly faded away. It took another five minutes before Sherman would stop. The medic beside him clicked off the bio scanner that once flashed with vital signs, and the helmet light within went dark shading the dead man's face.

Sherman leaned back on his heels, awkwardly moving in the bulky EVA suit, but needing to stretch his bent old knees. He was frustrated. He had just lost one of their team mates and he had no idea why. Phillips was young and healthy according to his physical data on the doctor's tricorder. What could have caused him to go into coronary arrest? Doc's mind joked, *'Something must have scared him to death!'*

With a look of semi-disgust, Sherman looked over to the non-moved Vulcan who was in deep discussion with the Andorian engineer. Both were completely unaware that Phillips was no longer with them, and he wondered if either really cared. With a sigh, Doc pulled himself up to his feet and walked over to Telek and Sorek. When the Vulcan didn't immediately notice him, Sherman cleared his throat loudly and announced "He's dead, Sorek." After a pause, the doctor added "We couldn't do anything in the time we had with him sealed in his suit. Cause of death is unknown. There's nothing apparently wrong with him. We'll have to take a closer look back in sick bay." With that, Doc turned back to his staff, ordering them to get the body back to the shuttle, prepped for transport.

Sorek looked without expression at Doctor Sherman as he gave his report. *A crewmember lost under his orders...Sorek had sent him to his death and they were no closer to finding out if it was the same cause as killed the crew or something else...How many more would he send to die before he figured this puzzle out...?* "Thank you, Doctor. I am sure you did everything you could. Prioritize the body's return to the Columbia and have your staff work to find cause of death. It may speak to the risk we are all under here."

He returned his attention to Telek, but could not help stealing a momentary glance at the lifeless suit splayed out on the control room floor. "Lt. Telek, we need immediate access to the botanical atrium. We do not want to vacate its atmosphere. Does it have a functioning airlock? If not we will have to establish a temporary one immediately. Please make the necessary preparations." Sorek toggled his communicator, "Sorek to Columbia. Lt. Phillips has been located with no vital signs. Cause of...death is unknown at this time. We have secured the Botanical Control room and are preparing to advance to the Atrium."

Sorek left those in the small room to their tasks and stepped out into the hall. More bodies. He noticed his EVA suit had compensated with a richer oxygen mix as he focused on returning his breathing to a normal rate. With the security team still posted as directed, he looked as nervously at the atrium door as he did up the dim hallway ahead.

Insert bridge stuff here

Like Stonn, Sorek was also completely overwhelmed by something that touched his mind. His human side was filled with emotion of love and caring - something that Sorek had spent years subduing. Whatever it was, it gave the impression of nothing but kindness and the desire to help. It tore Sorek up inside as his mind strove to retain his Vulcan stoic logic, and his humanity reaching out in return.

While he wrestled with himself, a voice suddenly spoke in his helmet's comm. It spoke to all of the crewmen that stood close by, "You are welcome to enter. Please come." The voice was distant, as someone talking in a reverberating hall. It was female. And it was non-threatening... almost gracious.

Sorek struggled to regain control and, again, found his heart racing. He looked around, hoping nobody had noticed and was surprised to see them all reacting to the voice. *Had they all heard it?* Control. He must regain control.

"Steady up and remember your training. Focus on your tasks. Logic would indicate that an alien entity is trying to coerce our actions. Follow orders or we may all end up as the Merrimac's crew. Lt. Telek. Secure an airlock on the botanical atrium so that we may enter." Sorek hated descending to melodrama to try and make a point, but Starfleet psychology classes and briefs heralded its limited effectiveness in times of crisis or indecision. He hoped he, above all, could maintain the strength of mind to resist this strange force.

Doc had remained in the control room after sending the medics back to the shuttle with Philips' body. When he heard the voice, he immediately scanned the other crew in the room to see if the others had heard it. Apparently they had, and Sherman noticed a particularly odd expression on the face of the Vulcan. Was that emotion? For a fleeting moment Sorek looked almost ... happy ... before his usual stoic face returned.

Whatever was here was messing with their minds. The doctor pictured the dead eyes of the young crewman he had seen when they first left the shuttle bay. "I'm not so sure we want to follow those instructions without knowing what's in there, Sorek."

"Doctor Sherman!" Sorek was letting too much emotion into his voice. He paused a moment as he glanced from face to face quickly. He continued in a cold, controlled tone, "Doctor Sherman. Whatever we heard, it was our intention to investigate the atrium from the outset. Lt. Telek *will* establish an air lock so we don't vent its atmosphere and we *will* continue with our mission."

The urge to reach out and search for that presence again was overwhelming, but Sorek had spent a lifetime exercising control. Nerves were fraying and he had to keep this mission moving. As soon as the entry to the atrium is secured, Sorek would lead them in.

With an echoed whisper, the voice returned in all of their helmets, "There is no need for an airlock."

To the surprise of both the security crewman and engineer standing by the botanical atrium entrance, the door opened of its own volition. Within were immediately seen large growths of vegetation, larger than anything that would have normally grown. Moisture and heat was also present along with an atmosphere of oxygen and nitrogen contained behind some hidden, unknown barrier.

The security crewman slowly reached out his hand until it broke the plane of the entrance - nothing deterred his reach, nor did anything react to his effort.

Doc was still reacting to Sorek's emotional display, when the door opened. Both Columbia officers turned to look and slowly started to walk back towards where Telek's engineer crewman stood.

Sorek stopped in his tracks as the door opened. The crew turned to look to him and he was, for the moment, at a loss. He was about to hail the Captain to advise on their course of action when the message came through from Downer for *his* ears only, "Columbia to away team. Commander Sorek, an unknown entity has entered our systems. Commander Grahm has ordered *all* contact with the Merrimac to be cut...You'll be on your own for awhile, Commander. Be safe. Please acknowledge." He fought down his emotions. The fear. The responsibility. The wonder. *Commander Grahm? Where was the Captain?* "Acknowledged."

There was no time to explain Columbia's predicament. It would not advance their cause here and would only breed further distraction and uncertainty. Their investigative mandate was clear and until they encountered a physical threat, he would continue. *But Phillips...what happened to him?*

"We will continue into the atrium. This...*voice* is an unknown presence that must be guarded against. Pair up and focus on your partner. Keep each other under constant watch and confirm all actions amongst yourself. Crewman, you are with me. Lt. Telek, partner with a security officer and follow me in after a moment. Doctor, please remain outside... you are the next ranking officer should anything happen. Let's go." Sorek stepped into the atrium with the security crewman and immediately activated his suit's tricorder looking for differences from the readings taken outside. Although he would much rather have been holding his phaser as the security officer was.

Doc was momentarily taken aback by Sorek's ... outburst. *This place ... something is very wrong here.* He disliked the order to remain behind in the control room, even though this was a wise choice under the circumstances. Doc felt a twinge of fear for the away team members about to enter the atrium, especially under the command of Sorek who was definitely behaving out of character. "Aye, Commander. I'll wait here and monitor everyone's vitals. But the moment something goes wrong, I want you and the others to pull back." Sherman prepped his tricorder to display a real time diagnostic for each of the team members who were about to enter the atrium.

Sorek led the team forward, he and the security officer entering the atrium first. His tricorder began to take environmental readings as their eyes took in the sights. They were standing on the second tier catwalk of the botanical room, its high-rounded ceiling still another thirty feet above them. Though plants still grew, they were grossly oversized and unnatural. Vines that would normally be as thick as a rope hung from rafters and braces with the circumference of trees. The metal catwalk had been bent and distorted by the weight of some of the vegetation that grew up through, or rested on the frames.

The science officer read his tricorder. The atmosphere was roughly 60% nitrogen and 40% oxygen and temperatures were maintained in the 90's. It was then that the security guard tapped on Sorek's suit. He looked to where the crewman stood at the edge of the catwalk, looking down to the lower level of the atrium and followed his gaze. The science officer raised an eyebrow as he saw a multi-faceted object that was suspended in the air, rotating. What also caught his attention was the human Starfleet officer that sat by the aesthetic, but artificial stream that ran in the center of the chamber, staring back up at them.

Sorek motioned to the crewman to keep his weapon lowered as he took a step closer to look down at the 'entity'. Oh, it was disguised as a Starfleet officer, but until Sorek had some proof he would treat it differently. If it was a crewmember, certainly he had been altered in

some manner that may pose a threat. In any case, there was knowledge to be gained here.

"Hello. I am Commander Sorek of the USS Columbia. Your ship has been damaged and we are here to offer assistance. Can you tell me what has happened here?" Best not to relay the extent of the damage or the fate of the crew at this time, he thought, "Are there others here with you?" Sorek focused his tricorder on the form, working quickly to isolate the background. He wanted to confirm first, that what he saw was true - hard scientific facts to back up the visual. Secondly, he tried to get a reading of some sort on the other object.

"Hello Commander Sorek, it is a wonderful pleasure to meet you." The lips of the Starfleet officer moved but the voice was from far away, hollow and echoey, as if in a grand hall. Maybe it only spoke within their minds, but the unnatural sound and visual of the woman mouthing the words caused the security crewman's skin to crawl. The woman continued, "We... I... am Lt. Commander Blair Jones and I am here to assist you."

Again it was as if the voice came from an elsewhere, but now readings on the figure began to run across Sorek's tricorder. There was a definite *living* energy contained within the body that was once Lt. Commander Blair Jones, but the Vulcan could see that the body itself was most assuredly dead. The pallor of the skin; the slack hang of naturally taut musculature; and the fact that there was no standard biological activity within the woman's body, such as a heartbeat. The security crewman held his phaser at his side, but he clenched it tighter still as the ghoulish looking woman continued to convey her message.

Sorek began to move towards, and then down the spiral-metal staircase - the crewman walking hesitantly behind him. They circled down until they alighted on the vegetation-covered floor of the atrium. Sorek had received more readings via his tricorder - a magnificent spectrum of light energy. X-rays, ultra-violet rays, gamma rays, and visible light that were at levels that should have killed any living organism in the room, but were instead bent and re-formatted into new ways that shielded and even stimulated the life contained. In essence, it was like the natural light rays were altered and had become a super-food for the plant's photosynthesis - thus the strange overgrowth. The Vulcan looked at the large, multi-faceted construct that hung in the air and wheeled of its own accord, in the center of the room. Sorek knew the object was the source - or at least the focus of the power present.

Suddenly, from above came Doc Sherman's alarmed voice. The physician had become impatient and entered the atrium with Telek, the other security crewman, and his fellow medics. Sorek maintained a practiced calm as he carefully logged his readings and slowly advanced. He glanced intently at the security crewman to try and capture his eyes - a reassuring Vulcan glance that he hoped would calm him. Doctor Sherman's voice disturbed the calm. "Hello, Doctor Sherman. This is Lt. Cmdr. Blair Jones. She has offered to aid us in the exploration of her atrium. Truly fascinating plant species. Wouldn't you agree, Doctor?"

"Are you alone in here, Commander Jones? The Doctor noticed some injured personnel in the corridor and your ship is damaged, which attracted our attention. We would like to offer any aid that we can provide."

Jones was pretty, or had been when her body was truly alive. Now it seemed an automaton like out of the classic Earth tale, Frankenstein. Now that they were closer, the security officer could see that the woman's eyes were open, but they did not move, nor did they blink. She tried to give expression to the face but it was weak and so the smile came off more as a grimace. "We have taken this form to better communicate with you, but I can see that something is wrong. You find it unpleasant. Have we done something wrong?"

From above the garden, on the catwalk, Doc could see that there were other crewmen bodies littered about the atrium. The plants had grown up and over them obscuring most. These were the survivors of the U.S.S. Merrimac - all had huddled here when the ship was damaged and slowly died. It was awful.

"Humph ... fascinating", Doc grunted sarcastically in response to Sorek's question. The sight of all the dead crew, who likely suffered horribly as the life support on their ship slowly failed, sickened the physician. This 'thing' had murdered all these people and now Philips as well, and it wondered if it had done something wrong. Doc continued to monitor all present, adding the 'entity' to his scan to see if he could discern something about it. It wasn't biological, which meant this was likely a job for the engineers rather than a medic, but it couldn't hurt to gather as much information as possible.

"There is no need for charade. If you wish to communicate you may do so in your incorporeal form. It is discomfoting to see the dead of our species animated. This ship has been missing for some time and our mission is one of investigation...and discovery. We want to understand what happened to this ship...and this crew." Sorek turned away from the body of the Lt. Commander and refused even to address the spinning object. He turned slowly through a circle as he talked, observing the room and the away team for any subtle changes or oddities.

"Pardon the discomfort," said the entity. "It is not our wish to cause discomfort to you, but it is not within our abilities to renew the life of this carbon-based flesh. We only wished to provide a means to communicate with you so that we may help in your passage." She looked at her hands and her arms, "It is strange but I can still remember this form. I remember when we... I was... Lt. Commander Blair Jones... before the damage. Before the attacks. Before they came to save us." Sorek's ears picked it up and he quickly glanced at the woman. What had she said? He had heard it before. It was the same voice that they had heard on the bridge of the Columbia... when Downer had been listening to the sounds that emanated from the Katyon Cluster... from the stars.

Doc read his tricorder. He was absolutely correct in his assumptions. There was nothing alive about the form below, in a human sense. But his tricorder did pick up the immense energy reading that was standing before Sorek. The tricorder began to detail the entity - it was a form of intelligent plasma that was giving off dangerously high levels of ultra-violet radiation, although he was getting no warning signs. In fact, the high-level radiation exerted was being altered and transferred into healthy rays of light and heat. As the energy stars of the Cluster was being refracted around the derelict Merrimac, in this chamber it was being focused. The super-light is what had increased the plant life and thus the oxygen and nitrogen built up to high levees within the chamber. It could have sustained the surviving crew - food from the vegetation, air, and apparent warmth - all focused around the object floating in the center of the room. The doctor made some mental calculations. The Mac had been gone for some time, but these people could have survived in here. Why were they dead? And why did she say *they saved us*?

Doc moved forward to stand beside Sorek, holding out the tricorder for the Commander to see. "Are you getting the same readings as I am? If the ship lost power a while back, these people could have lived in here for quite some time ... because of that." He gestured towards the floating object. Looking around the chamber, Sherman asked no one in particular, "So why are they dead now?" He turned his tricorder on the nearest body, initiating a full diagnostic. *Why indeed?*

The doctor's statement made the entity that had been Jones turn, "There has been no death here." Her echoey, calm voice continued,

"You believe them dead only due to the stopping of their carbon-based body. My fellow shipmates and I have moved on. We were saved from death by the Kaytons. They came when the Merrimac had been wounded. They came when our life support was bleeding out into space. They provided this..." she gestured to the multi-faceted sphere.

"Is it some form of protective shield?" asked Telek.

Blair nodded, "Of sorts. It provides a comforting environment for us until we are ready to making the crossing... until *you* are ready to pass through. It is a gateway."

The doctor's tricorder began to feed him information on the dead body that lay close by, entangled in the vegetation. Save for the decomposition, which was quite slow, there was no evidence as to why the person died. The body showed no signs of disease, sickness, or emaciation from hunger. There was no sign of heart failure, or constriction of the lungs and muscles from the loss of air. It was as if the body just stopped. Sherman looked to Jones and thoughts entered his mind, "*Did the crewman's life stop, or leave?*"

Sorek confirmed the readings between his and Doc's tricorders. He continued to monitor readings as he talked, "Crossing? That sounds like leaving this place. Why not just sustain life until a rescue ship arrived? The plant life in this atrium is certainly healthy. Why not just let them live here? Life as our species knows it. Our ship has experienced trouble of an unknown sort. We are well-protected and not in danger. Is this the doing of the Kaytons? We don't wish for any help as we are not in danger."

"From what we have learned through our interactions with your species we know that from the onset of your existence that your carbon-based bodies are dying. It degenerates even as it grows only to degenerate faster at the terminus of your being. Then even you do not know whence your essence goes. The Kaytons see this degeneration as a disease for which they are willing to help, and thus they created this." Again the animated Blair gestured towards the floating sphere. Then it was as if the woman that was emerged in the speech - no longer referring to herself in the plural, "They offered everything that we set as our primary mission - to boldly go. To explore strange new worlds and new existences. I could not help but want to find out what it was they offered. The Merrimac was a dead ship. The plants you see now were not like this then. Our atmosphere was gone along with the radiation shielding. Only this option was available to us, and oh..." she paused, although whatever expression the body tried to make failed in its lax state, "what an amazing world did I enter." She looked to Sorek, "Now they have come to help you. They have maintained the sphere for all who might wish to come."

Telek answered, "But as Mr. Sorek has said, we are not in danger. Our ship has not been compromised as had yours. What happened to the Merrimac?"

Blair looked to the Andorian, "We were engaged. The captain had given orders to investigate a small planetoid that orbits this cluster. Our mission had been to patrol the sector and deter all Orion pirate activity. Three ships set upon us and we fought back. The Merrimac was successful in destroying two and driving the third away. But the pirates were also successful in robbing us of our engines. Soon after the ship was damaged more severely as we were struck by small and large asteroids. That is when they came. They offered aid and protection." Again the gesture towards the sphere. "At first we did not understand. At first we tried to survive without them. But soon it was apparent that we could not. It was my order that led the remaining crew into this chamber. Most came to understand. We each made our transition when the courage was attained. Some resisted. I do not know what came of them."

Sorek interjected. A hint of passion crept into his voice, "But again, we are not in danger. If given a choice we would choose to live

out our lives in the bodies we are in now. Perhaps at the end of our natural life. The end of this...this...disease the Kaytons call it, maybe then it would be more palatable. But now we have a choice and it is ours as sentient beings to make. Again, our ship indicated trouble. Is this the doings of the Kaytons? We demand to live our life as we choose and not have the will of others imposed on us."

These people just let themselves be 'taken' away by this thing. What made them give up the fight to live? Maybe they're not really dead after all, just ... suspended. Doc gritted his teeth and harnessed his rising frustration. In their current situation, it would not help to lose control. He addressed the entity, "If these people were allowed to 'move on' with the help of this device, could it be used to bring them back? We are here to help now, to return them to their former lives if they want it."

Jones looked at the doctor, "There is no coming back. What would we come back to?" She gestured towards all of the decayed bodies that littered the room. The animated corpse suddenly glanced up towards the ceiling of the botanical chamber, as if looking at, or feeling something. Blair then looked at Sorek, "They come again. It may soon be necessary for your crossing..."

She turned away and moved back over to where the stone was, sitting down upon it. "Your ship indicated trouble? The Kaytons have done nothing to create trouble or ill will towards your people. They live in harmony with each other and all other life." Again she fell silent, as if listening, and then, "The gateway to our realm was opened. Our forms were changed to become living energy. Unfortunately, it is the ill will of some of your kind that is also present and the Kaytons do not understand them. They were given leave to migrate to the new realm, but some did not."

"Again, what if we don't want to go? You say the time of our crossing is near. Who are the Kaytons to determine how we will live our lives? To force this change on a being against their will is not harmony, it is barbaric. It is slavery. These Kaytons seem to only want to conquer. To assimilate all life into copies of themselves. We will fight Lieutenant Commander Jones. We will fight back as your crew was unable to. As *any* Starfleet officer would have wanted to." Sorek tried to stir emotion in the being to which he spoke. Was there anything of Lt. Cmdr. Jones left in there? Was there any spark that could give a clue to how they might act against these beings?

Following the gesture of the entity, Sherman surveyed the remains. His wishful need to bring back the others was, of course, out of the question. Where indeed would they go? "Are these people still 'alive' at all? Can we communicate with them? Or only through you? For all we know, their life force has simply fed your existence ... You have 'eaten' them to sustain yourself."

To the doctor, Jones answered, "They all live. They all live within a new realm of existence." Then she turned to Sorek, "And they all went of their own free will. Some resisted. Some hated that life was at an end. Hated that their world as they knew it, would no longer be their own. Still they passed through so that they could survive, though they did not come with us. The Kaytons do not understand hatred or anger. They cannot fathom these emotions and so those that made the transfer, who harbored such thoughts, found a new existence but were not accepted." She looked away, as if something spoke to her or like she saw something, then she turned back to Sorek and Sherman. "I promise you Commander Sorek, the Kaytons are not here to take you, but offer you refuge. They are not here to assimilate species into their kind. They offer a chance for life to continue. You will not be forced to pass, nor will you be made to fight, but you will be offered a safe harbor from the slow decay of your current carbon-based form. I must go now... I am not sure that I may return... or that you will be here for us to communicate again."

The body of Blair Jones fell to the floor in a horrific heap as the presence within it departed. The Columbia crew stood in silence, the shimmering light of the object bathing the botanical atrium. Sorek stood unsure for a moment. So much he could not control or affect. What of the Columbia? What was the situation there? What if this message from the Kaytons was true - that they were peaceful? What if these rogue entities were the crewmembers that resisted? Ones trapped in this altered state of existence? It was a theory. "Doctor, if what we were told is true, could those who resisted the sanctuary offered still be here in an altered state of matter? Could the crewmembers have been transformed to some energy-based life form and left behind? Something killed Phillips. Let's regroup in the hangar and use our equipment only to try and identify such an occurrence. This atrium isn't... natural. I must contact the Captain."

Sorek quickly retreated to the hallway. He was surprised at the relief he felt at leaving the botanical atrium. The hall was sterile, more understandable. He keyed his communicator to the Columbia, "Sorek to Captain Stonn. Captain, we made contact with an energy based life form called the Kaytons who professed a peaceful nature. They say they *rescued* the Merrimac's crew from certain death by taking them from their carbon-based bodies to a new state of existence. They said those who resisted were still transformed but not accepted. Captain, is there any merit to the theory that former crewmembers, so converted, are the cause of the problems we are experiencing?"

Stonn's voice answered, "It is indeed, Mister Sorek. If there is nothing that can be done for the Merrimac's crew, quarantine the vessel and return all boarding party personnel to the Columbia immediately. We are about to be intercepted by an Orion Syndicate vessel."

Stonn's orders rang through clear to the Vulcan science officer and it was also received by other personnel aboard the Mac. The Galileo pilot called over his shoulder to the engineering crewmen, "All right, we have orders to bug out and to do it quick! Start re-loading and stowing all of your gear and get your personnel back inside. I am vacuuming the craft until everyone is back aboard so button up your EVA's."

Outside Galileo 042, the engineering personnel who were working on the Aladdin looked at one another. There was still no way to get the larger shuttlecraft off the deck, so it would have to be abandoned, at least until whatever the emergency was had ended. They left her sit where she was and began packing up their tools and moving towards the one operational shuttle on the Merrimac. As they did, they called and beckoned to the medical and science personnel to get back to the hangar.

Sorek ordered an *orderly* retreat to the hangar bay and watched for signs of distress that might manifest in any of the crew with him. He ordered the security ensigns to bring Phillips' body with along with them. The away team was trained for this. They would respond appropriately and efficiently. Sorek did a quick calculation on the number of personnel on the Merrimac and the amount of emergency space available in the shuttle. If it was impossible to fit them all, he would be one of the ones to remain behind.

Doc squeezed himself through the door after the final away team member found a place in the crowded shuttle. It was a tight fit, and they were just going to make it. He turned around to face the door. Only Sorek stood outside, surveying the crowded interior. Doc caught a look in the commander's eye, and stated flatly "Oh no you don't. Nobody gets left behind on this dead ship." With a heave, the doctor shoved a couple of his medical staff further in, who tried not to grunt their disapproval too loudly when they saw that it was their

commanding officer doing the pushing. Once space was made, Doc reached out for Sorek, pulling him inside and pressing the door control at the same time. "There we go. No problem." grunted Sherman, his medical bag pressing uncomfortably into his side.

With the shuttle tightly loaded with all personnel, and now environmentally sealed, the pilot activated the ship's atmosphere and commenced the launch. Doc waited for the cabin green light to illuminate and then opened his EVA's face plate. It was good to breathe air that hadn't been recycled through his suit's scrubbers over the last few hours.

All those standing grasped for hand holds, as the Galileo shuttle jostled in its launch and exit from the tail end of the Merrimac. It was only moments before the ship was free from the derelict and racing the distance to where the Columbia orbited slowly. A voice came over the interior intercom, "Galileo 042, we have your track and the hangar is ready for immediate landing. Tractors will assist when you are in range, Columbia out."

"Acknowledged," was the quiet answer from the pilot.

Standing beside Doc and Sorek was the Andorian engineer, Telek. He spoke in a hushed tone, "It's a shame that we did not have more time with Jones. If she is really one of us, transformed into a new form of life, it would have been fascinating to learn more of what she now knows, or sees."

Sorek considered Telek's comments for a few moments, "Discovery and knowledge is our primary mission, Lt. Telek. It may have been fascinating to interact with these beings more, but the team and our ship is in danger. We may yet have a chance to find out more. We have plenty of hard data to analyze."

"Yes, sir," replied Telek. He went silent.

A sour look crossed Doc's face. "Jones wasn't *transformed* into anything. She was murdered like the rest of them. That thing was just using her body to communicate with us." Turning to Sorek, the doctor's face turned more thoughtful. "You know Sorek, I've never thought much about an *afterlife* or wherever it is our souls go after death, but I definitely get the impression that whatever should have happened to the crew of the Merrimac after they died was interrupted by that thing we saw in the atrium. I wonder if the only way to properly send those folks on their way will be to destroy that device."

Sorek nodded to Telek and the doctor while he looked around the crowded shuttle. A strange away mission to be sure and not wholly successful. Why even Lt. Telek seemed to share the sense of regret at underperforming in their duty. If they had more time and did not have the support problems from the Columbia perhaps they could have investigated further. But the physical problems of the Merrimac were the least of its problems. It would be interesting to correlate the data from their portable sensors with that collected by the Columbia. Hopefully there would be time to do so once they returned.

Sorek gave his head an imperceptible shake. He was lost in his thoughts again. He continued to sit straight and show the crewmembers the deportment of a Starfleet Officer. He scanned the faces again with what he hoped was a comforting look.

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