

A Matter of Honour



by Lance Schonberg

A Matter of Honour is a work of fan fiction taking place in the Star Trek prime universe early in the fifth year of the original Five-Year mission as newer vessels in the fleet have begun to convert to TMP-era uniforms and design style. Published in September of 2020 and freely available to download or read on Wattpad.

The rights to Star Trek and all associated names and characters are held by CBS-Paramount and no infringement is intended.

Chapter 1

Two levels above the assault team, a detonator ticked down to zero and the finger-sized bomb planted in an environmental control closet exploded. Energy ripped through the surrounding conduits, tripping at least a dozen different alarms. One of those, and probably more than one, triggered an alert klaxon, a harsh, high-pitched whine that would give Chekov a headache if he had to listen to it for too long.

He heard the grin in the marine's voice behind him. Corporal Bhatti, the explosives expert of the squad, didn't try to keep the pride out of her voice. "Your distraction, Lieutenant."

Running through the basic plan again in his head, Chekov allowed himself a moment of thinking out loud. "Thank you, Corporal. Now, if the floor plans we downloaded from the base system are correct, the detention cells are one level beneath us and approximately fifty metres in that direction." He pointed through a wall on an angle. "Grant, you and Bhatti remain on this level. I'd like several more distractions to lead any hostiles away from us."

The pale woman nodded, a wisp of ginger hair sneaking out from under her helmet. "Understood, sir."

With a nod, he turned to the final member of his team, a stout, grouchy Tellarite who seemed to be taking great joy in the destruction

they were about to sow in the underground base. “Grev, you are with me. We rendezvous at the maintenance crawl way marked Beta Three.” He didn’t fish out his tricorder to verify the location, but Grev made an extra-sour face, no mean feat from a human perspective, the dark eyes scrunching into ovals and upper lip wrinkling further under the thick nostrils. To Chekov, Tellarites always looked sour, much as he tried to learn to read their expressions, but Grev kicked it up a notch.

“Hunh. And if the floorplan’s wrong?” Grev didn’t make eye contact with Chekov, instead scanning the corridor behind him, probably looking for any hint of movement. It was nice to know the noncom had his back even in disagreement.

He grinned at the stocky Warrant Officer anyway. “Then I will require your superior combat abilities to secure a living prisoner to lead us to the Vulcan ambassador.”

“Ah, we improvise.” The face didn’t smooth. It couldn’t. But the sudden grin spread the wrinkles in horrifying directions. “I like it.”

While Chekov would have preferred to have several backup plans going into the rescue, half the running of a small unit action was in maintaining the flexibility to react properly to conditions as you found them.

“How long do we wait, sir?”

Chekov did spend a moment to consider Grant’s question. “If we have not joined or contacted you with alternate instructions in, let us say, ten minutes, you will attempt to reach

the ambassador along an alternate route and return to the surface.”

“And what about you and Grev, sir?”

Bhatti frowned, clearly uncomfortable with the idea of leaving without them.

With a head shake, Chekov flashed a brief smile to take any possible sting from the words. “The ambassador’s security is paramount. You have your orders, Corporal.”

“Yes, sir.” She hesitated just long enough for her eyes to narrow. “I just don’t like leaving people behind.”

The Tellarite barked a single syllable of laughter. “Don’t worry about us. We’ll do our best to make sure you don’t have to.” He patted his phaser rifle even as he didn’t draw attention to the half dozen grenades glued to his belt. Grant lifted his own rifle. “And we’ll improvise a whole lot of damage and casualties.”

With a nod, Chekov pointed ahead. “We’re that way. Move out.” Letting the NCO set the pace, he followed quickly down the corridor as they took two turns and avoided a pair of running guards by the simple expedient of pressing themselves against the wall to stay out of peripheral vision.

One more turn and Grev nodded ahead of them, whispering. “Maintenance access is behind that door.” Reaching it, he immediately spun the mechanical latch. It moved smoothly, letting a couple of metal clanks reach their ears before it swung inwards.

It was difficult not to sigh. “I appreciate the daring, Warrant Officer, but is it not possible

you set off an alarm just by opening it?” He would at least have liked to scan it first.

A Tellarite grin was a fearsome thing to behold. Grev waved at the side of the door. “No entrance code required, and your base schematics say there are no defense systems inside.”

Chekov took note of the possessive pronoun just as an explosion echoed through the corridors. A stun grenade from the sound of it. “Ah, so now you trust the floorplan?”

With a shrug, Grev stepped forward to the hatch. “No, but if it makes you feel better, I’ll go first.”

“Somehow I think you’d go first anyway.”

“My job, sir. Gotta protect your commissioned, in charge of the mission, carcass, after all.” Grev stepped through the hatch and motioned for Chekov to hurry up to the sound of distant phaser fire. The Tellarite dogged the hatch behind them.

“I appreciate your concern.”

Grev practically jumped down the ladder to the next level and undogged the hatch he found there. His head disappeared from Chekov’s view for a moment, but pulled back almost instantly. “It’s clear. You can come down.”

Not quite as reckless as his partner, Chekov moved quickly down the ladder, a part of his mind actually grateful for the sturdy construction and the padding on each step giving minimal sound and shaking as he stomped on each step. With the hatch open below him, his boots ringing on metal rungs

would have been something more than he wanted.

Together, the two of them slipped out of the hatch, which Grev closed, but did not dog, behind them, and they began to creep forward just as a human guard in commercial armour stepped around the corner. All three of them reacted by raising weapons, but the guard spoke first. "Halt! Identify yourselves."

"Ha!" Grev pulled the trigger and the phaser knocked the man unconscious, flinging him back a bit to slump against the wall. "Identify that." Of course, shouts came from just out of sight and there were soon weapons peeking around the corner to take more shots as the two of them shrank against the wall. "Bah! They have too much cover."

There weren't many options to consider and they needed space and time to reach the Vulcan ambassador. "How many grenades do you have left?"

Grev's next phaser blast knocked the barrel of a rifle sticking out too far and Chekov hoped it stung the wielder through his armour. "Only ten."

Which was more than the six Chekov could see and he fought to roll his eyes. "Only ten, he says. Do you feel like you could part with two of them to adjust our current situation for the better?"

"Two?" Chekov could hear the bushy eyebrows rise even though the Tellarite didn't look up.

"Da. One for our friends around the corner and a second left where we are standing with a

twenty-second delay while we run very quickly in the other direction, perhaps catching some stragglers.”

“Ha! You know, you’re a little more bloodthirsty than most Fleet sapient I’ve met. I like the way you think.” He pulled a pair of grenades from his belt.

“Thank you. It comes from being Russian.”

“Whatever that means.” The first grenade was in the air and a second one had already appeared in his hand. “Fire in the hole!”

Chekov watched the device bounce once on the floor just before the corner, arc up into the air and bounce again off the far wall to bank out of sight. He turned his eyes to avoid the flash and said a quick thanks for the helmet protecting his ears from the concussion.

Grev had already moved on to the next phase of the impromptu plan, however, and didn’t give Chekov time to wait. “Timer’s set, we’d better go.”

The two of them took off at a run. Keeping his breath under control, Chekov pointed ahead. “Turn left at the junction. There is a cross-connecting corridor that will bring us back toward the detention cells.”

Grev puffed a little, stubby but muscular legs working harder to keep up than Chekov’s did to set the running pace. “How much time did you spend studying the schematic?”

“Probably longer than I should have.” A disruptor blast hit the floor a metre to Chekov’s right and twice as far ahead. “They’re persistent.”

“That’s their bad judgement.” They turned the corner just as the explosion came, shaking the floor under them, and slowed to a light jog.

“Maybe that will gain us a little time, but we have to assume they called in seeing us even if the explosions don’t narrow our position down nicely.” He pointed ahead. “Turn right here. The detention centre is at the end of the next corridor.”

The corridor ahead of them was clear, but the door to the detention centre opened just as they arrived to spit out two guards who immediately dove to the floor, taking up prone positions on either side of the door. Chekov and Grev step back behind the corner and the Tellarite made a sour face. “Unfortunately, so are those guards. Maybe another grenade?”

Chekov shook his head. “We cannot risk harm to the ambassador.”

“I thought you might say that.” Grev sighed, a loud and significant gust of wind. “Well, the hard way, then.” He dropped to the floor and shimmied forward to peer around the corner, pulling the trigger repeatedly on his phaser. One of the two guards yelped, and Chekov was fairly certain he heard something hit the floor hard.

“Keep firing. Cover me.”

Grev grunted but didn’t respond otherwise. He had the feeling the Tellarite knew what Chekov intended and didn’t want to comment on the stupidity of the idea. Moving to the opposite wall, he took two quick steps and did a shoulder roll into the middle of the corridor, exposing himself completely but

hopefully surprising the remaining guard. As Chekov popped up into an almost standing position, he watched the guard shift his aim from where Grev had been firing to train on Chekov. Knowing he couldn't bring his own weapon to bear quick enough, he had already planned to dive forward and further confuse the man's aim, but Grev's next shot made it unnecessary.

The Tellarite was at his side almost before the man hit the floor. "Interesting tactic."

"Trusting in the abilities of my partner?" He grinned. "It shouldn't be."

Shaking his head, Grev moved forward and the door to the detention centre slid open. They moved inside and, as their intelligence had told them to expect, only one cell was occupied, but its occupant was not someone Chekov expected.

"Commander!" Pulling his eyebrows under control, Chekov quickly shut his mouth. Best to stay on script for the scenario. "I mean, Ambassador Spock. I'm happy to find you in one piece."

"It is agreeable to see you, Lieutenant." The Vulcan didn't even raise an eyebrow as the force field dropped and he stepped through the now-empty space. Of course, it wouldn't, no matter who had come to his "rescue". Spock wouldn't break character, and Chekov didn't think he should either, so it was worth continuing to play along. Hopefully, that would contribute a little to his final grade.

"And you, sir. I trust you have been treated well."

Now an eyebrow did rise. “While it is, at times, conducive to reflection, confinement is rarely a satisfactory way to spend one’s time.”

“Of course not, sir. While I wish we could simply beam out from here, the installation has built in interference generators. We need to get back to the surface for transport.” While they’d achieved the first primary objective, the scenario wasn’t over yet, and there was still plenty of time for things to go wrong before they achieved the second of actually getting the Federation ambassador to safety. But there was a way to increase the odds a little, he thought. “Do you feel able to actively participate in our departure?”

“Certainly, Lieutenant, though I find myself unarmed.”

Thinking that the Vulcan was never really unarmed, Chekov reached for his belt and Grev began grumbling as Chekov handed Commander Spock his backup phaser pistol. “You know, every second we stand here runs the risk of someone figuring things out. We should get moving.”

“Logical.” Spock tilted the phaser to one side to check the power level, ensuring a full charge. Chekov hoped he wouldn’t have to fire it very much, but he also had the advantage of knowing Mr. Spock’s accuracy rating.

A rumble passed through the floor and the walls. A tiny bit of dust drifted down around them, surprising for the recent construction. Chekov looked up, suddenly wary of the ceiling. “It does sound like Bhatti and Grant are having some success with continued distractions, but

you are correct, Grev. Let's get to the rendezvous."

Chapter 2

Personal Log, Lieutenant Junior Grade Pavel Chekov, Stardate 6234.6. The Enterprise remains at Starbase 67 for extended maintenance and system upgrades that have been scheduled to take approximately six weeks in total. Many of the crew are taking the opportunity to spend some accumulated leave time. As a trip home to Earth is not convenient from this location, I have decided to avail myself of one of the training opportunities available at Starbase 67, an advanced small unit tactics course. Colonel Miller, the CO of Marine Training Command here, thought it an odd interest for a starship navigator but saw no reason to deny my request to join the course even before he saw Captain Kirk's approval on the application. I will admit that the course has been challenging, but, aside from the new skills I am gaining, I have developed a new appreciation for the life of a combat soldier in the Starfleet Marine Corps, of which most of my course mates are members. Of the four of us who are not marines, I am

the only non-Security officer. It has been an... interesting experience.

The inner door opened onto Colonel Miller's office and the shaven-headed marine commander looked up from his desk with a raised eyebrow and a lopsided smile. "Lieutenant Chekov, come in please. Have a seat."

Chekov stepped forward far enough for the door to close behind him, eying the single, too-comfortable looking chair before moving towards it. "I had not expected to be called so soon, sir."

With a grin, Miller leaned back in his chair a bit. "Just making use of the alphabet, Lieutenant. Comes in handy sometimes."

"Aye, sir." It hadn't occurred to him that Miller would be looking at his students results alphabetically. Chekov had somehow always thought that things were done by service number order, but he'd never been one to organize a training course of any kind. He wondered how the alphabet worked when dealing with members of truly different species but supposed phonetics would come into play.

"Have a seat, son." He pointed at the chair again.

Chekov slid into it and found the chair was as comfortable as it looked, which he thought was odd, considering where he was and whose office he sat in. "Thank you, sir."

"I recall expressing some surprise when you requested to enrol in the course, Lieutenant." Miller leaned forward again, just a bit. "It's very rare to get a bridge officer interested in small unit tactics. I believe your

words were something to the effect of ‘a good officer should be well rounded.’”

Which rang a bell, and he still agreed. “It was a valuable experience, sir. Thank you for allowing me to participate.”

Miller shook his head. “You did more than just participate, Mister Chekov.” He glanced at the pad on his desk. “Actively soliciting advice and assistance from your classmates. Studying classical and modern texts in your off hours. Offering assistance to others at the potential expense of your own scores.” He looked back up. “These are all comments in the file from your instructors during the past several weeks.”

“I- thank you, sir.” Embarrassing praise, but he thought he managed to keep the colour from his cheeks, at least.

But Miller shook his head again. “I’m not finished, Lieutenant. In the final practical, you were one of only five team leaders to think of hacking into the base computer system in advance to find out exactly where the Ambassador was held, and the only one to put a phaser in the Ambassador’s hand to have extra firepower to facilitate reaching the extraction point.”

“Knowing Mister Spock’s capabilities, I may have had an unfair advantage in that regard, sir.” He’d actually been shocked to find out the Vulcan Ambassador had been the first officer of the *Enterprise*, but it was a good surprise as far as he’d been concerned.

“Commander Spock was one of several volunteers to be an actor in the final scenario and we allowed him to be the prisoner in yours

precisely because of your three plus years of service with him. It was considered a possibility that any friendship you might feel for a shipmate could potentially cloud your judgement once it was time for extraction.”

“I don’t see how it could, sir.”

“No, maybe you wouldn’t. Looking at your psych profile, I can see the possibility, but it never seemed in line with your displayed personality.” Miller grinned suddenly. “I was personally impressed by how well you adapted to having a grouchy Tellarite non-com on your team. Not easy for most people.”

“A little vocal, perhaps, but he has a surprising outlook on many things. I found Warrant Officer Grev to be a fine fellow, Colonel. Refreshingly pleasant.”

Laughing, Miller slid back from the desk a little. “I may have to tell him you said that, Lieutenant, though I’m not sure how he’ll react.”

Chekov grinned back. “I’m fairly sure.”

“In any case, you have done more than just participate. You scored the highest of any non-Security Fleet officer in the ten years this course has been offered at Starbase 67, and comfortably in the top two percent overall. The appropriate notations have been made in your dossier.”

Now he couldn’t keep the flush out of his cheeks. Having no duties while the *Enterprise* was in dry dock, he’d applied himself completely to the course and had hoped to do well, but didn’t think he’d possibly score so high, particularly considering the general competence of the marine officers he’d seen around him. He

expected he'd approach things very differently due to his very different career path, but fully expected that to make things more difficult for him. "Thank you, sir. And, as I said, thank you for allowing me to participate."

"I'm glad you showed the interest, Lieutenant. You were a valuable addition to the course and there might be a few tweaks to happen going forward." Insert some kind of emotive action here. "It's traditional for graduates of the course to take a turn as actors or even instructors in the next round or two, depending on their deployment. That's often particularly difficult for Fleet officers, but I hope you'll keep it in mind if you're ever in the neighbourhood again."

Miller stood and Chekov followed suit.

"Thank you, sir. I would be honoured."

The marine commander extended a hand. "And let me offer my personal congratulations. I hope what you've learned here will help you in your time on the *Enterprise* and further in your career."

Chekov found the handshake warm and firm, and he returned it as best as he was able. "Thank you again, sir. I'm certain it will." Not that open combat was something he normally found on a landing party, but there had been a few moments in the past several years and could easily be again. Even if he never found himself in a situation that warranted it, he still felt that no time spent learning or improving skills was ever wasted.

There was no place to drink like a Starbase bar filled with uniforms.

Chekov could, and did, drink anywhere with anyone, and he held his alcohol with the best of them, but enjoying a well-earned beverage surrounded by other service members brought a comfort to the process he didn't feel very often. Starbase 67, being a forward base very close to the Klingon border, had a larger Marine contingent than bases not so near a hostile power, so the uniform mix was a bit different than he was used to, but that just made conversation more interesting. This particular bar seemed just noisy enough to make the background music fade into an indistinct audio blur.

Lieutenant Zhenko raised his glass, filled with something a little on the green side. "To graduation!"

Chekov, along with two other classmates, raised his glass. "Graduation!" He took a big mouthful of vodka, enjoying the cold bite against his taste buds and the pleasant burn as the liquid made the trip to his stomach.

Ensign Oddell smiled as she lowered her beer, raising an eyebrow at the man across the table. "Sure you want to be hanging out with us Fleet weenies, Lieutenant?"

Morrison, in the odd, almost-camouflage patterned Marine dress grey tunic shrugged as he leaned back in his chair. "Why not? The three of you survived Tactics III. You're all honorary marines now."

Zhenko grunted. "I'm not sure whether to be happy or insulted?" He set his glass down

and leaned on both elbows, carefully avoiding any condensation rings.

Not quite willing to surrender his glass to gravity, Chekov took another sip and swallowed quickly. "I'm sure." He grinned as much at the reactions around him as at the secret of the repeated joke.

The other two Starfleet officers laughed, but Morrison shook his head and held up a hand. "There is no higher compliment I could possibly bestow. Besides, I'll be spending a lot of time with Fleet weenies for the next couple of years."

"And why's that, Mr. Morrison? Slumming?" Zhenko bit down on his cheek from the inside, maybe trying to control the grin a bit.

"No, Lieutenant, because I'll be commanding the Marine contingent that's about to be stationed aboard the USS *Marathon*."

Reaching across the table, Chekov tried to grab his friend's hand for a shake. The marine didn't hesitate in a firm grip. "That is excellent news, Kristofer. Congratulations!"

"Thank you, Pavel. At least someone has my best interests at heart."

Oddell raised her glass in salute. "When did you find out?" The sip she took was quick, though.

With a shrug, Morrison reached for his own again. "My orders were waiting for me when I got back to my quarters after my course debrief with Colonel Miller. It's going to be weird, stuck on a ship for longer than it takes to get from one place to another, especially something that size."

“The *Marathon* is a *Larson* class destroyer, is it not? I was not aware they carried troops.” Actually, Chekov thought it was something typical of only the largest ships, aside from a few specialized cruisers.

Oddell shrugged. “It’s a pilot project. A dozen or so ships in the class have been designated line units and are having their passenger cabins replaced with destroyer-sized crew cabins to bunk a platoon of marines.” She looked around at the sudden stares of her drinking companions. “Oh didn’t I mention? I’ll be joining the *Marathon* as Security 2IC when it arrives next week.”

Morrison’s eyes lit up, and Chekov wondered if he read too much into the expression. “That’s great, Kezia. It’ll be nice to know someone on board, even if she is a Fleet weenie.”

“Gee, thank so much. Considering we’ll outnumber you about six to one.”

“Federation Marines are never outnumbered.”

She stuck her tongue out at the marine before looking away. “You’re staying with *Enterprise*, Pavel?”

“I certainly hope so. Colonel Miller certainly didn’t say anything about new orders and I do not have any desire for a transfer at this time.”

Zhenko nodded his agreement. “From a *Constitution* cruiser? Who would? Especially the *Enterprise*. But I’d guess you’re almost the only one in the course who isn’t coming out of it with new orders.”

“Where are you headed then, Marlowe?”

“Deep Space One. Just about as far from everything as you can get. I’m hitching a ride on the *Sagan*, day after tomorrow. The frontier. The far frontier. Technically along the Romulan border, but so far out they haven’t shown any interest in local space, yet.”

“Well, seems like a lot of excitement in store for everyone.” Morrison raised his glass for another toast. “New adventures.”

Chekov couldn’t help but join in. “New adventures.” Glasses clinked together and he had another sip. Before he managed to lower it again, Oddell nodded to get his attention.

“So what’s it like on *Enterprise*, Pavel?”

He hated that question. “I’m not sure I know how—” And was suddenly saved from any more details in answering it by the appearance of the course coordinator, Lieutenant Commander Sarin.

“Excuse me. I hope I am not interrupting your celebration.” The typically impassive Vulcan expression seemed to subtract the little intonation Chekov normally expected to find in the words.

“Not at all, Commander.” Awkwardly, Zhenko gestured to the tiny space still available at the table, a stool shoved underneath probably noticeable to no one but a Vulcan. “Would you, um, like to join us?”

Sarin shook her head. “It is a considerate offer, Lieutenant, but no thank you. I was merely passing by and recognized several voices present. I thought it might be an opportune moment to congratulate the four of you in

person. Each of you exceeded my expectations for the course and I expect you to continue to do so as you return to active service.”

Chekov fought the urge to whistle. In the 12 years since Sarin had graduated from the Vulcan Science Academy, she’d served for five as a liaison and observer to the Marine Corps Training Command before spending a full five-year tour as a junior officer on an advanced exploration cruiser. The Commander’s braids might have been fairly fresh, but Sarin had the experience to back them up. “That is high praise, ma’am. Thank you.”

A slightly stuttered chorus of, “Thank you, ma’am,” followed.

Sarin nodded. “It is well-deserved, Lieutenant. All of you. That is all I came to say. I do not wish to intrude further. Please enjoy your evening. Live long and prosper.” She held up a Vulcan salute. The group chorused a second round of thanks and Chekov barely stopped himself from what he thought might be the traditional response of, “Peace and long life.” It would have seemed weird, somehow, when he’d never said it to Mr. Spock.

All four of them watched the Vulcan walk through the light crowd and out of the bar into the corridor, no one managing to find any words until Oddell finally gave voice to the collective feeling. “Wow.”

Shaking his head, Morrison reached for his glass again, wrapping a hand around it without lifting it to his mouth. “Recognized our voices walking by the bar? Good thing we weren’t trying to pass notes in class.”

Three of them laughed, but Chekov merely shrugged. “I assumed we all knew better with a Vulcan instructor.”

“I think you’ve got an advantage there, Pavel. There aren’t all that many Vulcans in Starfleet and most of them are on research vessels.”

He reached for his own glass. “I suppose that’s true. I hadn’t really thought about it.” A sudden flashback to the *Intrepid*. He wasn’t sure if that made an argument for or against integration, though he generally thought mixed crews were a very good idea to keep people well aware that there were other viewpoints than their own. The Federation was a big place with many peoples in it. He watched Morrison lifting his glass, and felt another toast coming on.

“Well, with the strong words of approval from our senior instructor, exciting assignments ahead, and plenty of drinks available. I do believe we have adequate reason to celebrate. The frontier!”

Glasses clinked together, and they repeated the toast. The vodka still felt pleasantly warm on the way down.

Chapter 3

Chekov found the arboretum on Starbase 67 tremendously impressive.

The top deck of the station had been given over to what was essentially a giant garden that must have required a full-time staff to maintain

the delicate balance and play between botanical specimens from at least a dozen different Federation worlds. While not every member species of the Federation would find something to recognize from home in the arboretum, they should all at least find something to appreciate, even if only the care and effort taken in maintaining a space for growing things on one of the most up to date and high tech installations Starfleet possessed. Not to mention the birds and insects needed to properly balance the various needs and pollination cycles of those plants.

But somehow, Chekov was more taken by the sunrise at the moment, regardless of the actual time and ignoring that Starbase 67 didn't have a habitable planet to synch with so remained linked by the clock to Starfleet Headquarters in San Francisco, a rather large number of light years from where he was standing. But watching the sun break over the roiling atmosphere of the gas giant below, he was trying to enjoy the pause before figuring out what might come next, thought not as successfully as he'd hoped.

He didn't pay much attention to the footsteps behind him—traffic on the paths of the arboretum wasn't heavy, but it was constant—until he heard Commander Sarin's voice. "Good afternoon, Lieutenant."

The Vulcan had appeared, not exactly out of nowhere, but unexpectedly, a second random encounter on the huge station in less than a day. Not exactly suspicious, but odd. Not a reason to be anything less than pleasant to one's

fellow officers. “Oh, hello, Commander. Yes, I suppose it is.”

Sarin raised an eyebrow. “Is there something wrong, Lieutenant? You seem, preoccupied.”

“Not so much preoccupied as bored, ma’am.” He tried to smile, but his heart wasn’t quite in it.

“A strange human predilection, boredom.” He could hear the arched eyebrow without looking at her. “My experience suggests that it is always possible to find something productive to do.”

Now he was able to find a full grin. “I don’t disagree, ma’am. But now that the frantic activity of the Advanced Tactics course is over, the normal pace of shipboard duties, even if I weren’t forced to be on leave at the moment, would be very much a let down. I prefer to be busy.”

“I see.”

“I’ll get over it in a day or so, ma’am. There is certainly plenty to do here. I am merely adapting to still having three weeks with no formal duties to attend to.” He shrugged. “I thought I’d tour the station, see some of the place I haven’t gotten to yet, and found myself momentarily sidetracked as the sun rose.”

“The arboretum is an excellent choice to begin any tour with.” The two of them turned away from the observation dome and began to walk towards the edge of the deck and the turbolifts. “However, if I read the records correctly, when faced with this problem before, you enrolled in the Tactics III course. There are

other courses on offer at Starbase 67 at the moment, ranging from various physical conditioning courses through to theoretical warp mechanics. Many of them fit inside your available time frame. Surely you could find one of those to fill your 'empty days'."

Chekov chuckled. "I'm certain I will, ma'am. The training opportunities are significant here. But unlike Tactics III, there is nothing that grabs my attention as an opportunity to be seized rather than a passing interest. At least, not until after the *Enterprise* is due to depart."

"Hmm." Very briefly, Sarin's forehead creased. "Considering the courses beginning within three days of your ship's scheduled departure date, would that be the Combat Shuttle Piloting course or Intra-Treaty Klingon History?"

It was hard not to laugh again. "One of the two seems appropriate. It would be a difficult choice to make, Commander, but I am a little embarrassed to be so transparent."

"Not at all, Mister Chekov." Sarin shook her head. "As I do with everyone enrolled in the courses I oversee, I spent considerable time reviewing the files and records of the Tactics III students. It allows me some insights into the mindsets and interests of each of you. Based on my limited knowledge, I merely picked the two most likely interests for you of those becoming available at the most inconvenient time."

Something that wasn't quite a bird zipped across the path at about eye level and no more than a metre in front of them. Sarin didn't react at all, of course, but Chekov tried, and failed, to

follow the splash of green and red with his eyes to see more detail. “Of course, ma’am. If I had another week available, I would almost certainly avail myself of one of those two courses. There are several shorter course possibilities before Enterprise departs, so I’m sure I will find something. As I said, I prefer to be busy.”

“Indeed.” Not missing a step, Sarin began to angle towards the most distant of the turbolifts in an obvious attempt to extend the conversation. “Have you considered the possibility of a short-term assignment?”

“Ma’am?” Had their steps slowed just a little?

“The Bureau of Personnel sometimes has assignments lasting only a few days or weeks to keep officers or crewmembers occupied who are waiting for an assignment and who do not have accumulated leave to take. Have you considered such?”

He rolled the idea around in his mind for a moment, wondering both what the Captain would think and how something like that might look on his record. Captain Kirk would almost certainly be in favour of something that got Chekov more experience if it didn’t interfere with his reporting back to the *Enterprise* on time, and a successful mission was always a good thing, regardless of its nature. “No, ma’am. In fact, the idea hadn’t occurred to me at all.”

Sarin nodded. “I am unsurprised. Normally, these are only offered to personnel forced by transportation or extenuating circumstances into waiting on regular assignments. Already assigned to the *Enterprise*,

BuPers would not bother contacting you, but you are entirely free to contact them if you are aware of the possibility.”

“I am now, ma’am. Thank you very much for the insight.” He could already see less boredom in his future.”

“No thanks are necessary, Lieutenant. It is merely an opportunity I thought you should be aware of.” They reached the oversized turbolift and the door slid open to permit them entry to the car. Neither stepped forward, though. “But in the interest of full disclosure, I must also admit to a small ulterior motive in providing you the information.”

Which made it Chekov’s turn to raise an eyebrow. “And what would that be, ma’am?”

“I wished to gauge your interest in the possibility of an opportunity.” She clasped her hands behind her back. “I have been tasked with a certain short duration assignment and have been given leave to select my own personnel for the... mission. You are both conveniently available and, as I said last evening, you exceeded my expectations in the Tactics III course.”

“I, well, I am honoured you considered me, ma’am.” Not to mention surprised. The old saying about keeping one’s eyes open for any opportunity sprang to mind. “What is the mission?”

“It has something of a delicate nature, Lieutenant and would be best discussed in private. If you would accompany me to my office?” Sarin entered the turbolift and Chekov didn’t hesitate to join her.

“Of course, ma’am.”

The door slid shut. “Deck 3.” And the turbolift didn’t hesitate in initiating the short ride.

“How long might the assignment be, ma’am?”

“I would expect it to last approximately two weeks from departure, which needs dictate to be early tomorrow morning station time. Sooner, if I can gather the needed personnel quickly enough.”

Two weeks long, but they had to leave in the morning on a mission that Commander Sarin wouldn’t talk about openly. Interesting, very interesting. He tried to think about those things he knew of in the local or galactic political situations that might need something done quickly by Starfleet and came up blank. That could easily just be his security clearance, though. “That is not a great deal of time to prepare.”

The turbolift came to a quick stop and the door slid open. Sarin stepped out into the corridor and began walking towards her office, assuming rightly that Chekov would match her pace. “Unfortunately, not. The departure timeline provided to me late this morning is somewhat inflexible. But, as it is a short duration assignment, most of our preparation would be enroute to our destination. You would only require such personal effects as you felt needed for a period of two weeks away from the Enterprise. Uniforms, equipment, and so on would be provided as per normal operating procedures.”

Nodding, Chekov matched the Vulcan's suddenly less leisurely pace. "In other words, I should pack light."

"Indeed, should you choose to accept. There will be sufficient stores that you should need to pack very little."

"You are certain of the timeline?"

Chekov saw the eyebrow raise in his peripheral vision. Not a uniquely Vulcan expression, but one that seemed very Vulcan in his experience. "As certain as I can be with the data currently in my possession. Have you already chosen to accept the assignment, Lieutenant?"

"Not as such, ma'am." He smiled. "I will certainly need more information to make an informed decision, but you are being secretive enough to engage my interest."

"While 'secretive' is not my intention, Lieutenant, it is not an entirely inappropriate word given the nature of the mission." They turned right into a larger corridor, and Chekov saw several people moving ahead of them as they approached one of the primary administrative areas of the Starbase. "I will admit that I would find it personally gratifying to have you accept the assignment but would have you do so in possession of the same information I have available."

"I appreciate that, ma'am."

Sarin nodded. "I am also obligated to mention that any information imparted to you in the course of this briefing is to be considered top secret and not to be shared with any non-assignment personnel without my explicit order

or that of my commanding officer in this instance, regardless of your acceptance.”

From anyone other than a Vulcan, Chekov would have been tempted to take some affront at the implications that might be behind the notice. From Sarin, however, it could only be a pure statement of fact. “Of course, sir.” He couldn’t stop just a little dry sarcasm from slipping out, however, and he should have known better. And not just because Sarin was Vulcan. “Should I take an oath to that effect?”

“That will not be necessary, Lieutenant, but I appreciate the offer. I only intended to enforce the notion of secrecy. Do you have any other questions I am as yet unable to answer?”

Ah, right. Just because Sarin didn’t use sarcasm didn’t mean she wasn’t able understand when it had been used and, tactfully, let the other conversational participant know it. “Well, ma’am, in relation to the assignment’s timeline, I just don’t want there to be any danger of missing my ride back to the *Enterprise*. Three weeks may seem a long time to hang around a starbase being bored, but it might be a little different leaving that starbase with the added stress of uncertainty about the time of my return.”

“Should you choose to accept the mission, I am certain you will find other things to stress about during the assignment, Lieutenant.”

“That didn’t exactly answer my question, ma’am.”

A door bearing Commander Sarin’s name slid open. “Indeed.” The two of them stepped into the office and the door slid shut behind them.

Chekov was unsurprised at the rather Spartan decoration: a single landscape painting easily visible from the desk, and a Vulcan lyre of somewhat different design than any Chekov had seen before. The same number of strings, but certainly thicker. “Computer, engage privacy protocol. Authorization Sarin zero-zero-one.”

“Working.” The so-familiar computer voice followed by a three-toned chime. “Privacy protocol engaged.”

Chekov nodded again. “Top secret, ma’am. Understood.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant.”

Behind the desk, a second door, he’d assumed leading to an inner office or more private area, slid open and Colonel Miller stepped out. “Colonel! I hadn’t expected to see you again.”

Wearing a big grin, Miller moved around the desk. “At ease, Lieutenant. And thank you for coming. Somehow, I didn’t doubt you’d be interested in Lieutenant Commander Sarin’s offer, even before you heard it.”

Again a little surprised at being so easy to read, Chekov did offer a smile. “I’d still like to know what the offer is, sir.”

Miller nodded. “And you’ll have more detail than you might expect in just a moment, Lieutenant.”

“Of course, sir. I—” A second figure appeared in the doorway and Chekov tensed. There was no mistaking the cranial structure or the uniform. “Sir! Get down! There’s a Klingon behind you!”

Chapter 4

Chekov tensed himself to leap past Colonel Miller, wishing for a phaser to draw, or really any weapon other than his fists, but even as an unarmed distraction, at least he could buy some time for the senior officers to get away. Commander Sarin's voice cut through the moment with just the right amount of force. "Lieutenant Chekov, please stand down."

"But Commander!" He didn't take his eyes from the Klingon but he did, even in the adrenaline rush moment, note that his potential enemy had only taken a single step beyond the door, just enough to let it slide closed.

"As you were, Lieutenant."

The Klingon crossed his arms and Chekov tried to force himself to relax. Not an easy task. Not a possible task, really. The best he could manage was a tension-filled ready stance, hands loose at his sides rather than tucked behind his back. "Aye, sir."

"Thank you." Sarin took a step to stand next to Chekov, angling her body to take in the whole of the small group while still facing everyone. "Your reaction is understandable, Mister Chekov, but misplaced in this instance. Please have patience."

Sucking a deep breath in through his nose, he tried again to relax his whole body letting it out, with just a little more success the second time. "Aye, ma'am. I will try."

Colonel Miller, however, was smiling. "I suppose we should all be thankful you're not carrying a phaser, Lieutenant." Behind him, the

Klingon grunted. "But since we're not at war and you're neither Security nor a marine assigned to this Starbase, you wouldn't be." Miller shrugged. "Mister Chekov, as I'm sure Lieutenant Commander Sarin mentioned on your trip here, anything revealed to you as part of this briefing is to be considered Top Secret and to be discussed only within the confines of this mission, until and unless you are released to do so by Sarin, myself, or a higher direct chain-of-command authority who has specific oversight. That most especially includes the presence of the gentleman standing in the doorway. Do you understand?"

"I do, sir." Completely. A neutral station or planet was one thing, but finding a Klingon roaming around a Federation Starbase was a significant event.

"Good." Miller kept smiling and Chekov wondered if he were enjoying the discomfort at all. "Please try to relax, Lieutenant. Everything will make sense in the next couple of minutes, at least as much as the situation can make sense."

"I will try, sir."

"Thank you. Now, this may or may not be Colonel J'dek, who may or may not be employed by the Klingon Imperial Intelligence Service. He'll neither confirm nor deny either of those facts, and a good many others. I strongly suspect he'll neither confirm nor deny being Klingon."

Scowling, J'dek allowed the point in a deep voice. "Perhaps we can take that as a given, Colonel."

"You'll notice he didn't say yes or no. Commander Sarin."

The Vulcan nodded. “In light of the situation, Lieutenant, I found it quite interesting that you confirmed an interest in Klingon history and politics during our earlier discussion. I wonder how familiar you are with the current structure of the Klingon ruling body.”

Not as familiar as he would like, but the *Enterprise* had interacted with representatives of the Klingon Empire more than once during his tour, enough that he’d long thought it worthwhile to learn more about the adversary’s culture. “Essentially a governing council, the High Council, presided over by the Chancellor who selects the Councillors from among the heads of the major Households of the Empire. How the selections are made seems at the whim of the Chancellor and how the Chancellor is chosen, I have no idea.”

With a grunt, J’dek nodded, though Chekov had no idea how to read the man’s dour expression. “As it should be, yet I would not be surprised to learn that your own intelligence services know far more about the process than we would like. I will say, without revealing anything that isn’t likely to be obvious to everyone here, that there are always factions in the Council and certain members may stand closer to the Chancellor than others.”

“One of those is Councillor Rakag.” Sarin, probably in the interest of efficiency, considering the limited time frame she’d quoted previously, seemed interested in hurrying the Klingon’s explanation.

“None stand closer.” J'dek didn't seem to relax even a little as the conversation went on. “Rakag and Chancellor Morg are like brothers.”

“Which makes the kidnapping of Councillor Rakag's son, apparently by agents of the Federation, a particularly unfortunate event at this time.” Ah, that Vulcan predilection for understatement. Chekov didn't have to think too hard about how things might progress from there, given the general ‘scream and leap’ philosophy of Klingon tactics.

The Klingon gave a sharp nod. “Human and Vulcan DNA have been reliably found at the site of the kidnapping by independent investigators. There are other indications of a covert operation including surveillance video, though there was clear interference with the local security systems either in advance of the kidnapping, or at the time.”

“Regardless of the evidence involved, Colonel Miller and I have been assured at several levels that no such official Federation operation exists.” Sarin's bland words did very little for Chekov's tension, nor for anyone else in the room, or who might be aware of the situation, he expected. “Politically speaking, it would not be in the Federation's best interest to enter into an armed conflict with the Klingon Empire at this time, even should the Organians choose not to interfere.”

J'dek snorted. “The glow bugs are far less interested in our affairs than they would have us believe.” Finally, his posture started to relax a little, but not enough that Chekov could have called him comfortable. “Regardless, while the

conflict would be glorious, the Empire has other concerns at the moment.”

And that was a very interesting statement. Chekov wondered what he could possibly read into it – another enemy, an internal conflict, a disaster – or just the Colonel simply being evasive and all that was going on was the standard military build up on both sides.

Sarin raised another eyebrow, the opposite one this time. “And the Federation prefers peaceful solutions to disputes where possible. In any case, whoever is behind the abduction does not have the interests of either the Federation or the Empire in mind. It seems an obvious attempt to destabilize the region.”

With a grunt, J'dek waved a hand at the Vulcan. “Rakag has the Chancellor's ear. Should he become convinced the Federation is culpable in the abduction of his son, many warships will cross the border, regardless of Organian intentions. At the moment, he is furious but stable, willing to see . That could change.”

Chekov felt he had more than enough background at this point. “Sir, I believe I grasp why this could be an unfortunate event, politically and militarily. I do not understand where I fit in. What does this have to do with the ‘short term assignment’ Commander Sarin offered me?”

Miller held up a hand. “In a moment, Lieutenant. Colonel J'dek has access to other sources of information than the official investigation into the matter. So does Starfleet and Federation Intelligence. Between his offering

from the IIS and our own sources, we have a probable location where they boy is being held.”

Another grunt from Colonel J'dek. “If he is still alive, which is by no means certain. The kidnappers would have been wiser to throw him out an airlock as soon as they'd escaped safely.”

“It is likely they see him as a bargaining tool.” Sarin clasped her hands behind her back. “There may be more than one layer to the deception.”

Miller nodded. “Agreed, Commander. Our best information, our only information, says that the Councillor's son is still alive.” The marine faced Chekov directly. “Commander Sarin will be taking the cutter *Nancy Wake* to a small system about half-way between here and the Klingon border, P3847. She requires a crew.”

“In your case specifically, Lieutenant Chekov, I require a First Officer.”

“Ma'am?” Feeling both his eyebrows rise but unable to bring them under control, Chekov didn't know what else to say.

Sarin saved him the trouble. “The *Nancy Wake* is a freshly commissioned *Solar* class Cutter. It normally carries a crew of twenty-five, five of whom are officers. In most cases, one of those serves as First Officer. I am offering that position to you for the duration of this mission.”

“The *Nancy* is on loan to Starbase 67, first of a new production run.” Miller threw the offhand comment out as if Chekov was up to date on all of the Federation's ship production. “We're supposed to be putting a variety of new systems, particularly computer and stealth systems, through their paces before her

shakedown cruise. Ultimately, it's the only appropriate ship available for this mission in a timely fashion, so she'll be getting a different kind of shakedown. Lieutenant Commander Sarin will serve as her captain and we've been able to come up with most of a crew for her on relatively short notice. We're hoping to overpopulate her a bit, actually, but the crew we can provide is mostly green and very inexperienced." Chekov didn't quite have the fortitude to wonder out loud how experienced he might be considered.

"You have several qualities to recommend you to the position."

Another compliment from Sarin, but Chekov had to grin as the pieces began to fall into place in his mind. "Not least is my availability, no?"

Miller laughed. "Being available helps, Mister Chekov, but it's that combined with your experience on the *Enterprise* and your recent completion of the Tactics III course. You could say it's a combination of skills and timing."

"First Officer..." Not something he had any right to expect so early in his career.

"It is only a cutter." Miller chuckled a little more.

But Sarin shook her head. "Respectfully, sir, my experience is that there is no 'only' when it comes to any starship. A ship is what its crew makes of it in the duties it is given."

"I find it easy to agree with that, Commander." Chekov smiled but turned his gaze back to Miller. "Do I have any time to consider the matter?" At the very least, he had to

have some kind of discussion with Captain Kirk. There was no way he could just run off on a mission without the blessing of his Captain.

“Yes.” Miller nodded. “But very little. The *Nancy* leaves dock as soon as the selected crew can be released from other duties and brought on board. I can give you a few hours. The ship will undock at midnight whether you’re aboard or not. Oh, and you should also know that you’ll be expected to lead the landing party to retrieve Councillor Rakag’s son. Your time on the *Enterprise* might lead you to think differently, but responsibility for the landing party is the First Officer’s job, usually. You’ll have some marines available, as well.”

“And so the tactics requirement.”

“It does have some relevance.”

He wasn’t going to get a chance to miss Vulcan speech patterns if he took the mission, and that was comforting, somehow. “I will need to confer with Captain Kirk, but I believe I am interested in participating in this ‘short term assignment’.”

Miller nodded and extended a hand.

“That’s excellent, Mister Chekov. I think your being on the mission improves its chances of success. And no, Mister Sarin, I’m not interested in exactly how much.”

Chekov took it as Sarin raised another eyebrow. “I had not thought to provide concrete numbers, Colonel.”

“I’ll just bet you didn’t.” He pulled his hand back and took a step towards his desk to find J’dek sitting in his chair. With a half grin, he turned more fully back to Chekov.

“Lieutenant, I’ll put the orders in but mark them as pending your acceptance. And I’ll call ahead. You can go talk to your captain and acknowledge them when you’re ready. Good enough?”

“More than fair, sir.” It gave him some hours to consider and track down the Captain to gain permission.

“No, it isn’t, but it’s the best I can do. Just don’t wait too long. And don’t give Captain Kirk any details of the mission.”

“I won’t, sir.”

Chapter 5

Chekov found it strange being in Captain Kirk’s quarters. The amount of available space on board the *Enterprise* was significant compared to many small ships, but even the Captain’s quarters weren’t large, and part of them doubled as an office. Chekov sat in one of the three available chairs and Kirk occupied another.

“Colonel Miller swears he’ll have you back before the upgrades are done, Lieutenant, but won’t tell me what he wants you for.” Kirk’s voice stayed level, but there was something in his Captain’s eyes that spoke of unsatisfied curiosity.

“No, sir. I am not surprised at that.” He hated keeping anything back from his Captain, but he understood the rules of things well enough at this point. “And he ordered me

directly not to discuss it. Both he and Lieutenant Commander Sarin made a point of saying the... assignment has been classified as Top Secret and cannot be discussed with anyone outside the mission chain. Several times.”

Chuckling, Kirk leaned back a bit. “Believe it or not, most of what we do is classified Top Secret, Lieutenant. It’s a polite way to say that unless you’re involved, you don’t need to know. I’m fine with not needing to know what the mission is. I’m not fine with not knowing how something might affect one of my officers and therefore my command.”

“I understand, sir, I think, but—” He stopped at Kirk’s raised hand.

“I’m not asking you to tell me anything, Pavel. I recognize security concerns. There have been plenty of missions during the last few years when I haven’t been able to tell anyone anything.” The grin came back. “You might remember one or two where I kept rather large secrets from the crew. But you have to admit the orders are rather vague.”

“Actually, Captain, I have to admit that I haven’t actually seen them.” Chekov gave a lopsided grin. “I have discussed the mission verbally with Colonel Miller and Lieutenant Commander Sarin, but the orders were to be issued pending my acceptance and my condition was to be able to confer with you, first. I came directly here from Colonel Miller’s office without stopping at a terminal on the way.”

“Condition, Mr. Chekov? On orders? I see I’m training you well.”

Feeling his face redden, Chekov tried to figure out how to back that up a little so it didn't seem like he was trying to manipulate things to his own advantage. "Sir, I didn't mean—"

"Keep telling yourself that, Lieutenant. Blindly accepting an assignment when you have an option not to isn't usually a good move. Not talking to your current CO before accepting even a short-term assignment is definitely a bad one."

A sigh of relief that Kirk both understood his reasoning and seemed to agree with it, but his face didn't quite drop back to a normal, neutral temperature. "Thank you, sir. I think. What, exactly, do the orders say?"

"As I said, not much." Kirk leaned forward and tapped the small three-sided view screen in front of him. The wavering surge of power didn't put anything on the screen facing Chekov. "Orders. Chekov, Pavel, Lieutenant Junior Grade to report to Docking Bay 23, Starbase 67, no later than 2300 today. Immediate departure on NCC 9767 USS *Nancy Wake* as first officer, a posting to last not less than fifteen days and expected not more than twenty from date of assumption of duties. Authorization required by Chekov, Pavel A., Lieutenant Junior Grade and Kirk, James T., Captain *Enterprise*." Kirk looked up to find Chekov's gaze. "Not exactly forthcoming in terms of information, is it?"

"No, sir."

"But an XO slot on a small ship... I imagine that's very tempting on its own. Still, the timing is, well, a little tight. If the mission goes the full twenty days, that leaves you only

three until *Enterprise's* scheduled departure from Starbase.”

“I did have the same thought, Captain.” And more than once. He'd even had the brazenness to bring it up with Colonel Miller and Commander Sarin but thought that didn't need mention at the moment.

Kirk tapped the view screen again and it powered down. “And things seem to have a way of working themselves out to be closer to deadline than we'd usually like.”

“I have noticed that happens with an undeniable frequency on *Enterprise*, sir.” And yet with almost the same frequency, they met those deadlines with a sliver of time to spare.

“True.” Kirk nodded. “Still. Secret mission, first officer on a just-commissioned ship. Could be a nice note on your record if things go well.”

“That thought had occurred to me, sir.”

“No doubt it's also occurred to you that there must be some risk involved.” Kirk leaned back again, and the strength of his focused gaze made Chekov want to shift in his seat a bit. He resisted the urge. “If you were taking the *Nancy* to the next Starbase over to drop off a case of Saurian brandy, I'm sure it wouldn't be marked Top Secret.”

Although that was something that a Starbase commander probably wouldn't want broadcast as common knowledge. Keeping his breathing level, Chekov nodded again. “Probably not, sir.” It was difficult not to let the excitement creep into his voice. “But my conversation with Colonel Miller and Lieutenant Commander Sarin leads me to believe that the importance of the

mission significantly outweighs the potential risk. I admit to being excited for myself, but if my presence can increase the chances of a successful mission, and I am able to do so, it is my duty to contribute.”

“Duty is an interesting word, Lieutenant. It can be interpreted in many, many different ways. And even as your CO, it’s not my place to tell you how to interpret your duty. That’s up to you.”

Captain Kirk was a big believer in free will and free thinking. If nothing else in his time on the *Enterprise*, Chekov had learned he was expected to function independently. This was just another reinforcement of it, he hoped. “I, I see, sir. Thank you, sir.”

Another nod, and Kirk’s expression shifted a bit, eyebrows coming down and left eye tightening as he cocked his head. “You’ve obviously given this some thought, not just regarding your own career but contributing toward the mission, whatever it is. I’ve only got one question for you: do you want to go?”

Not a question he’d been expecting, although maybe it should have been. Outside of pressure decisions, Kirk didn’t often give orders or make decisions without consulting and making sure he understood the relevant views. “Yes, Captain, I do.”

“Then you have my blessing, Lieutenant, if you need it.”

He did. Chekov felt quite a bit of tension leave his body. “Thank you, sir. It means a great deal to me.”

Kirk stood and offered his hand. "Pack light, Lieutenant. You haven't got a lot of time."

"No, sir. Thank you, sir." He took the handshake, hoped it was firm enough, and moved for the door.

But Kirk called him back just as it opened. "Mr. Chekov?"

He turned. "Captain?"

"Clear skies and a strong wind."

He kept the frown from his face, but almost certainly not from his voice. "Captain? I—"

His captain grinned. "Safe journey, Lieutenant. Dismissed."

"Thank you, sir." He managed not to flush again as he left.

*

Kirk watched the door close behind the young officer, letting his mind drift back to a few moments in his own career at around the same stage. He wasn't sure what path Mr. Chekov was going to take yet, but the young man definitely had good instincts, a strong sense of duty, and open eyes. He'd likely do well on whatever track he eventually put himself.

Not wanting to give over to maudlin reflection on a misspent youth, he reached for the comm panel beside the small viewer and flicked a switch. "Kirk to bridge. Connect me to Starbase 67, please. Have them put me through to the Colonel Miller in his office."

He wasn't sure why he expected Uhura's voice, knowing very well she'd chosen to exercise an extended shore leave while the *Enterprise* was

in dry dock, but Palmer's soprano surprised him for some reason. "Aye, sir."

He listened to the hum of the air vent for a few seconds before getting the voice he wanted. "Colonel Miller here."

Unable to hold back the grin, Kirk found himself leaning a little closer to the panel. "He's on his way, Reg."

"That's good news, Jim. What did you have to do to convince him?"

"Very little." Kirk shook his head. Sometimes it was all about asking the right questions, something he wished he'd learned a lot sooner in life. "I let him talk me into it. Doubt he sees it that way, though." *And Chekov had already made up his mind at any rate. He'd just wanted my blessing.*

"Probably not." Miller paused for a moment and Kirk had the impression he was multitasking, a familiar sensation. He probably should be doing a little of that himself. How often did he get weeks in one spot to catch up? "I wouldn't worry about the timing, Jim. If everything goes off without a hitch, he'll be back aboard in two weeks."

"Ha! When was the last time you had any mission go off without a hitch?"

"Well... you've still got more than three before your scheduled departure. I can't see it being likely that things go that long, but I'm sure you could be delayed for a day or two if necessary. Or I could send a courier to meet you with him. Even the ship he's going to be on, if I have to. The *Nancy Wake* is rated faster than *Enterprise*."

He didn't grudge the extra emergency speed on a ship that small. He also didn't find pulling out without his best navigator all that attractive, but it would do, in a pinch, if it had to and the *Enterprise* got carried away or assigned to something that wasn't an emergency the moment it left drydock. "Just make sure I get my officer back in one piece."

"I don't think I can promise that any more than you can on any given day. I wouldn't have asked if there were better options, you know, and Chekov is a pretty damned good option."

Kirk sighed. "I know it, Reg. That's why I want him back."

"I know. I needed someone who can function as a starship officer and work tactically on the ground. He might be a little raw yet on the latter, but he's got the right skill sets for the job, Jim. A good young officer."

Hard to disagree with that, considering the amount of time Kirk had put into him and the raw ability Chekov had started with. "And he's in the right place at the right time."

"Just as important. Plus, he pays attention and he plays nice with others, both of which are more important than usual this time out, and not just because his new CO is a Vulcan. Chekov is an excellent bet, Jim. I've got plenty of faith he'll come back."

"And you still don't want to tell me what it is?"

Miller laughed and it sounded a little bit tinny in the tiny speaker. "Chekov didn't, either, eh? Good lad. I can't, you know that, but it is important. Sarin is a solid officer and I've got as

many good people going with her as I can manage besides Chekov. I might whine about the shortages, but I've pulled the best we've got who can be spared for the job."

"A little risk comes with the profession. I'm well aware of that and so is he. It's just natural to look out for the people under your command."

"Don't I know it. Any time I get a status report, I'll pass along open details to you. Fair enough?"

A placating move, and Kirk knew it. The unclassified bits he'd likely get would be things like, 'The *Nancy Wake* has reached her destination,' or, 'The *Nancy Wake* is due to dock in some number of hours.' He wouldn't get better, and he knew it, so he'd take what he could. "Thanks, Reg. I can't really expect more, so I'll be satisfied with that."

"And I'll give you what I can. Take care, Jim."

"You to, Reg."

"Miller out."

Kirk reached forward and flicked the comm panel off, leaning back again with a sigh. "Good luck, Lieutenant."

Chapter 6

The tingling of the transporter faded from Chekov's skin. It felt different than beaming onto the Enterprise, somehow, and he didn't think it had anything to do with the beam colour. While the blue seemed odd, if soothing in a way, and

gave an easier fade in to his vision, he still wondered why the change. A by-product of the design, probably, but what would cause it?

The transporter room itself was darker and there was a more physical separation between the operator and the pad, an actual shield rising from the edge of the console to the ceiling, almost as if the designer had been afraid the beam would reach out and grab the operator, too.

That operator stepped out of the booth. A young woman, which seemed odd coming from his mind, somehow—had all of *Enterprise's* transporter operators been male?—and paler than any Russian, wearing the gold of command and operations and the single braid of an Ensign took one step forward and came to attention. He smiled at her and did the same. “Permission to come aboard?”

Still at attention, she seemed to relax a little, a bit of tension sliding from her face. “Granted, Lieutenant, and welcome aboard.”

“Thank you, Ensign...?” He stepped down off the pad and held out his hand hoping she'd relax.

“Ogden, sir.” She took the hand but remained stiff if not quite rigid. “Sheila Ogden. I'm, um, Gamma Shift officer.”

He opened his mouth to be interrupted by the low-high-low whistle and Commander Sarin's voice coming from both the booth and the comm panel on the wall. “Ensign Ogden, report please.”

“Excuse me, sir.” Ogden flushed and ran for the wall panel. “Ogden here, skipper.”

“Is Lieutenant Chekov on board?”

She looked over at Chekov as she spoke.

“Yes, ma’am. Just transported from the dock.”

“Please escort him to the bridge. Sarin out.” The panel clicked, communication cut from the other end.

“Yes, ma’am.” The words were quiet enough that Chekov obviously wasn’t meant to hear. “If you’ll follow me, Lieutenant. The skipper wants you right away. I’ll make sure your bag gets to your quarters.”

He looked back at the bag as they walked out of the transporter room. In truth, he’d almost forgotten it was there, not that there was much in it. He probably could have gotten by without packing anything at all, but he’d brought a few items of clothing more suitable for a planetary excursion that didn’t involve uniforms. He let his guide lead him through two corridors before clearing his throat. “Ensign Ogden?”

She didn’t look at him and he tried to decide what the emotion was he wanted to attach to the non-engagement. “Yes, sir?”

“Have you ever served with a Vulcan before?”

She almost missed a step and did make eye contact then, if only peripherally. “I—no sir. We had a physics instructor in first year on loan from the Vulcan Science Academy.”

Thinking back to his own first year physics class, Chekov couldn’t help but smile. “Dr. Ranek?”

“Um, yes.”

He nodded. "I'm not certain 'on loan' is really the word the Academy staff ought to use, unless the word permanent is included somehow." He chose his words carefully, placing what he wanted to say in between them, so the meaning would be in what he didn't say, he hoped. "Dr. Ranek spends a year at each of the Academies, rotating through a four-year cycle. I believe he only teaches one or two courses per term, but his schedule is designed so that every officer cadet attending in that academic year will have him as an instructor. Did you do well in his class?"

Her cheeks darkened again, the curse of a fair complexion he knew well. "Not very."

"Neither did I." He shrugged. "I'm not sure anyone does, yet he rarely fails a student, working to instill basic principles in all of us. His classes are designed to be a humbling experience, I think, to teach us that we do not know everything."

It was hard to tell if the answering smile was in humour or irony, but either would do, he thought. "I certainly learned that, sir. Um, why are we talking about Dr. Ranek?"

"Lieutenant Commander Sarin is also a Vulcan."

"She is."

"So is the first officer on *Enterprise*, Commander Spock." Perhaps he would have to spell it out. Well, things had been gently spelled out often enough for him in the past. It only seemed fair he'd have to repay it. "Mister Spock is a brilliant man and an exceedingly capable officer. Yet, being Vulcan, he doesn't always

understand the nuances of the emotional interactions the rest of us suffer from.”

She looked at him more closely, turning her head to do it. “Suffer from?” Both eyebrows rose.

“From a Vulcan point of view, it is the correct word, yes.” Chekov smiled, hopefully taking away any potential for Ogden thinking he might be making fun of her. “He has an expectation of competence from everyone who serves on *Enterprise*, that we will do our jobs exceedingly well, and does not waste time on things he believes we should know or on idle communication. But he is well aware of our activities and duties and the details of operations, including how long standard duties are likely to take under normal conditions, for example. My limited experience suggests that Commander Sarin is of similar temperament.”

“Under the ‘no news is good news’ school of thought, so long as I’m not being told something is wrong, I’m doing okay.” She went back to looking straight ahead. “I get it, I guess.”

“I would take heart in the fact that she allows you to refer to her as ‘Skipper’.”

The eyebrows pulled down. “I hadn’t thought of that. It’s traditional, but—”

“But not official. That tells me she has studied some human history and military customs and she knows she has a mostly human crew.” It seemed as if the corridor would never end. “Tell me, Ensign, are we going to walk all the way to the bridge?”

The abrupt change of topic seemed to catch her off guard. “What?” She laughed, a

quick, almost stuttering sound and he thought she might still be nervous. “Yes, sir, except where we have to climb. There’re only three decks on a *Solar*. Not worth turbo lifts. The access hatch to the forward ladder is just up there. The transporter room is as far from the bridge as you can get without going to Engineering. Didn’t get a chance to study the deck plans?”

“No.” He grinned and felt a bit silly about it, but not embarrassed. “I guess that’s obvious. The assignment was only offered to me late this afternoon and I’ve been far more concerned about the mission itself. I thought I’d have time while under way. The ship isn’t very big, after all.” And in one fell swoop, he’d destroyed the image of the wise and all-knowing First Officer.

Still grinning, Ogden stopped them in front of a large hatch. “No, it isn’t, though it sometimes seems that way.” She put a palm to the panel beside the hatch and it rolled open almost slowly compared to what he thought of as a standard door. Thicker and bulkier, too. He wondered if it sealed against vacuum. “This brings us up right behind the bridge. Um, two decks up.”

“I think I’ll manage, Ensign.” He grinned again and then followed her through the hatch to a very steep set of stairs. Steep enough that he would have preferred to use the word ladder, as she had, and the railing to either side reinforced the idea that he might need to hold on for balance. Ah well, he wasn’t that out of shape, he hoped.

The door closed behind them as his foot reached the third step and Ogden looked back over her shoulder. "I should warn you the bridge is rather small. Nothing like on a *Constitution*."

He wanted to smile. That was something he'd figured out on his own. The whole crew of this ship could squeeze onto the *Enterprise's* bridge, though quite a few more than half of them would have to stand. He settled for a raised eyebrow. "Oh?"

Turning back to face forward, Ogden nodded. "There are four stations available, but most of the time, there are only two people on the bridge, one officer and one crew person. And, actually, the systems are linked together so the whole ship could be run from any one of the four stations if necessary."

"With a crew of only 25, that's not surprising." And efficient. There would also have to be lots of cross training involved for the bridge crew. Not as much room for specialization as on a larger vessel, a *Constitution*-class vessel, for example.

"I suppose not, but it might feel a bit cramped until you get used to it. Just wanted to warn you, sir." She reached the top of the stairs and waited for him to join her before palming the hatch open.

"Thank you, Ensign." Another heavy door rolled back to let them out into a corridor that was not merely right behind the bridge, as promised, but let Chekov see into the edge of it from where they stood. He thought he might be able to hear some of the background instrumentation.

“This way, sir.” She gestured down the small corridor as if he couldn’t see the way and they took the few steps needed as the hatch closed behind them.

And it really was only a few steps to get onto the bridge, which was as small as Ogden had promised, four stations in a tight arc in front of the command chair. One of those stations was occupied by a crewman in a gold jumpsuit. He came to attention as Commander Sarin turned in her seat. “Lieutenant Chekov reporting as ordered, ma’am.”

The Vulcan nodded. “Welcome aboard, Lieutenant. I am gratified you chose to join us.”

“I didn’t mean to seem indecisive, ma’am, merely to be sure I wasn’t being hasty.”

“Consulting with your current commanding officer was certainly logical as was a reasoned consideration of your options given the time you had available.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” He hadn’t expected a Vulcan to hold any kind of grudge, much less one that was about fully understanding something, but it was still a relief to hear the words.

“However, it is ultimately good you made your decision as quickly as you did. I have just received word that the additional engineering crew we had expected will not be arriving, making you the last member of the crew who will report aboard. While we have a standard complement, this is effectively a shakedown cruise as well, but we shall deal with any issues as they arise. In the meantime, Starbase traffic control has granted us leave to depart ahead of

schedule.” Her eyes moved from Chekov. “Ensign Ogden, as approximately three hours of Gamma Shift remain, please take a station.”

“Aye, aye, ma’am.” Ogden took a few steps and slid into the station next to the crewman so that the two middle stations were occupied. She hit several switches to activate the board.

“At your convenience, Ensign.”

Ogden nodded, and Chekov saw her twitch to avoid looking back. “Retracting docking clamps... now.” She watched the readout for a few seconds.

But Sarin, in true Vulcan fashion, was multitasking. “Lieutenant Chekov, you will have Beta Shift, responsible for ship operations from 1200 to 1800 daily, beginning tomorrow.” She didn’t turn to look at him, however.

He came to attention anyway.

“Understood, ma’am.”

“Petty Officer Schulman will serve as your bridge crew.”

Well, at least he was learning names. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Thrusters engaged.” The interruption was welcome. “We are clear of the dock. Approaching minimum safe distance. Adjusting attitude.”

Ogden did glance back over her shoulder this time. “Course and speed, Skipper?”

“Lay in a course for P3847, Warp 7.”

“P3847, Warp 7, aye.” Not exactly a well-known destination, or a system anyone had necessarily heard of. Chekov wasn’t surprised to watch Ogden looking it up quickly to get coordinates before bringing the navigation programming up. It only took her a few seconds.

“Minimum safe distance achieved. Course plotted and laid in, ma’am.”

“Execute at will, Ensign.” Two switches depressed simultaneously and the warp drive began building in the background noise. Not quite the same as the hum on *Enterprise*, but significantly louder. “Very good, Ensign. You have the Conn.”

Ogden nodded but didn’t leave her station. “I have the Conn, skipper.”

Standing, Sarin looked at Chekov. “Lieutenant Chekov, there will be an officers’ meeting at 0900 tomorrow. Your time until then is your own.”

“Understood. Thank you, ma’am.”

Without a further exchange of, well, anything, Sarin moved away from the command chair and left the bridge. A few seconds later, Chekov heard the hatch he and Ogden had used open and then close.

A few seconds of background bridge instrumentation went undisturbed before Ogden let a large sigh free. “Doesn’t waste time on idle communication, does she, sir?”

Unable to suppress the grin, Chekov nodded. “Not at all, Ensign, though she said more than you might think. It’s a Vulcan trait. As I suggested, she assumes you know your job.” His stomach rumbled and he thought about his last meal. “I hope you won’t think it rude, but I’m going to try to find the mess. Lunch was a very long time ago.”

Turning in her chair, Ogden grinned at him. “Not at all, sir. Deck two and about three quarters of the way back toward engineering.

Ration packs and basic replicators. It's a small ship, sir."

He nodded. "But a good one, I hope."

"I guess we'll have to wait and see."

But probably not for too long, Chekov thought. It was a short mission and likely to be a fairly intense one once they reached their destination.

Chapter 7

First Officer's Log, Stardate 6237.9, Lieutenant Pavel Chekov reporting. We are well under way, cruising at Warp 7. On *Enterprise*, Mr. Scott would be complaining about the stress on his engines, but Lieutenant Shran has not said a word. The *Nancy Wake* is overpowered for her size, able to achieve an emergency speed of Warp 9 for some duration. I hope we do not need it.

Two days into our trip, it is still very quiet on board, but I can feel a sense of anticipation building. We will reach the planet P3847, called Harak by its very pre-industrial natives, in only five more days. Hopefully, considering how little technology is available on the planet, we will easily find the location Councillor Rakag's son is being held.

It is worth noting that while Colonel J'dek is on board with us, he has so far kept to his cabin except to retrieve meals from the mess. I find it interesting to meet a Klingon attempting to keep stress levels as low as possible, if that is his indeed his objective.

As a side note, my field brevet to full Lieutenant feels a little strange considering how recent the Junior Lieutenant promotion still seems.

End log entry.

The hatch slid aside for Chekov and he stepped out into the short corridor leading to the bridge. A glance at a couple of readouts as he entered and the two people present looked up as he smiled at them. "Good morning Ensign, Crewman Alyx."

"Good morning, sir." The crewman smiled back and looked back down at his board.

"Good morning, sir." Sheila Ogden stood and just barely stopped herself from coming to attention but didn't hide it very well.

Chekov wondered if Commander Sarin had told her why the shift change to Alpha with the Captain taking Gamma, almost immediately after entering warp. There wasn't an obvious reason so far as he could tell. He glanced down at the arm of the command chair for a chronometer check. "I mark the time 1152 hours."

Ogden nodded. "1152 hours, aye. Ship remains on course. No systems or maintenance issues to report, nothing out of the ordinary on any scans.

"You are relieved, Ensign."

"I stand relieved. Thank you, sir."

He tilted his head a bit to one side before sliding into the command chair. There was a brief flash of guilt at not taking a station, but he could see everything he needed to from the center seat and Commander Sarin had made it quite clear that when the shift was his, he was in command unless she deliberately came and took over. "For what, Ensign?"

"For always coming early. Your shift hasn't officially started yet."

Always meaning three days in a row now, but it was a trend he intended to continue so long as he was standing watches on the *Nancy*. "I suppose that's true. It's a simple courtesy, Ensign. You may not have anywhere to go, but neither do I, and it's nice to leave work on time, yes? I expect you do the same for Ensign Engel."

She shook her head. "It's not that, sir. I just didn't expect it. This is my first real shipboard assignment. My midshipman cruise was on a *Nelson*, the *Champlain*. They were considerably more, um, relaxed about shift change."

Something he'd heard before about other vessels in the same class. Perhaps when you spent so much of your time expanding the frontier, the idea of being on time drifted away from consideration. "The habit on *Enterprise* is more to be slightly early, but not too early to

avoid setting unrealistic expectations. While that has not been the case here as yet, there is often additional information to exchange and, as I said, it's always nice for the officer going off shift to leave the bridge on time."

She took a small step to stand next to the chair, not quite ready to be off duty yet, perhaps. "I guess if you do it enough, the person you're relieving might start that for the next shift. Eventually it will work its way back around to you."

"That's a good thought, Ensign." Chekov smiled at her. "I'd never really considered it before. My midshipman cruise was on the *Zhukov*, a Larson class destroyer. Very regimented. I went to *Enterprise* after final graduation to find it a bit more relaxed in its culture, but certainly efficient, and with an expectation of performance."

"Um, what's it like on *Enterprise*, sir?"

"Hmm." As always, difficult question to answer, even considering it was where he'd spent his entire career so far, and one he encountered very often so felt he should have a better answer for at this point instead of having to come up with a new expression of his feelings every time. "Active, busy, crowded at least compared to *Nancy*. And it seems like there is always an emergency."

"Isn't this an emergency, sir?"

Hard to argue with the logic from a first mission point of view. "Beyond any doubt, Miss Ogden, but it isn't urgent quite yet. When we get a little closer to arriving and everyone begins feeling the stress a little more, you'll have some

idea of what it might be like on *Enterprise*.” He shook his head. “No, that isn’t really fair. There are certainly stretches of boredom, sometimes even the midst of a crisis. The emergencies only seem constant in memory.”

“I suppose so, sir.” She didn’t sound convinced, and he couldn’t really blame her. He hadn’t really given her a good explanation. “Excitement helps the time pass quickly, Ensign, but sometimes it’s nice just to be busy with routine tasks.” He laughed suddenly. “I wonder how Captain Kirk would react to hear me say that. Enjoy your down time, Ensign.”

She flushed a bit and he wasn’t quite sure why. “Thank you, sir.” She was about half-way to the hatch when Chekov heard it open.

“Oh, excuse me, Ensign.”

“After you, Petty Officer. I’m just leaving.”

The hatch opened and closed again a few seconds later and Chekov turned just far enough to see his watch mate step onto the bridge. “Beat me here again, sir.”

With a grin, Chekov shrugged. “It is hardly a race, Mister Schulman, which, if it were, I think you would probably win. You have the look of a runner about you.”

The older man—Chekov put him in his mid-30s before he read the fellow’s service jacket and had to revise upward by a few years and changing the first digit—patted his stomach. “Not as much as I used to be, sir. Sorry, Alyx. I mark the time 1155 hours.” He slid into the seat next to the crewman.

“Agreed at 1155 hours. Ship remains on course. No systems or maintenance issues to

report, nothing out of the ordinary on any scans. The watch is yours, Petty Officer.”

“You are relieved, Crewman.”

“I stand relieved.” Alyx stretched. “It’s all good, Hans, and nothing to apologize for. Have a good watch. You too, sir.”

Chekov nodded at the man as he stood. “Thank you, crewman. Enjoy your downtime.”

Alyx left quickly as Schulman went over his board, making sure all systems were slaved properly to it and functioning. “Another quiet day, sir.”

“We can certainly hope, Mister Schulman. The action will start soon enough.” Probably far too soon, but he was hopeful for an effective and casualty-free resolution, in spite of the combined force nature of the operation, and the vast unknowns of the ground mission.

But he needed to find something to fill his watch on this quiet day.

*

Chekov slid into the seat across from the grouchy looking Tellarite. To be fair, from a human perspective, Tellarites looked grouchy pretty much all of the time, even when they were laughing hysterically, not that that happened often. It seemed easy to regret what was becoming a repeat observation for his inability to wrap his brain around Tellarite expressions. Tellarite expressions were *Tellarite* expressions and he wasn’t sure why he had such an easy time putting the same human stamp on nearly all of them instead of managing to take them for what they were..

He reached for the reconstituted fork to spear a chunk of reconstituted stew and had the morsel half-way to his mouth when Grev grunted. "Funny how things work sometimes."

"I'm not sure what you mean, Telik." He popped the chunk of not-beef into his mouth and began chewing.

"I was just thinking about your Tactics exam."

Swallowing, Chekov tried to be noncommittal. "Ah." It was tough, sometimes, to figure out Tellarite humour, or which piece of something was going to be found funny. He had an idea this time, several, in fact, but wanted a little more information to make the decision. It looked like he'd have to drag it out of the marine, though.

"You don't think it's funny? No sense of humour, you humans."

Chekov shrugged, reaching for the large cup of almost-coffee. "I might have said ironic. The person we're going to rescue isn't likely to be all that happy to be rescued by *us*."

"Ha!" Grev's shoulders shook. "That just makes it funnier. No, he won't, but he'll want to help fight his way out even more than your Vulcan friend, and he'll have better reason."

"If we can trust him with a weapon."
Chekov swallowed a large mouthful of the hot, caffeinated liquid.

"That's why we're bringing the Klingon. A friendly face in the crowd."

Chekov wasn't sure friendly was the right word but didn't get a chance to express that. From the other end of the table, Crewman

Sheingold, the Delta shift bridge crew, snorted. “The turtlehead’s got to be good for something, I guess.”

Grev scowled, a truly impressive expression on the dense Tellarite face. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

The other man shrugged. “I’m just not all that fond of Klingons, Warrant.” He shrugged again. “Not that I want a war, but isn’t this something they should be taking care of themselves?”

Chekov countered with a raised eyebrow. “By the terms of the Organian Peace Treaty, Harak is in Federation space, Crewman. Would you be comfortable letting a few Klingon battlecruisers pass through to pick up the missing boy?”

“Of course not! The Klingons would almost have to start a war while they were here. The Federation couldn’t allow it!”

Warming to the argument, Grev leaned forward and a bit towards the younger man. “Tell me how you really feel then, Sheingold.”

The younger man—and it briefly felt weird to Chekov thinking of him that way—huffed. “I’m not stupid, Warrant Officer. I know we’re trying to prevent a war and I know we need to get the Councillor’s kid back, but I don’t see why we should have to have him along. You guys can handle yourselves.”

“Oh, we’ll handle ourselves, but you’ve got no idea what you’re talking about, you whiny little—”

Time to be first officer. “Telik, please. Let’s not stoop to insults. Mr. Sheingold, I think you’re missing the point. Or a point, at least.”

The door to the mess hall slid open and all three sets of eyes watched as J’ddek clomped to the disposal chute, shoved his tray in, dishes and all, and clomped back out again, all without a glance in their direction. As the door slid shut again, Sheingold flushed, stood up from the table and moved towards the disposal himself. “At least he doesn’t eat with us. I don’t know if I could—”

“Thank you, Crewman. That will be enough.” Sheingold stiffened and turned back to look at Chekov with his mouth open, but Chekov didn’t feel like letting him speak again just yet. There was a little straightening to be done.

“Whatever you may think of Klingons, crewman, Colonel J’ddek is here at great personal risk to himself, and possibly his family, to accomplish what he undoubtedly sees as an important task to the security of the Empire. He brought us critical information and is part of the team to help retrieve the missing boy, hoping to prevent the war you don’t want.”

“But sir, he’s still a Klingon. You can’t trust him! Besides, we don’t even know if he’s acting with official authorization or not.”

Grev gave an exaggerated shrug and leaned back in his chair, eye narrowing a little. “Meh. If we rescue the kid, he’ll be a hero of the Empire. If we don’t, then he was obviously part of the plot all the way along. That’s how these things work. He knows that.”

“Da.” Chekov nodded. “Whether we trust him or not, Colonel J’dek seems to wish to prevent a war. Is that not worthy of some respect, at least?”

More blood pumping into his face, Sheingold tried to stand his ground. “If that’s really what he wants, sir. I don’t buy it. Klingons don’t do peace very well. It’s just time to take a breath for them.” He got up and started for the disposal chute himself.

“I have heard the same thing said many times of the Gorn.” Was there any bit of logic he could use to get through the man? At least they weren’t yelling, and he hadn’t had to go so far as a disciplinary conversation but encountering bigotry in a Starfleet uniform always shook him a bit. “We signed a treaty with them recently. There was discussion of trade. It is possible we just haven’t found the right things to talk to the Klingons about yet.”

Sheingold shook his head, the flush dropping back a little bit, but his blood pressure obviously still high. “I don’t know that we ever will, sir.” He turned back to the disposal system, scraped his dishes and returned the plastics to the recycler, leaving the small mess hall without looking back.

With a huff, Grev shook his head, but he didn’t speak until he had Chekov’s full gaze again. “I thought I liked to argue.”

Chekov glanced down at his stew, still warm but not quite steaming anymore. “You do. But you listen when you argue. It isn’t much of an argument when you can’t hear what the

other person says.” He scooped up something meant to be potato.

“That’s pretty mature for a human. Are you sure there isn’t a Tellarite in your ancestry?”

He barely managed to swallow before the laugh escape. “I’m sure. But when did I become the mature one?”

“I said, ‘For a human’.” Grev grunted but let himself smile in return. “Don’t let it go to your head. Sir.”

“I’ll try not to.”

“Seems unlikely.” An exaggerated sigh. “And, really, no insults?” Grev shook his head several times. “That’s part of the fun of arguing.”

Which made it Chekov’s turn to sigh.

*

The bridge background noise on *Nancy* was too different from *Enterprise* for Chekov to feel comfortable yet. Most of the systems were brand new instead of upgraded, which made the background difference entirely reasonable as the *Enterprise* had been in service, and through several major upgrades or overhauls, for a quarter century or more. Design aesthetics changed and those would naturally be integrated into a new design where in an older ship, even one as fine-tuned and well-engineered as the *Enterprise*, most of the upgrades were behind the basic cosmetics of things.

So the *Nancy* sounded different in almost every way, especially on the small bridge, and down to the triple beep of an external communication announcement.

Petty Officer Schulman glanced at his board and then looked back over his shoulder at

Chekov. "I have an incoming communication from Starbase 67, sir. Authentication code shows it originating from Colonel Miller's office."

He straightened. "It is a live visual transmission, Petty Officer?"

"Aye, sir."

"On screen, please." Colonel Miller's face appeared over large on the main viewer at the front of the bridge. "*Nancy Wake* responding. Chekov here, sir."

Miller nodded, his eyebrows trying to knit together. "Lieutenant, I really wish I were calling you with something positive to say."

He tried to pull himself straighter against the sudden knot in his stomach and lifted a hand to gesture at Schulman. "Shall I call Commander Sarin to the bridge?" He was already reaching for the small panel on the arm of the chair when Miller shook his head.

"No, better to keep this short and harder to intercept."

"Aye, sir." His hand dropped back and he deliberately didn't suggest patching her in. The Colonel had already expressed that he wanted to keep things as short as possible.

"The situation is now public. Councillor Rakag is demanding the return of his son. He stops short of pointing his finger directly at the Federation but has delivered an ultimatum. The 'rogue elements' perpetrating this act must be brought swiftly to justice or Klingon warships will go where they need to go to engage in their own search and won't recognize any borders or Treaty Zone."

"Hmm. 'Rogue elements', sir?"

“He’s trying to give the Federation an out to avoid war.” Miller spread his hands. “Not that he’s come up with a logical reason for us to have kidnapped his son in the first place, and he probably doesn’t care if he needs one. The out he’s giving us is clearly politically motivated in a very personally charged situation, so there’s at least one cooler head giving him advice.”

Chekov shook his head. “It still does not make sense, sir.” While it was a good setup, the Federation had no wish for war and the Empire should know that. If it truly had no current wish for one either, that should be added incentive to avoid one.

“It doesn’t need to. I know how I’d feel if it was my son missing and evidence pointing at the Klingons. Give me the power to do something about it and I probably wouldn’t be much more rational than Rakag.”

“I suppose not, sir, but our political climates are somewhat different. Do you have any additional orders for us in this light?”

“No.” Miller shook his head. “No. Pass the information along to Lieutenant Commander Sarin. Bring back Rakag’s son. That’s all we need.” He didn’t add the word alive to the order. It didn’t need to be said. A dead son would guarantee war.

“Understood, sir.”

“Good. Miller out.” Chekov saw the colonel reach forward and the image disappeared, replaced by the forward exterior view of stars gently sliding by as the *Nancy* moved through warp.

Looking back over his shoulder, Schulman gave a lopsided grin. "I guess things just got a little more interesting, sir. Shall I page the Skipper?"

As if there were any doubt. "Please."

The compact, adjustable control panels of the *Nancy's* bridge stations still seemed to cover too much ground to Chekov. A couple of deft swipes and half of Schulman's board switched its functions to become an almost-full communications panel. Schulman found the required switches instantly and Chekov heard the bosun's whistle of a ship-wide communications request. "Bridge to Lieutenant Commander Sarin."

There was a pause of no more than three seconds before Chekov heard a click and then his CO's voice. "Sarin here."

He almost cleared his throat. "Uh, Lieutenant Chekov here, Commander. We've just had a communication from Colonel Miller. The overall situation has become public. Councillor Rakag is threatening to breach the Treaty Zone unless there is a swift, positive resolution. Colonel Miller did not provide a definition for 'swift', but he stressed a rapid and successful conclusion to the mission."

"Has the Chancellor spoken on the matter?"

"Not that Colonel Miller mentioned, ma'am."

There was a longer pause than when she'd first answered the comm and Chekov wondered at the calculations she might be making during those few seconds. "Very well. It seems that

additional haste is called for. You are authorized for full emergency speed. I will speak to Lieutenant Shran regarding the fitness of the engines to maintain that output until we reach our destination.”

Well, he agreed haste was called for, but the speed he was about to order concerned Chekov more than a little considering his normal experience. But the *Nancy* was not the *Enterprise* and she was designed for speed more for than a heavy cruiser was. “Understood.”

“Carry on, Lieutenant. Sarin out.” The channel closed from the Vulcan side and Schulman looked back over his shoulder even as he touched the pad that restored his station to standard configuration.

“Orders, sir?”

His heart rate accelerating a few beats, Chekov tilted his head to one side for a moment. He felt his hands make the shrug he didn’t want his shoulders to participate in. Most of the need for secrecy had just been removed from their mission, so long as the real kidnappers weren’t tapped into Federation communications in any way. “You heard the Skipper, Mister Schulman. Full emergency speed. Take us to Warp Nine.” Hopefully, Commander Sarin would reach Lieutenant Shran before the Engineer had the chance to complain.

Schulman turned back around and entered the commands. “Warp Factor Nine, aye.” The engine hum built in the background as the *Nancy* worked towards its new cruising speed.

Chapter 8

First Officer's Log, USS *Nancy Wake*, Stardate 6238.3, Lieutenant Pavel Chekov Reporting. With the shift to emergency speed, the time to our destination has been decreased by almost eighteen hours. Still, that does leave us several days of normal operations until it is time to engage the majority of our stealth systems and attempt a rescue, and the ship must continue to run efficiently during that period.

I find myself growing nervous as my own tension rises, and I do not think I am the only one. The anticipation over what we might find when we arrive is a topic of conversation for everyone on board, as is what we'll have to do about it.

But we must find our way forward until then.

"I can't tell you how much I appreciate this, Lieutenant."

Difficult as it was in open company, Lieutenant Shran smiled. "It was an interesting diversion, Mister Cestor. And considering our mission, certainly in keeping with a state of preparedness."

Cestor nodded. "Agreed. Plus, it's nice to be able to stay sharp." He had a quick look through the hatch to the cargo bay. "The *Nancy* has a lot of amenities considering the space

available, but there's not really enough for us to do in the normal course of operations on board. A little training will help. Marines get bored easily and when we get bored, we get into trouble."

"You could say the same thing about Engineers. Sometimes, it's even the same kind of trouble. Other times we take apart the antimatter injectors to find out what's making a sound no one else can hear."

Laughing, Cestor shook his head. "Yeah, not a problem we're likely to have."

"No. I imagine you have different problems and different solutions." He looked at the marine CO and frowned slightly. "Probably problems I wouldn't even consider. And solutions to go with them. But this particular solution might be good for everyone. Theoretically, we all have to be qualified at minimum levels."

The two of them turned at the sound of footsteps just in time to see the first officer turn the corner. Lieutenant Chekov smiled at the pair as he got close. "Mister Cestor, Lieutenant Shran."

Shran nodded. "Lieutenant." He wondered if it was as strange for the young human to be First Officer as it was for him to technically be Chief Engineer aboard an admittedly small starship. In his case, he was the only officer assigned to engineering, even though fully a third of *Nancy's* crew technically reported to him. There should have been more for a shakedown cruise, especially when it was overloaded with a secret mission, but he tried not to hold a grudge.

Chekov continued smiling. "It is convenient to find you both together. Commander Sarin hopes you have time to spare from your duties to attend a staff meeting this afternoon."

Raising an eyebrow, Cestor forced the other one down. "Didn't we have one yesterday?"

"Yes." Chekov shrugged. "But that one was merely about standard ship's business. The situation has changed somewhat since then, so this one is to focus on preliminary planning for what we may encounter when we reach Harak."

"I'm not certain why the skipper would want me involved, then. The Chief Engineer isn't going to have much to do with any rescue operation." At best, he needed to keep things under close supervision in case an exit as rapid as their entrance was needed.

"Don't be so sure about that, Shran. The phaser range is going to be a big help for all of the marines on board, at least. Whoever hits the surface is going to have the edge in practice."

"The *Nancy* has a phaser range? I was not aware of such a thing." Shran read the raised eyebrows of Chekov's expression as surprise. As expressive as their faces were, humans weren't always easy to read. Their expressions didn't make the same kind of sense as normal Andorian ones.

But it was Cestor who answered first. "I'm not surprised. There wasn't one until this morning."

Shaking his head, Chekov frowned at the two of them. "I do not think I understand. *Nancy* is not exactly a large ship and I have studied the

schematics thoroughly. There is no space for a phaser range on board.”

Shran gestured at the open hatch. “The schematics you’ve been looking at probably refer to the area as the main cargo bay, Lieutenant.”

“Ah. That I do remember. You have converted it to a weapons area?”

“Not exactly. We’ve programmed some basic holographic emitters to display colour patterns and random targets around the cargo bay. The shooter may select any one of a dozen types of program at various levels of difficulty. It’s not very advanced, but it’s good for reflexes.”

“Which is to say there are no live targets and any phaser needs to be set on the lowest possible power setting, Lieutenant.” Cestor smiled.

Nodding, Shran kept trying to read Lieutenant Chekov’s expression. “We don’t want to risk any damage to the ship.”

The first officer nodded, but his entire mouth moved to one side. “Of course not.”

“It’s actually an excellent practice range, about on par with the room they let you play in during the first Academy summer session. I’ve just finished testing it out. Next best thing to a live fire exercise we’re possibly going to get on board a ship. I’m really impressed.”

“You are too kind, Lieutenant.” Shran felt his face cooling and hoped there wasn’t a matching colour change to go with it.

But Cestor was warming to the subject. “Not at all, Lieutenant. Like I said, my boys and girls are really going to appreciate it. There’s not an awful lot for us to do on board. The gym is

nice, but we'll get stale fast if we can't train other skills too, and this is kind of an important mission."

He nodded. "I was happy to be of assistance. It was an interesting challenge, given the space available."

"I believe I'd like to test it out myself." Chekov made a show of leaning forward to look inside the otherwise empty area. "Probably I should ask if you compromised the use of the cargo bay as a cargo bay."

The cooling continued, but less embarrassment now as pride in his workmanship took over. "Of course not, Lieutenant. We may be called upon to retrieve more than just a young Klingon at any time. It wouldn't do to not have the area available for use. And certainly Lieutenant Commander Sarin would not appreciate any major changes to the ship, even if it is only her command for a short time."

Straightening, Chekov made direct eye contact. "Ah, you secured the Commander's permission, then. I was concerned for a moment since I hadn't heard about it first."

Shran looked at Lieutenant Cestor, who shook his head. "Not exactly."

He felt his antennae stiffen. "Well, that is to say—"

"I see." Chekov nodded again. "Well, I think the idea of the currently empty cargo bay doubling as a phaser range could be seen as a boost to morale in general, as well as to marine efficiency, and a practical tool to ensure continuous hand phaser skills development in

aid of maintaining Starfleet certifications as well. Perhaps if I were to speak to the Commander this afternoon before the meeting and suggest such a thing, and how it could be accomplished in a very short time with available equipment from stores, she might be willing to allow such modifications to take place.”

Cestor turned to look at Shran, but the engineer had no idea what to say, what might be expected by the first officer, chronologically younger than he was but with nearly four cycles of experience on the most active *Constitution* class cruiser in the fleet. Sadly, in his hesitation Shran left Cestor to flounder a bit. “That—” The marine swallowed once. “That sounds like an excellent idea, Lieutenant. I’m certain the marine group would benefit from having access to such a facility if it were to be made available.”

Struggling to catch up with the sudden malleability of the timeline, Shran got control of his antennae and nodded. “I concur. On long missions, an extra diversion is always welcomed by the crew and we are all required to maintain a certain level of proficiency with hand weapons, even more critical on missions such as the one we’re on. The technical challenges would certainly afford some interest for any engineering crew involved, if only briefly.”

“You both make excellent arguments.” Chekov frowned a little and scratched his chin. “I’m certain I can convince the Skipper of the merits of the idea and relay her decision to you at this afternoon’s staff meeting. 1530? The Briefing Room?”

“I think I can find the time in my schedule, Lieutenant.” Cestor nodded.

“As can I.” Shran paused, trying to put his question together carefully. “May I ask, Mister Chekov, why you didn’t just have the computer inform us of the meeting? Or the bridge crewman on duty?”

A wide human smile, wide enough to make him uncomfortable. “I like a personal touch where I can, Lieutenant. It’s a small ship and I didn’t think it would take long to find either of you.”

“I guess not.” But from the sound of Cestor’s voice, he didn’t understand any more than Shran did. “See you at 1530, then sir. And thank you.”

“You are most welcome, Lieutenant. I thank you both for the suggestion and the work you will probably both have to put in to make this idea a reality. If you will excuse me, I have two more people to track down.”

Shran watched the first officer walk away, aware that he’d just been saved some trouble and possibly some fairly intricate talking with their Vulcan commander, but still not sure exactly how or why.

*

Under the background hum of the *Nancy* and the less background metallic breeze of the air vents, Chekov thought he finally heard the heavy clomping footstep he’d been looking for after not finding their passenger in his quarters. He turned the corner to see a tall figure in Klingon body armour stalking away from him. “Colonel J’dek!”

The Klingon intelligence officer stopped in his tracks and seemed to stiffen. His shoulders slumped just a little as he sighed, the breath loud enough to echo in the corridor. “Yes, Lieutenant. How may I assist you?” He turned around just as Chekov came to a halt.

He knew a smile was wasted on the colonel but tried one anyway. It was in his nature to be friendly even if his audience didn’t always appreciate it or recognize it. “I was hoping to convince you to come to a staff meeting with me. Commander Sarin wishes to do some preliminary planning for our mission once we reach Harak.”

J’dek sighed again. “As I told your Vulcan when she first invited me to the meeting, any planning we do in the absence of information is useless. We will see what there is to see when we arrive. We will beam down, retrieve Rakag’s son, kill whoever gets in our way, and beam up. It’s simple.”

“I, um, think there may be a little—”

“Ughh.” J’dek rolled his eyes. “You Federation types seem to thrive on useless planning and wasting time. Plan when there is something to plan for, otherwise just do. I will be in my luxurious Starfleet cabin waiting for word of our arrival. Then we will have something to plan since there will be something to know.” The Klingon intelligence officer turned his back abruptly and began to stalk down the corridor.

There was only so much rudeness Chekov was willing to tolerate. “Colonel!” J’dek stopped and looked over his shoulder. “I do not think you are being fair. It is obvious we lack data at this

point. Commander Sarin wishes to use this as an opportunity for us to become accustomed to each other before we arrive.”

“Bah. What she wants is to waste time in useless mental exercise. This will be over soon enough, and you and I can forget we were forced to work together and go back to hating each other.”

That brought Chekov up short. “I do not hate you.”

Turning fully back, J'dek snorted. “No? How do you feel about Klingons?”

“Well, officially speaking, there is a peace treaty between us—”

Two long, quick steps brought J'dek almost to Chekov's nose. Chekov wasn't tall, but the Klingon had both height and reach on him. Still, this was not the time to give any ground at all. He took the violation of personal space with nothing more than a raised eyebrow.

“No, that is not what I asked. How do *you* feel, human?” He bit off each word. “When you look at my face, do you not see an enemy? Do you not want to reach for the nearest phaser and make sure I cannot harm you or your precious Federation? Do you not remember your first reaction on seeing me?” Chekov drew a breath even as he pushed down the memory, but J'dek waved him off. “Even humans have a drop of warrior's blood in their veins. You feel it. Your blood boils because I stand so close to you.”

Chekov's eyes narrowed. He would not be goaded into a fight, even a verbal one. “That is not so. We are working together to prevent a war—”

“Ha! On this mission we are allies, but that does not make us friends. Make no mistake. I couldn’t care less about Rakag’s brat and I would love nothing more than to see the Federation in flames, its worlds ground under the Empire’s heel. But the time is not right. When it is, no glowbug treaty will stop our warships from crossing the border and setting fire to everything we find.” He turned away again. “Now, if you will excuse me, *Lieutenant*, I will be in my cabin. Enjoy your ‘staff meeting’.”

He watched the man stomp down the corridor and turn the corner. “*Chort Vozmi*. It is a good thing I didn’t ask him to join us for a drink in the mess hall.”

*

The door closed behind J’ddek and he looked around the small space. Reaching for the scanner at his belt, he confirmed that no recording devices had been placed in his absence. Shaking his head, he admitted a lack of understanding, if only to himself. Why the idiot Starfleet officers on this ship weren’t keeping closer tabs on him was a mystery.

Stepping onto the bunk, he popped the vent cover free with a small grunt. At least the construction was good. The first time he’d stood on it, there had been some concern about it supporting his armoured weight.

He hopped down again with the extra transmitter in his hand, plugged it into the scanner and then slotted his communicator into the expansion port. A few clicks later, he was ready. “Firespitter calling Home.” He waited for several seconds without receiving a response.

“Firespitter calling Home.” Several more seconds passed, and he’d inhaled to repeat himself again when a gruff voice announced itself at low volume.

“This is Home. What are you able to report?”

Good. He’d almost been concerned for a moment. “All is as expected. We are on course and now ahead of schedule. How do events proceed on our side of the border?”

“As well as any might expect. Some members are proving less tractable than we might desire, the father himself among them, but they will all be brought to heel. Just be sure that your mission is successful.”

Nodding even though there was no visual, J’dek grunted. “On my honour.” Failure wasn’t an option. It never was.

“That is expected. Things will be far more difficult if you fail.”

In any number of ways. “I will not fail.”

“The Council sincerely hopes that is the case. Qapla!” The transmission dropped out at the source and J’Dek popped his communicator free almost as he started unscrewing the antenna.

“I will not fail.” But he kept the snarl in his voice low.

*

Chekov arrived at the briefing room early, under the assumption that his Vulcan commanding officer was likely to do the same. He found it gratifying to be right, but still disappointed at the situation he had to explain to her.

Sarin listened without interrupting, nodding at key moments, and waited for him to finish. “An interesting reaction, Lieutenant, but not altogether unexpected given the circumstances.”

With a sigh, Chekov allowed himself to slump a little before catching himself. “I suppose not, ma’am, and I know he’s kept almost completely to himself while we’ve been under way, but still, it is frustrating. When we met in Colonel Miller’s office, he seemed very forthcoming and reasonable, for, um...”

“For a Klingon, Lieutenant?” Sarin raised an eyebrow.

He found it hard not to make a face at the bald statement. “I hate to put it in such terms, ma’am, but yes, for a Klingon. My experience may be limited and slanted toward tense situations, but back on the Starbase, Colonel J’dek seemed very calm and reasonable. In that way, he was rather unlike any other Klingon I have met.”

“Your point is not necessarily invalid for being limited, Lieutenant.” Sarin placed both hands on the table in front of her. “The Klingon reputation for irrationality and violence is perhaps not entirely undeserved. Yet from a Klingon point of view, J’dek’s reaction to your questions was perhaps entirely normal and reasonable. And it did achieve his desired result, Lieutenant.”

Chekov’s eyebrows jumped up too quickly for him to stop the reaction. “Ma’am?”

“To be left alone.” He swore one corner of her mouth twitched. “You are unlikely to invite

him to another meeting without direct orders to do so.”

He had to admit that if that had been J'dek's intent, it had been a very effective tactic. “True. I had merely thought to demonstrate we were capable of working together. His reaction was... disappointing.”

“I understand. It is difficult to put away your prejudice when the object of it insists on confirming your belief.”

He felt his back stiffen. “Ma'am, I resent the word.”

Sarin shook her head, eyes closing for just a moment. “Please do not, Lieutenant. It was not intended as a reflection on you. Every sentient being has prejudices and preconceptions, even Vulcans. Strength may come from trying to look beyond them. That you are making the attempt speaks well of your character.”

Another reminder, even in the face of the lesson on Klingon psychology, that all Vulcans were not alike. He tried to remember the last time Mr. Spock had handed out a compliment in casual conversation and thought maybe he should pay more attention on returning to the *Enterprise*. “I— thank you, ma'am.”

But Sarin hadn't finished yet, either with psychology or adjusting Chekov's current morale. “And you will have plenty of opportunity to demonstrate the ability to work with Colonel J'dek. You are, after all, leading the landing party when we reach Harak.”

And that made him sit a little straighter. He hadn't forgotten but had put it out of his mind when not discussing it directly for the last

couple of days. That had to change. “Yes, ma’am.” He raised one eyebrow intentionally. “Does the Colonel understand that?”

Sarin’s hands turned over as she didn’t answer the question. “An excellent question, Lieutenant. Perhaps you should ask him.” She took her place at the briefing room table. “Do you have any other matters to discuss with me before the meeting proper?”

He did but wasn’t sure how she could possibly know that.

Chapter 9

First Officer’s Log, Stardate 6247.8, Lieutenant Pavel Chekov reporting. We have entered the Harak system and dropped to impulse, making what we hope to be an unnoticed approach to the planet. The *Nancy Wake* is equipped with a number of stealth systems that, while certainly not equal to a Romulan Cloaking Device, do tend to make a small ship far less noticeable. This is not normal for Cutter class vessels, but as the *Nancy* is specifically designated for use in covert operations, she has a number of non-standard surprises built in.

I must admit to a small amount of trepidation at heading the landing party. Colonel J’dek has made it clear that he is not interested in working very closely with

us to rescue the hostage. We retrieve the boy and then return, with as many casualties as possible. Peace is not on his agenda and he has more than once stated that the Empire has 'other concerns' in my hearing. I must confess to wondering what those concerns might be considering how close we came to war only a few years ago. Yet the Organians have been quiet since the original treaty was put into place.

On a personal note, I am disturbed on a different level by this mission. There seems to be a trend of hostage taking to achieve objectives, though I am not sure if that is merely my perception given recent events in and around *Enterprise* or if perhaps the tactical training examination is still fresh in my mind.

The barely detectable thrum of the impulse drive disappeared below Sarin's hearing and she anticipated the report before Chief Rankins delivered it. "Insertion achieved, Skipper. We're in geosynchronous orbit a little bit offset from the target zone. No apparent surveillance."

She nodded, though he hadn't turned to look. "Sensor confirmation, Mister Rankins?"

A rhythmic whirr from the sensor station brought pleasant reminders of her training at the Science Academy. "I have power readings consistent with a small technological installation on an otherwise late Bronze or early Iron Age planet. Looks like about the levels you'd expect

from a cultural observation post, but they're centered in a ruined stone fortress."

"An unlikely location for an observation post, disregarding that there are none on file for this planet."

The whirring continued. "The readings do fluctuate a little as if there were some shielding or other interference, but there's no doubt that something's there. I would have thought they would make a better effort to hide. Or at least shield themselves."

"Indeed. Thank you, Chief. Select a transport site based on the established guidelines and send them to the transporter panel."

"Aye, aye, skipper."

She touched the small communications panel on the air of the command chair. "Sarin to transporter room." Ensign Ogden's voice came back immediately.

"Transporter room. Ogden here, Skipper."

"Mister Rankins is about to send you coordinates for the beam down location. The landing party may depart when ready."

"Acknowledged, ma'am."

Sarin closed the connection in almost the same moment that Chief Rankins pressed the last of several pads on his board. He looked back over his shoulder. "Site selected and coordinates sent, ma'am."

She nodded to him. "Thank you, Chief." Which made it time to exercise what was perhaps her most valued skill, though it always seemed in shorter supply than she wished.

Patience.

*

Moving her hands from the comm panel to the transporter controls, Ensign Ogden kept her eyes on the board for a few seconds, waiting for a set of beeps that seemed far too long in coming. "There we are. Coordinates received." She looked up. "Everyone ready?"

Chekov looked around the transporter pad. Three heavily-kitted out marines, Chief Schulman carrying almost as much gear, Colonel J'dek in full armour, and himself. Grev nodded, at least, and everyone other than J'dek made eye contact. "I believe so, Ensign. Energize."

Ogden nodded, her eyes going back to the board, left hand making a downward sweeping motion. "Good luck. Energizing now."

Chekov felt the beam seize him, watched the transporter room fade out and the forest fade in. There should have been some sensation of time. He knew the process took ten or so seconds, a little quicker than he'd grown accustomed to, but there was no transition as far as he was concerned. Normal, he'd been told and more than once. As the tingling faded, he looked around at the light temperate forest they'd beamed into. Nothing instantly to distinguish it from any of several dozen others he'd experienced, but there often wasn't at first glance unless something about the local sun or conditions produced unusual colours. Evolution, though never truly parallel, often produced similar solutions to similar niches.

He took a deep breath, catching a scent that reminded him a bit of standing on the edge

of a wheat field. “A nice enough planet, I suppose. Mister Schulman, if you wouldn’t mind giving us a heading and distance to our destination.”

Schulman already had his tricorder out, and the faint whir reached Chekov’s ears. “We’re not close enough for me to zero in on those power readings with a hand held, sir, but based on the coordinates I received from Chief Rankins, our destination, um, approximately 17 km in that direction.” He pointed to Chekov’s left.

With a sigh, Chekov straightened his back for a moment, not quite a stretch. “I was afraid it would be something like that.” Afraid but not surprised in the least. Guidelines for this kind of covert approach suggested at least ten kilometres, and closer to twenty was wise.

Grev nodded. “Farther than I’d like, but I doubt they’ve got sensors out here, which is the point.”

“Pathetic.” With a growl, J’dek turned and began tromping in the direction Schulman had pointed, making as straight a line as possible and pushing branches and bushes out of his way.

“Huh.” Grev looked at the rest of his small squad. “Grant, you’re on point. Try not to let our Klingon friend get too far ahead, but if he’s that intent on getting there first, who are we to stop him?”

The tall woman nodded. “Yes, Warrant.” She started off after J’dek, making considerably less noise. “I’ll try to make sure he doesn’t get ambushed.”

“Milano, you can bring up the rear. Anything bigger than a tree-rat tries to sneak up on us and I want to know, but no transmissions.”

Already moving, Milano nodded.
“Understood.”

Chekov looked at Schulman and the older man grinned. “That puts me on sensor duty, just like upstairs. Passives only, sir?”

“Thank you, Chief.” He looked at Grev to find the Tellarite grinning at him.

“Ready for a hike, L-T?”

He’d begun to wonder if the Grev took some amount of pleasure in the mild discomfort of others. “It is a nice enough day for it, I suppose. I bow to your experience and direction, Warrant Officer Grev.” And he literally did so.

“Huh. I thought you were smart for an officer.”

The little group started after the advancing members of the party.

*

Chief Rankins stared at the sensor readout, too small on a board that had to do too much, but still present, and showing something he didn’t think should be there. “Odd.” He didn’t realize he’d spoken out loud until Lieutenant Commander Sarin responded.

“Is there something I should be aware of, Chief?”

Frowning at the readout, Rankins tapped a couple of pads. “I’m not sure, ma’am.” Refining a couple of band wavelengths seemed to help for a moment, but not enough to give him any confidence. “I’m getting a strange blip from the

sensors, just a flicker now and then. Not quite like a ghost or a reflection, but something that's almost there once in a while."

"Range and direction?"

He pressed his mouth into a thin line, trying to replay the last blip and find some detail that wasn't there. "It's a bit variable, sir. I've seen it in three different places so far, always closer to the planet than we are, but only for a moment at a time, on the order of a quarter of a second. Just a flicker, then it's gone. If we weren't on only passive sensors..." He shook his head. That wasn't going to change without a really good reason. Stealth was critical at the moment and an active scan would toast that fast. "I want to suggest that it's a cloaked ship, but I just don't have enough data, ma'am." Looking back over his shoulder, he waited for a response.

Commander Sarin appeared to give it several seconds of serious thought. "We will continue silent running, Chief, but please attempt to track the anomaly as possible. And certainly keep me apprised of its status."

He turned back to his board and dedicated a little more space to sensors. "Aye, aye, skipper."

Chapter 10

The fortress was a grim and imposing structure, even from a distance. Considering the average technological level of the Harakans, the

amount of labour that had to have gone into the construction of its walls alone, never mind the castle inside, was staggering. It seemed to be carved out of the side of a huge mountain with the rubble from the carving used to litter the landscape around the twenty-metre wall. From his view through the monocular, it seemed to Chekov as if there had once been a moat, dry now and probably not very deep, and he liked to imagine it filled with alien monsters of some kind. He wondered how long ago, and why, the fortress had been abandoned.

Sheltering at the edge of the forest, there was a great deal of open ground between the small company and that imposing walls. Plenty of places for cover closer in, but getting to them would make anyone trying easy to spot from those walls in daylight.

“It’s an odd place to hold a kidnapped Klingon prince.”

Lowering the monocular, Chekov looked to his left, one side of his mouth rising in a half-grin. “I am not so sure.” He nodded towards the distant structure. “A ruined fortress on a sparsely populated pre-gunpowder planet with sentient natives. Since it is in Federation space, there is the Prime Directive to deal with. It’s far enough away from any current habitation that an observation post would be pointless as there are no natives to observe. An unlikely place for Federation authorities to come by accident or intent.”

With a grunt, J’ddek, fresh from his solo trek through the forest, agreed. “More relevant, since the planet is in Federation Territory, it is

initially safe from Klingon pursuit, particularly in such a non-strategic location. And the planetary societies are primitive, fractured, and fragmented, so it has little perceived value to the Empire. Plus, the ruin is haunted, and so uninhabited.”

Grev looked over from his own hiding spot, and Chekov reminded himself not to underestimate Tellarite hearing. “What? Haunted? How could you possibly know that?”

“You might be surprised what Imperial Intelligence knows.”

Chekov raised an eyebrow at the implication J'dek worked for Klingon intelligence, but Grev merely shrugged and went back to his study of the structure. “I suppose I might at that. Thankfully, I'm merely a soldier.”

“Did you know there is something in the rocks to confuse the tricorder readings?” Schulman raised an eyebrow at the Klingon intelligence officer.

Who didn't look back. “High grade magnetite.”

Proving that everyone could hear everything, regardless of whisper volume, Corporal Milano chimed in. “Is it actually haunted?”

J'dek shrugged. “I don't care.”

Clearly, it was Chekov's duty to keep things on track. “We will go in closer when darkness falls. Until then, it is sheltered here, and we are out of easy view, so we might just as well make ourselves comfortable.”

Grant shrugged out of her pack, not needing to be told twice. “We spend a lot of time waiting, sir.”

Deciding to take the load off his feet, Chekov sighed. “Believe me, Corporal, I am quite familiar.”

Picking a different tree to lean against, Milano lowered his voice, though not far enough, to talk to Grev. “You don’t think it’s really haunted, do you, Warrant?”

Chekov saw the twinkle in Grev’s eye even if Milano didn’t. Maybe he was getting better. “That depends. Do you believe in ghosts, corporal?”

Flushing a little, the marine sat. “Well, not believe, exactly, Warrant. But I’ve been on a lot of planets, and I’ve heard stories. Some things have to make you wonder.”

Grev nodded. “Then it’s definitely haunted.”

*

Rankins continued to try to tease more out of the readings without much luck. There just wasn’t enough to work with, and he wouldn’t get any more than he had without permission to use active sensors which wasn’t going to be given.

“Mr. Rankins.”

He turned his chair far enough that he didn’t need to look over his shoulder. “Skipper?”

“It would seem unlikely a covert installation on a primitive planet would be left with no protection, particularly considering the hostage they have chosen to take.”

The lack of expression on the Vulcan face made it difficult for him to assign any motivation to the words, but he took the opening to voice his own suspicion. “So it is a cloaked vessel?”

Sarin nodded. “While there is barely enough data to speculate, that would seem to be a reasonable working assumption. The lack of solid sensor contact and the apparent mobility of your ghost suggest it. Which lends suspicion to a Romulan involvement in the hostage taking.”

“What do we do about it, ma’am?”

“We maintain silent running conditions and wait, Chief. It is still entirely possible that the sensor anomaly is merely a sensor anomaly.”

Then why had she coaxed him into admitting what he thought? He shook his head “It’s an awfully consistent anomaly, then, ma’am.”

“True.” She nodded again. “But as long as it makes no hostile moves and we are aware of its presence, there is no reason to assume we have been detected.”

Shaking his head, he tried to work his way through a human version of the logic that might be behind that statement and came up with the opposite conclusion. “I’m not sure that follows, ma’am. If they’re cloaked and we can still find traces of them, that may just mean we have good sensors. We have no way to know if they’ve detected us, and we’re not cloaked.”

“Also a reasonable supposition, however, there are additional possibilities. We have a landing party on the surface. If the cloaked vessel – if it is a cloaked vessel – has detected us or them and yet sees fit to leave us both

unmolested, I am content to allow its Captain to believe we are unaware of its presence. If it has not detected us or them, it seems reasonable that we are in no additional danger.”

“I think I see the logic, ma’am. Either way, so long as we don’t draw attention to the landing party, they’ll have more time for the extraction.” He frowned. “But if we are aware of them, even if they’re aware of us, does that give us any advantage?”

“Perhaps. It would depend on the nature of the ship. I would suggest, however, that, should a hostile vessel suddenly decloak, you do not wait for the order to raise shields.”

“Skipper?”

The Vulcan tilted her head. “I would rather the shields were up to give us some protection from the initial volley. There is a human axiom I have been made familiar with: it is often easier to beg for forgiveness is than to receive permission.”

Grinning, Rankins managed not to laugh. “My father used to say that, ma’am, but he wasn’t usually talking about starship combat.”

“To what did he refer, Chief?”

“Well, he’s the head of the Securities Regulatory Commission on Deneva.”

Sarin raised an eyebrow. “Interesting. Not what I would expect to be a common point of view from someone working in the field of financial regulation.”

“Maybe not, ma’am, but he always added, ‘just make sure you’re right’.”

“Indeed. Wise advice, though certainty is often difficult to come by.”

“True. And I think he was more talking about the people who worked for him, not the ones playing fast and loose with investors’ assets.”

“Perhaps then, not so different from our current situation.”

He tried to work through the logic that got there and came up short. “If you say so, ma’am.” Turning back to his board, he started the boojum hunt again. That cloaked ship wouldn’t find itself.

*

Kalleg staggered back into the cell, the door clanging shut behind him before he could turn back and rush the bars. That didn’t stop his attempt, grabbing one with each fist and shaking. Sooner or later, the weak metal would give way to his strength. When that happened, he would taste vengeance. A cold drop of water hit his ridges as he bared his teeth. “Filthy petaQ! I’ll cut your heart out!”

The centurion, whose name he’d overheard as Mahrek, rolled his eyes and turned away. “I believe I’ve grown tired of your whining, cub. Soon I’ll be forced to stun you again just for the brief period of peace it might afford me.”

“Ha!” He spat hard, almost landing a glob on the back of the Romulan’s boot. “You have no honour or you would face me like a warrior.”

With a sigh, Mahrek took another step away from the cell. “If you wish to live long enough to become a warrior, you might try keeping your tongue still.”

Rattling the bars, Kalleg grinned at the obvious tactic the Romulan used to hide his

fear. “I *am* a warrior, and if you insult my honour again, I’ll rip your tongue from your head and strangle you with it, petaQ!”

Shaking his head, Mahrek sighed again.

And so Kalleg spat again, the gooey missile falling even farther short. “The Romulans are supposed to be our allies, but I’ve known since before I could walk that you couldn’t be trusted.”

Turning, Mahrek unholstered his pistol.

Kalleg didn’t back down. He wouldn’t back down. He was a Klingon warrior. “I’ll make you curse the day your whore of a mother met your ale-swilling father, you—”

The stun beam took him and Kalleg felt every muscle in his body stiffen at once before his nervous system shorted out and dropped him to the floor. He breathed heavily, noting how the blast felt even lighter this time. Vision not yet clear, his ears brought him the sound of a Romulan communicator power up and Mahrek’s voice.

“This is Mahrek. I have stunned the brat again. Perhaps we could revisit the need to physically stand guard over him. Many more stun blasts and he might require medical attention.”

Though the muscles in his face wouldn’t respond, he imaged himself giving a vicious grin. Let the filthy Romulans think him weak and not worth guarding. The more opportunity to escape when the stun beam wore off. Escape and seek his revenge. It was only a matter of time.

Chapter 11

Lieutenant Commander Sarin frowned at the tiny, even compared to the multi-purpose bridge stations, sensor display on the arm of the command chair. “Interesting.” Before she could pursue the thought further, Chief Rankins slapped the board in front of him.

“Shields up!”

The rapid, pulsing beat of the new standard red alert klaxon blared through the bridge and Sarin had to raise her voice to be heard over it. “Report, Chief!”

“Romulan war bird de-cloaking off our starboard bow.” His hands kept moving, likely powering up weapons and sending notifications to the crew remaining on board. A bit redundant, perhaps, considering the red alert, but an important impulse.

“Evasive manoeuvres, Chief. Break orbit.” Her hand found the correct sequence to quiet the red alert.

“Evasive, aye! Full impulse.” One hand spun the course settings to a random point while the other pushed the impulse drive into action. “She’s firing. Skipper, it’s a—” He slammed another spot on his panel. “All hands brace for impact!”

It wasn’t much warning, but it was enough. Sarin pressed her feet into the floor and wrapped both sets of fingers around the arms of her seat just as a massive impact tried to throw the entire ship to port. At least some of the energy made it through both shields and hull to

change the impact into an audible explosion that quickly faded. "Report!"

Behind her, the access hatch to the lower decks opened and Sarin chose to ignore the curses that followed as Rankins took the readouts he needed. A few error lights, nothing major. "Starboard shield holding, but at nine percent."

A few not quite even footsteps. "Captain, Ensign Ogden reporting for duty!"

Sparing a glance for the slightly dishevelled ensign, Sarin noted the limp as she took two more steps forward and what would likely be facial bruising in a few minutes. Still, the young woman seemed ready to serve as needed and Rankins would certainly appreciate the assistance. "Weapons and sensors, Mister Ogden."

She straightened for a moment. "Aye, aye, skipper!" More quick hobbling steps and she slid into the station next to the Chief.

"Chief, turn the ship to present full shields."

But the order was too slow and the ship shook under another impact. "Starboard shield down!"

"Return fire, Ensign. All phasers to bear. Continue the maneuver, chief."

She felt more than heard the release of energy as two of the ship's phaser banks discharged. "Direct hits, ma'am, but their shields are holding." She shook her head. "She's trying to turn with us to keep our side exposed. We're a little quicker, though. A few more

seconds and I'll have a line with the port bank as well.”

Another impact shook them, but lighter than the last. “Feel free to continue firing, Ensign.”

Nodding again, Ogden's hands played over the board. “Aye, aye, sk—captain! Sensors register a transporter beam. Deck 2, mess hall.”

Sarin pressed a control of her own. “Intruder alert.” A new klaxon began, but she dialed the bridge volume down quickly. “Chief Rankins, full emergency speed. It would be preferable to fight only one battle at a time. Mister Ogden, please feel free to return fire as long as you can.”

“Full emergency speed, aye.”

“Returning fire.”

The engine hum built quickly as Sarin felt several volleys of phaser fire during the pass. Without rear facing weapons, however, that quick series of broadsides was the only fire they were able to manage.

“They're not moving very quickly to pursue. I think we caught them by surprise, Sikipper.”

Nodding, Sarin mentally reviewed the capabilities of the Romulan vessels she was familiar with. The vessel in question, though much larger, might be able to match the *Nancy Wake's* velocity for a very short time, but not exceed it. However, there was a boarding team to deal with, so pursuit was still likely. “Signal the landing party while you are able to, Mister Ogden, and retrieve a phaser from the weapons locker. You as well, chief. Then, if our internal

sensors are fit to the task, it would be both interesting and relevant to know how many Romulans we have on board.”

*

It was hard to tell for certain in the near-darkness, but Chekov thought Schulman might be scowling. “It’s an interesting plan, sir. A little, um, unorthodox, but interesting.”

Chekov nodded. It was the best he’d come up with so far and thought it worth the attempt. “I agree, but I do believe it offers our best chance for information.”

With a soft growl, J’ddek’s head jerked a single nod. “It is a bold move, but carries great risk for you. That is... unexpected.”

“Thank you, Colonel.” He grinned. “I will take that as a compliment.” He should probably take two out of that. The second for a Klingon to recognize a human for planning bold action. He opened his mouth to suggest other activities for the plan, but Grev jumped into the silence.

“I don’t like it.”

Laughing, Milano paused in the act of shovelling rations into his mouth. “You don’t like anything, Warrant.”

“Ha! That’s fair enough, but I particularly don’t like this plan. It stinks.”

Grinning at the Tellarite getting into the spirit of things, Chekov opened the door. “This isn’t the Tactics final, Warrant Officer. Other opinions are not just allowed but welcomed and encouraged. Don’t hold back. I will be happy to hear more viable options you are willing to offer.”

A sour grunt preceded the response. “And now that I’m allowed to give them, I don’t have a

better one. It's not like a frontal assault is a good idea."

"There is nothing wrong with a frontal assault under most circumstances, particularly if the odds are overwhelming." J'dek crossed his arms, and Chekov had the feeling there was more than one scowl in the shadows around him. "But intelligence is critical. One must know who the enemy is and where they are. This offers opportunity for great gain in that regard."

"Agreed. As well as giving us entrance to the fortress without having to storm it." Chekov nodded and then grinned at the noncom. "Would you rather do it, Mister Grev?"

With a sigh, the marine gave in. "No, sir. While it's part of my job to protect my officer, and I'd love to argue the point, this one or any other, it's not something I could do. It wouldn't be believable."

"Agreed. So, unless anyone else is going to volunteer, it's settled then." He grinned. "In fact, if anyone else is going to volunteer, it's still settled." His communicator chirped and Chekov immediately retrieved and opened it. "Landing party."

Ensign Ogden's voice filtered through the tiny speaker. "Landing party, this is *Nancy*. We are breaking orbit, under attack, and have been boarded. You're on your own."

"Underst—"

"Close the communicator, you fool!" A Klingon hand slapped the communicator away from his face and out of his grip. It hit the ground, bouncing once and closing on its own. "Do you want them to trace the signal?"

“Thank you, Colonel. That would not have occurred to me.” Klingons appreciated sarcasm, he was sure. He’d certainly heard it enough in personal interactions he’d had in the past. “I had thought the *Nancy* would appreciate an acknowledgement. Perhaps the understanding, however transient, that we are still alive.”

“They’re busy. Us staying alive isn’t their problem.”

Considering past interactions, Chekov was lucky that Schulman was apparently a peacemaker, and the Chief tried to bring the conversation back on track. “What do we do now?”

“We proceed with the mission. The Colonel makes an excellent point in that the *Nancy*’s current circumstance is irrelevant to ours. The mission is still the mission.” Councillor Rakag’s son was in the fortress, he was sure, and still needed rescuing.

“With no way to get back?”

“One thing at a time, Mr. Schulman. First, intelligence gathering. Then the hostage. We will find a way home when we need one, preferably back on the *Nancy*. If that isn’t possible, we will seek other options. Understood?”

“Aye, sir.” But the man didn’t seem happy. Chekov didn’t blame him. He wasn’t terribly happy with the revised situation himself.

Grev barked a laugh. “Besides, running away from our pursuers will give us something to do.”

“Hunh. You say that as if we will leave any alive.” Obviously, living enemies weren’t high on

J'dek's list of accomplishments, but Grev wouldn't leave the point.

"Oh, I don't know, Colonel. A prisoner or two would be nice. We can always use a little extra intelligence."

"Some of us more than others."

"Put your mirror away, Grant. We've got work to do."

"Yes, Warrant."

The interplay between marines always amused Chekov and he could never quite decide if it was merely for entertainment value or served some deeper purpose. They seemed to lack discipline sometimes, but never when it counted. "Now is as good a time as any, I suppose. Colonel J'dek, does the plan meet your approval?"

"Approval is a strong word. It is a functional plan I am willing to try."

Chekov shrugged. He wasn't likely to get anything better from the dour Klingon. "As much as I could hope for, I suppose."

Chapter 12

Kalleg rattled the cage as hard as he could for as long as he could. He was sure the bars had to give way soon, but they stubbornly refused to yield to his strength. "Filthy Romulans! You are all without honour. I will kill you all."

He started pacing, trying to build his anger and channel more of it into his muscles.

They had to still be monitoring him, at least, even if they couldn't be bothered to post a guard. They had to be doing something beyond just bringing him reconstituted meals when they got around to it. Ack, he'd kill for some decent roast krada. Aside from making his mouth water, the thought built his anger again. "Do you hear me? I will kill you all!" His words echoed back to him down the stone hall, but no response came with them.

Two quick steps forward brought his shoulder against the door of his cage, even more unyielding than the bars themselves. Someone had installed a passable lock to hold the ancient metal together.

With a sigh, Kalleg let his rage fade. It was somehow less satisfying to taunt the empty air. He almost wished that petaQ Mahrek would appear to check on him to give him something to focus his anger on, even if it ended in another stunning. "I *will* kill you all." That was a promise he would honour.

*

Tonuk approached the shadow on the wall. Guard duty on a primitive planet wasn't his favourite pastime, particularly at night, but it was more restful and relaxing than many others. "I relieve you, Sub-Lieutenant."

The shadow, which had resolved itself into Sub-Lieutenant Uroth, turned to face him. "Thank you. I hope you will find the remainder of the night as dull as my watch has been."

"I wish it so, yet something tells me we shall see some excitement soon."

Smiling, Uroth shook his head. “Only if we start guarding the Klingon brat full time again and you draw the duty. The *Stalker* has given chase to the Federation tug it found in orbit.

“But has not come back yet.” And that worried Tonuk just a little. He had no idea what kind of ship the *Stalker* had found, the report he’d been privy to suggested something relatively small, but it was at least conceivable their guardian destroyer had been outgunned or damaged in the fight if they hadn’t managed to deploy the plasma weapon quickly enough. Even if victorious, they might have suffered some damage that prevented their speedy return.

“Have no doubts, my friend. This will bear fruit.”

It should serve to increase tension between their enemies, certainly, but bearing fruit could mean different things to different people. “I believe you are right, but I don’t understand why we don’t just kill the brat and be done with it.”

“Misdirection.”

“As if that can explain everything.”

“Can it not?” Uroth shook his head. “He may not be stupid enough to be convinced we are Vulcans, no matter how we might act, but should our position become untenable, evidence has been left to that effect. Just enough that others might be convinced and given time he might doubt what he has seen, especially if he is the only one who has seen it. There is no danger.”

“It seems to me that the same could be accomplished while still leaving the brat dead,

but I bow to your superior wisdom, Sub-lieutenant.”

Laughing, Uroth took his first step away from the post. “I had as little to do with the plan as you. I merely serve the Praetor.”

With a nod, Tonuk moved closer to the wall. “As do we all. Fortunately—” A beam of bright green energy stabbed out of the darkness, striking Uroth in the chest and dropping him to the parapet.

Tonuk dropped into a crouch, his pistol in his hand and fired in the direction the beam had come from without having a clear target. Beams answered, splashing harmlessly against the rock and stone around him as two other blaster pistols reached out from other points on the wall. The exchange went on for a minute or more before he heard a yell from the darkness and the possible sounds of retreat.

A centurion appeared at his side. “Are you well, Centurion?”

“I am fine, Uhlan.” Tunok nodded. “The Sub-Lieutenant appears to be stunned, however. Send a party to investigate.”

“It is already under way, Centurion.”

Only a moment later a shout came from below. “There is one here. Too slow or too stupid to move.”

A prisoner. That was a bit of luck and would perhaps lead to a bit more. “Does it live?”

A short pause before the answer came. “And breathes well. Human. Armed but not carrying much in the way of supplies.”

He considered for a long moment. That would mean there was a camp or that they

weren't expected to operate on the surface for long. Either way, it spoke of the Federation having more knowledge of what occurred here than it should. "The Federation tug must have sent a rescue team. We are perhaps more at risk than we thought. Bring him inside. I will signal the Subcommander."

"I obey."

The plan wasn't his, but it was the plan. Still, he expected things to change in short order, pending results of the coming interrogation.

Chapter 13

This time, Sarin left the intruder alert klaxon to its own devices. There was no reason to let the boarding party have any more peace than necessary. Phaser drawn, she kept it trained on the doorway to the bridge even as she listened to the report from Engineering in Lieutenant Shran's filtered voice.

"Engineering is locked down, Captain. They're banging at the door but can't get in for now unless they brought something strong enough to cut through the bulkhead."

Which wasn't an unreasonable expectation. "I believe we can expect visitors to the bridge at any moment, as well."

"Do you know how many intruders we have on board, skipper?"

Sarin glanced over at Rankins, still sitting at the console. The young man kept his head

bent to the board even though he held a phaser almost casually in one hand. "Have you tabulated the Romulan numbers, Chief?"

Rankins nodded. "Internal sensors confirm eighteen hostiles, ma'am. None of them yet on deck one, but one group of three is moving toward the access hatch just aft of the galley."

"Keep engineering sealed, Mister Shran. We will attempt to deal with the boarding party."

"Acknowledged."

Sarin switched channels. She intended more under the umbrella of her inclusive pronoun than the three members of Starfleet on the bridge. "Sarin to Lieutenant Cestor."

It took the marine officer several seconds to respond. When he did, there was clear weapons fire in the background and she recognized two distinct beam types. "Cestor here. We're a little occupied, Captain"

Years of study had still not produced an adequate explanation for human tendency to state the obvious. Cestor must know that she could hear the combat over the communicator. "Understood, Lieutenant. While I am certain the idea has already occurred to you, Starfleet would appreciate some prisoners."

"I'll do what I can, ma'am. They probably won't make it easy."

"That seems likely. Do your best, Lieutenant."

"You've got it, Skip."

"Sarin out." The weapons fire intensified just as she switched the channel off. Now, for some additional precautions. "Computer,

transfer all command codes and authorizations to Chief Petty Officer Arthur Rankins as of this stardate and time stamp. Authorization Sarin four-six-beta-two.”

That got the Chief’s attention. He looked up from the board, his eyebrows high. “Skipper?”

The computer voice spoke first, having processed her command. “Working. Command authorizations transferred. Chief Petty Officer Arthur Rankins now in command of NCC 9767, USS *Nancy Wake*. Stardate 6250.8, 1843 hours.”

“Chief, it is entirely conceivable that the boarding party might capture one or more officers or crew members and attempt to use their authorizations to gain access to ship’s systems. In my absence from the bridge, you now have the ability to override any such attempts.”

“I—” Rankins took a deep breath and let it out again very slowly. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Thank you, Chief.” She stood.

“Absence from the bridge ma’am?”

Nodding, Sarin checked the power level on the phaser pistol she carried. “You will seal bridge access behind us and attempt to learn everything you can about the boarding party and the vessel pursuing us, communicating changes in detail as you consider relevant.”

“Aye, aye, skipper.” He glanced down at the board as if to confirm something. “We are outdistancing the Romulan ship, ma’am, so I’m not sure how much more data we’ll get on that side right now, but, um, from the brief look I had

at her and sensor data so far, I believe it's a Death Talon class destroyer."

Sarin felt her brow furrow. "Interesting."

"Ma'am?"

"That would mean approximately one sixth of its crew is now aboard the *Nancy Wake*." And was more of her crew present on Harak? If so, how much more? Additional variables to consider. She looked at the other officer present. "Ensign Ogden."

The young woman sat up straighter.

"Skipper?"

Motioning her to rise, Sarin turned for the doorway. "We are going to take a more active role in the internal defense of our ship."

"Yes, ma'am!" Ogden bolted to her feet as Sarin looked back over her shoulder.

Her eyes carried on back to Rankins. "As I said, Chief, seal the bridge behind us and do not open it without confirmation that all of the intruders have been dealt with."

For a moment, before the blast door closed them off from the Rankins said nothing. He didn't respond at all until the door had almost closed. "Yes, ma'am."

And then it was time to pick their preferred path through the ship from a limited number of options.

*

Dragged.

Yes, that was it. Chekov was being dragged. He could feel the friction between his boots and the stone floor as two people carried him with a not quite even gate. Well, it was better than having to run, he supposed. Not

terribly comfortable, but less effort expended to get him where he wanted to go.

A surprisingly clear thought when his head felt groggy. The stun must be wearing off more quickly than he expected. Better to play along, so he groaned and let his head roll to the opposite side without opening his eyes.

“He appears to be awake, Sub-commander.”

Not a voice he recognized, but at least he could put a rank to the next man who spoke. “Excellent.” Footsteps came closer and the two people carrying him straightened him a little, enough that he felt like he should open one eye. “Perhaps you would like to share a little information about yourself before we begin the actual interrogation.”

His head throbbing just a little, Chekov gave it a little shake. “Not really, no.” He stifled an honest groan. Wearing off quickly, but the Romulan stun had been a solid one.

The Sub-Commander raised an eyebrow, an almost Vulcan gesture save for the heavier brow. “I thought it was traditional for captured Starfleet officers to offer their name, rank, and serial number.”

“Would it make you happy to know these things?”

The Romulan shrugged. “Not particularly. I am merely interested in your overall cooperation.”

Smiling, Chekov tried to mimic the gesture, though he had to put a little more weight on his feet to make it work, and that wasn't as comfortable as he might have liked.

“Well, in that case. Duck, Howard. Rank: Commodore. Serial number 111-1111-Quack.”

“Hmm.” Head tilted to one side. “It’s possible that might be amusing if I had any idea what you meant. However, I think your intended response was: Chekov, Pavel Andreievich. Junior Lieutenant. Serial number 656-5827B.”

The shrug felt more natural this time, and he hoped it hid his surprise. He felt a little twinge at the Junior Lieutenant designation since it wasn’t entirely accurate at the moment. “If you say so.”

“I do. However, the intelligence reports I have access to on this primitive world suggest that you are attached to the USS *Enterprise*, a vessel the Star Empire monitors closely. While it was considered possible that ship might be the one dispatched in the search, that was not the *Enterprise* one of our escorts chased from orbit. Had it been, I am far from convinced the battle would not have had an entirely different conclusion.”

Chased from orbit was a far better phrase than blew up or similar things that might have meant the *Nancy* had been destroyed. This Romulan was either new to the interrogation game or he had reasons for not wanting to crush Chekov’s hope. He was giving away too much information for free. “I am not sure what you mean.”

“Yes, that certainly establishes your level of likely cooperation, doesn’t it?” The Romulan smiled. “Are you likely to tell me why you’re here?”

Another shrug. That was starting to feel normal. “You seem like a very smart fellow. Surely you have already decided that for yourself.”

“How many more are with you?”

Chekov grinned. “Thousands.”

“What ship did you arrive on?”

“NCC 2222 *Rasputin*.”

The two Romulans carrying him finally dropped Chekov into a chair as the Sub-Commander sighed. “Perhaps this could have been less difficult.”

Shaking his head, Chekov matched the sigh. He could have hoped, but at this stage he knew better. “Please, Sub-commander. We both know it does not matter what I say. There will be an interrogation whether you like my answers or not. This way, at least I am amused before you find it necessary to bruise me.”

“What makes you think I’m going to touch you, Lieutenant Chekov?”

He shrugged again. In for a ruble, as the old saying went. “You must find a way to prove your Romulan superiority.” His hands jerked behind him, pulled together by his unseen hosts and bound tightly with some rough fabric.

With a gentle smile that somehow seemed to make his eyes sad, the Sub-Commander shook his head. “Something that does not need proving. However, I am most curious to know how many others you brought with you to my haunted fortress.”

“None at all. *You* brought *me* here.” He smiled back, even as the sweat started to trickle down his back. He was sure they were about to

get to the part of the plan he hated. But things had to be convincing.

“As you say.” The smile grew less sad as a high-pitched whine began behind Chekov. “But perhaps you might like to change your mind.”

*

Kalleg heard footsteps coming down the hall. More than one set. As they drew closer, it became apparent that something was also being dragged. He approached the bars, taking careful steps so as not to drown out the sounds with his own noise. Eventually, they came into view, two Romulans dragging a third figure between them, a figure whose face and head were mostly hidden in shadow.

One of the Romulans drew a pistol with his free hand and waved it in Kalleg’s direction. “Stay back or I will find it necessary to stun you again.”

“Romulan coward!” Kalleg spat and tried to turn it into a snarl but he stepped far enough back that they didn’t feel threatened. There were two of them and they were armed. If he had the advantage of surprise, they’d be no match for him, but it would be a simple matter to drop the prisoner and shoot him. Much as he knew his constitution could handle it, he’d been stunned enough lately. There would be a better opportunity.

“Tsk, tsk.” The Romulan shook his head as his companion unlocked the cell door. “That’s hardly a nice way to address one of your putative allies.” He grinned. “And I’m certain you’ve been told repeatedly we are not Romulan,

but Vulcan. Continued argument in the face of factual information is illogical.”

Kalleg spat again but was careful to do so in such a way that it went nowhere near his captors. “Ha!”

The cell opened and, rather than dragging the body in, they tossed it, kicking his legs out of the way so they could close and lock the cage again. Kalleg was fairly sure it was a human.

“What is this? Now I must share a cell? With a human?”

The two Romulans began walking away. “It won’t be for long. Think of him as a playmate, not that he’ll be very active while he’s here.”

“Agh. Insult upon insult. I will kill you all!” His shout echoed down the stone corridor, but the Romulans were gone.

On the stone floor, the human groaned and began to mumble. “Duck, Howard. Commodore. Serial number 111-1111-Quack. Ha!”

Scowling, Kalleg shook his head. The human sounded damaged. “Could it be any worse?” He took another step to grab the bars again. “You’re going to leave me here with a human? You have no honour! Tah-keck!”

Behind him, the human groaned. “You should be more careful of your language. One never knows who might be listening.”

“Agh!” Spinning around, he found the human lying on his back. “As if I need etiquette lessons from a human. Lie on the ground where you belong and don’t concern yourself with the affairs of your betters.”

Ignoring the order, the human pulled himself into a sitting position with a variety of unpleasant noises. He looked around and smiled at Kalleg. "I see the patented Klingon arrogance is instilled at a young age."

"Do you think I could not kill you with my bare hands?" He clenched his fists and took a step forward, leaning to give an appearance that must be menacing to the inferior seated in the dirt.

"Perhaps if I were to sit still and allow it, you might at that, but a scream and leap strategy is not always the best available. All is not always what it seems to be, Master Kalleg."

That brought Kalleg up short and the rage started to drain away. "What? You know me?"

With a chuckle and a wince, the human used the bunk and the wall to drag himself to his feet, seeming very unstable once he got there. "You're being held prisoner on a pre-technological world and a human just happens to be thrown into your cell. This does not seem strange to you? Perhaps it happens to you often?"

The gall of the human! "I've never been taken prisoner before!"

Frowning, the human held up a hand. Kalleg heard the footsteps in the same moment. Perhaps the Romulans had reconsidered keeping them together. "A guard is coming. Perhaps we should be quiet now. Besides, all this shouting is making my headache worse."

He turned to glared at the human. "Headache? I'll crack your head in two and scatter whatever I find inside! I'll—"

“Do I need to stun you again, brat? I’d thought some company might help your disposition.” Mahrek had returned with a heavy sigh. Eyes narrowing, Kalleg growled at him. “Perhaps not. It is now a rest cycle. I suggest you sleep otherwise you will be very tired should I choose to deliver your breakfast.” He turned and began walking away again.

“Filthy Romulan!”

Mahrek called over his shoulder. “Vulcan. And try to come up with some new insults while you rest.”

Behind him, Kalleg heard the human chuckling and spun around to confront the arrogant alien. “Human petaQ! Something is funny?”

Stepping to the bunk Kalleg hadn’t been using, the human sat. “Only that he has a point. I thought Klingons had a wide variety of available insults and expletives. It may not do anything for your situation, but you might entertain yourself coming up with some variety.”

“When I want your advice, human, I’ll remember not to ask.”

With a nod, the human sat. “A good beginning. But I am very tired and need some rest after my ‘interview’. Can I trust to your honour that you will not kill me in my sleep?”

“I promise nothing!”

The human laid down, put his hands behind his head, and closed his eyes. “Then I will simply appeal to your honour and take my life in my own hands.”

“Bah! Do as you will, human!” Kalleg turned his back on his sudden cell mate to face into the dark stone corridor.

“Thank you.”

Chapter 14

The background hum of the warp engines stayed at the high pitch that marked Emergency Speed to Sarin’s ears. Among other things, that meant that the intruders had not managed to breach the engine room, though she was certain she would have received a report to that effect if it were even imminent. She raised her weapon again, training it on the next corridor junction, just as Ensign Ogden fired.

Her communicator chirped and Sarin used her free hand to bring it to her mouth. “Report.”

The tiny voice that answered belonged to the Marine Lieutenant. “Cestor here. I have four stunned Romulans disarmed and locked in a storage cabin just behind the mess hall. Two marines down, one just stunned and one with a probable concussion. I’d like to drop them in Sick Bay, on my way to the next fight. Where would you prefer that be?”

Sarin squeezed the trigger, taking a moment to consider. “Reinforce Engineering. It is imperative they are not able to reach the Auxilliary control consoles or engine controls. We will join you if possible but are pinned down at the moment.”

“Should I send a couple of my people to relieve you, Commander?”

“Negative. I do not believe we are in danger. Engineering remains the priority. Sarin out.” She closed her communicator just as she fired again.

Across the corridor, Ogden lifted an eyebrow. “Very optimistic of you, Skipper. I think we’re outnumbered three to one.”

“True, if you insist on counting the intruder you stunned a moment ago.” She squeezed the trigger again. “However, Lieutenant Cestor does not need to split his remaining forces. He has three marines on Harak and two going to Sick Bay. Including himself, that leaves only six. We count six Romulans here, blocked from accessing the bridge. Lieutenant Cestor has dealt with four more. That leaves as many as eight attempting to gain entry to Engineering.”

“It’s the ‘as many as’ that bothers me, Skipper.”

Sarin nodded. “Somewhat imprecise, I agree, but in the absence of additional forces and communications, for the moment we must assume most of the crew is incapacitated or unable to reach a weapons locker. My tactical preference is to focus our strength where it will do the most good.”

Ogden kept her focus on the corridor ahead. “So the marines hopefully deal with the group trying to get into Engineering, then begin a sweep through the ship picking up and arming other crew members as they find them.”

“Precisely, Ensign. Until all Romulan intruders are accounted for and the *Nancy Wake*

is secured.” A flash of movement was worth at least one shot and Ogden fired at the same time though not quite at the same target, a clear difference in vantage point.

“And if the Romulans get into Engineering before Lieutenant Cestor gets there? Or in spite of him?” She ducked back as two blasters returned fire. At almost the same time, two different voices shouted unintelligible things, presumably in Romulan.

“Then we will adjust our tactics to suit.”

“That’s rather... vague, ma’am.”

Without admitting that the vagueness made her uncomfortable, adding rather unfortunate error bars to her probability calculations, Sarin nodded. “Boarding actions are typically fluid situations, Ensign. I have several potential courses of action in mind should it be necessary to employ more aggressive measures. Unfortunately, all require a more... extreme level of force than I am currently interested in employing.” Fortunately, she currently lacked the command authority with the computer to initiate a self-destruct sequence. She wasn’t usually interested in limiting her options, but it wouldn’t do for a current generation Federation starship to wind up on the far side of the Romulan border for deconstruction.

“I hope it doesn’t come to that, ma’am.”

“That would be my preference as well, Ensign.”

A harsh voice snarled a Romulan phrase that Sarin interpreted as something close to a command to unite with another unit. She

reminded herself to pursue her studies of the language in more detail as several blaster shots almost covered at least three sets of retreating footsteps. Ogden leaned out and fired down the corridor, catching one of the retreating figures in the shoulder, but without enough force to make the boarder do more than stumble. “Damn. They’re moving back. I wonder what’s going on.”

Frowning, Sarin pulled back just a little. “Perhaps Lieutenant Cestor has reached Engineering.”

Ogden, on the other hand, rose from her crouch and tensed her entire body. “Do we follow them?”

“Not just yet Ensign.” Sarin shook her head. “I would prefer—”

A distant rumbling accompanied a shaking of the deck plate under their feet. In almost the same moment, a Romulan soldier leaned just far enough out to snap off a blaster shot that struck the wall uncomfortably close to Ensign Ogden’s head.

She ducked back quickly enough, a fierce but not entirely readable human expression across her features. “A fluid situation, ma’am?”

“Quite, Ensign.” She slid back so that she couldn’t possibly be in view of anyone looking down the corridor from ahead of them and retrieved her communicator. “Sarin to Cestor. Report please.”

*

Cestor slipped back around the corner to dampen the sound of weapons fire as he opened his communicator to Commander Sarin’s voice. “Sarin to Cestor. Report please.”

“The Romulans used an explosive device to blow the main entrance to Engineering just as we got here, ma’am.” Meaning as his little group of marines turned the corner to see the Romulans taking cover to avoid the explosion.

“Status?”

No point in being anything less than truthful. “We’re under fire in the corridor, but I’m certain there’s firing coming from inside Engineering, too. Lieutenant Shran and his team aren’t giving in easily.” And had clearly made use of the emergency weapons locker which was definitely a good thing.

There was a long pause. “Very well. You have authorization to increase the force level. However, I would appreciate it if the warp core remained intact.”

So would he. Even the Romulans were likely to agree with that sentiment. “Understood, ma’am.”

“Sarin out.”

Cestor closed his communicator and returned it to his belt. He looked across the corridor gap at the other half of his squad. “Catch that, Corporal Bhatti?”

The young woman opened her mouth to show teeth that were far too white shaped into a feral smile. He could hear the joy in her voice over the weapons fire. “Yes, sir!”

“But—” Raising both eyebrows, he put up the index finger on his left hand. “We need to do this without blowing the ship up or damaging the Engineering crew.”

Which was like giving her permission to get creative and the evil grin got even wider.

“Understood, sir.”

“The Romulans probably aren’t as worried about casualties as we are. They may have had their weapons set to stun by the mess hall, but using explosives ups the ante.”

“I’m more than willing to raise that bet, sir.”

“I’m well aware of that, Corporal. I’ve played poker with you. Take Redurn and do what you need to do. We’ll keep as many of them focused down the corridor as we can.”

“Yes, sir.” She looked over her shoulder. “Redurn! You’re with me.” Together, the two of them ran off down the corridor and Cestor nodded to the rest of the team to start trying harder to end the Romulan threat on board.

*

Thunder rumbled somewhere far above them and a heavy downpour began, a rhythmic thrumming against layers of stone. Chekov, more awake than he would have preferred to be, rolled over in his hard bunk and yawned. “Ah, I think my dream was better than reality, if shorter.”

Across the small cell, sitting in the other bunk with a particularly sour look on his face, Kalleg grunted. “Only if it involved your swift and painful death.”

Chekov sat up and smiled. “A very gloomy outlook for one so young. One might almost think you were Russian.”

“Whatever that is.” Kalleg glared even as he puffed up his chest. “*I am a Klingon warrior.*”

“I should hope so.” He watched as the young man’s entire body tensed.

“What is that supposed to mean, petaQ?”

“Whatever you think it means.” Chekov shrugged. “Belligerence can sometimes come from frustration or a lack of hope, and even the greatest of warriors can lose hope or become frustrated.”

“Klingons are naturally frustrated.” His chest puffed up. “It helps us channel our strength.”

“I might have said naturally frustrating.” Chekov raised a hand. “Do not take offense. It may often give you an advantage over enemies with less patience than they need.”

“You talk a great deal, human, about something you can know nothing about. How many Klingons can you have met?”

“More than you might think.”

“How do you know what I might think?”

Chekov stifled a sigh. The young man seemed determined to take offense at everything. He wondered if that were naturally Klingon, too, or if his experience was still too limited. J’dek had surprised him more than once. “Let us just say more than I can conveniently remember with such a headache. How many humans have you met?”

“Ha! Hundreds!”

Raising an eyebrow, Chekov smiled. “Really?” He kept his tone carefully light. “I am impressed that someone your age could have travelled so much beyond the borders of the Empire. Or did you grow up in the Triangle?”

Deflating, Kalleg growled. Perhaps there was a little hope yet. “Fine, you are the first human I have met.”

“Then I hope my example is not so poor.” Strange how he always seemed to be worried about the example he was setting these days. He wondered if that were a mark of maturity or just a new quirk in his personality.

“Do you always talk so much?” Kalleg let out a sigh that seemed large for someone his size.

“No.” Chekov shrugged. “Usually I am much quieter. Perhaps it is the concussion.”

“Perhaps you should sleep it off.”

His head still sore, and clearly not quite feeling his normal self, he agreed that this might not be a bad idea. Chekov didn’t really think he had a concussion. While there had definitely been some deliberate focusing on his skull by the interrogators, it had all been designed to convince rather than effectively damage, and he didn’t seem to have hurt himself when he’d fallen after being stunned. He leaned back again. “I may yet do that. There is a little time yet, I think. It is still night?”

“How could I know that?”

This time, he didn’t try to bite back the sigh. Perhaps that was a mistake, but he was getting tired of fighting for every tiny verbal concession from the young man. And perhaps it wasn’t a fair question, even though one of the Romulans had threatened withholding breakfast. “How long have I been in the cell with you? Minutes? Hours?”

“An hour. Perhaps two.”

“Then it is still night.” He yawned. “I think I will rest after all. If something strange occurs, I would ask that you wake me if I do not rouse on my own.”

A barking laugh. “Kidnapped by Romulans, we are locked in a cell underneath a ruined castle on a primitive planet. You look for something *strange* to occur?”

Chekov felt himself smile. “Being locked in a cell of some kind is not so strange as you might think.” Another yawn took over the sentence and it seemed to last for a long time, long enough that his eyes were closed at the end of it. “It happens. Please, wake me if needed and be prepared.”

“A warrior is always prepared.” A short pause. “Um, prepared for what?”

“To be a warrior.” He smiled again. “Things are not as over as they might seem. Opportunity may come yet.” He hoped that was as true as he made it sound.

Chapter 15

Surprisingly, weapons fire from the Romulans kept increasing. While Cestor took this as a good sign that the invaders regarded his team to be a bigger threat than the engineering crew, it was also starting to get difficult to return fire. If that push lasted too much longer, the Romulans might be free to channel some of their strength in the opposite direction, exactly what he didn't want.

He took one enforced break to open his communicator when it beeped, and hoped it was the message he wanted. "Cestor."

And the voice he'd hoped for came back. "In position, sir."

A blaster strike left a hole in the bulkhead behind him and Cestor suddenly had the fervent hope the corner he'd shelter behind was reinforced better. He wasn't keen on needing his armour to actually protect him, nice as it was to be wearing it. "Now would be a good time, Corporal."

"Stand by."

The weapons fire from the Romulans continued while Cestor counted the seconds off slowly, hoping not to reach double digits. He got to eleven before the explosion shook the local area and threw dust and debris into the air. Coughing, he spoke into the communicator as he was closing it. "Well done, Corporal." It was time to finish this. "Take them all down!"

He stepped out from behind the corner and began firing at everything that might have been moving on this side of the engineering door, and maybe at one or two things that weren't.

*

The deck rocked underneath them and Sarin noted Ensign Ogden grabbing for whatever support might be within arms' reach. "What the hell was that? Excuse me, ma'am."

"Certainly, Ensign." No sense in drawing attention to a completely natural human reaction under the circumstances. She suspected the question itself might have been a

reflex but, nonetheless, had an answer of sorts. “I believe that was Lieutenant Cestor’s team stretching what I would consider an acceptable level of damage to the engine room. Which I should not find surprising at this juncture.”

With wide eyes immediately dropping into a scowl, the young woman contrived to look shocked and angry at the same time. “He’s setting off explosives inside the ship?”

Sarin nodded. “Undoubtedly an attempt at surprising the Romulan boarding party to distract them from their drive to gain control of Engineering. Tactically, if not environmentally, sound. Corporal Bhatti is considered an expert, so I expect she took the ship’s superstructure into account.”

Ogden’s face came most of the way back to normal. “Well, I’m not hearing a pressure alarm, at least.”

“A sound I certainly do not miss. I think it advisable to advance at this time. You will remember war games training at the academy?” Lieutenant Cestor would certainly have the sehlat’s share of Romulan attention now.

With a quick glance at her weapon’s power levels, Ogden nodded. “Of course, ma’am. Staggered advance. I’ll lead.”

“Ensign.” Sarin raised an eyebrow.

Grinning, Ogden moved for the corner. “Ma’am, I’m sure there’s a regulation somewhere that says the junior officer is supposed to go first in this situation.” She made a dash for a doorway about five metres down the corridor that slid open to her approach.

“Not that directly applies.”

More or less sheltered from most possible vantages the enemy might have, Ogden kept smiling as she glanced back at Sarin. “Well then, ma’am, I suppose I’ll have to find some way to justify it at my court martial.”

“Indeed.” Sarin began her own advance as Ogden leaned out and fired down the corridor and a target Commander Sarin couldn’t see.

Chapter 16

Chekov woke to a none-too-gentle backhanded fist in the ribs. Not a blow, exactly, but certainly far more than a nudge. Fortunately, his ribs had not been an interrogation focus and it wasn’t much more than a surprise to startle him awake.

“Would you wake up, human!”

Still, he felt it politic, and completely appropriate, to groan. “It cannot be morning already.”

“No, it’s only been a few minutes since you began snoring.” Kalleg jabbed him again.

“Something ‘strange’ is happening. Wake up!”

“Ack. Fine.” He rubbed the spot on his side as he sat up. “What, am I back in interrogation? I only have so many ribs, you know.”

With a downcast scowl, Kalleg gave a grunt. “You wanted me to wake you.”

Well, it was hard to argue with that, and there was no reason he could hold that against the boy. Still, Kalleg could have been just a little

more gentle. “Da. I suppose I did. I don’t suppose you’d like to help me up... no? I thought not.” He swung stiff legs over the edge of the stone bunk and pressed himself into a standing position that was less comfortable than it ought to be but felt more than before he laid down for his nap. “Well then, why have you disturbed my beauty rest?”

Eyes rolling to rival any human teenager, Kalleg huffed. “Something strange is happening. Isn’t that what you wanted to know?”

“My apologies, Master Kalleg. It is, indeed, what I wanted to know. A little more detail on what that strange thing might be would help me know if it is the strange thing I have been waiting for.”

“Hunh.” Kalleg considered for a few moments and Chekov thought it might be to see if he could find an insult somewhere in the words. “More Romulans than I thought were keeping me here ran by the cell several minutes ago.”

Stretching his neck from side to side and allowed himself a smile. He didn’t feel nearly as poorly as he would have expected to. “Ah? Good. How many.”

“At least eight.” Kalleg scowled, something Chekov was certain he had a tremendous amount of practice at. “Perhaps ten. It was dark and they were moving quickly.” He glared at the human, probably defying him to contradict the words.

Nodding, Chekov felt a pleasant pop in one shoulder as he rotated both of them forward and backward. “Ah, not so good, but not so bad as it

might have been, I suppose. Grev and J'dek will have to adjust, not that it will be difficult for either."

"What are you talking about, human?"

"In due time." He moved closer to the bars to inspect the joints. "We must first find out if all the Romulans have been distracted. Do they usually respond quickly when you yell?"

"PetaQ-mey! There is often one of them right outside the cell door, though normally the guard is farther down the corridor. They dislike guarding me directly. I have been stunned a number of times for being too noisy."

"Ah, better and better." He grinned. "I would take that to mean that they don't trust the bars to hold on their own against you. Strange that they haven't set up a force field."

The scowl slipped away, possibly as Kalleg processed the compliment. "There was one, but they took it down. Its performance was... erratic. At least one of them was shocked worse than I was. Something in the stone used to build this place interferes with force fields and sensors."

"Magnetite, as I recall. That would make sense. Can you be noisy enough that the guard would normally come to investigate?"

"Why?"

"Because, if we are alone down here, it is time to do our own part in the rescue operation by leaving the cell. If we are not alone, well, then I suppose we will see." He shrugged and tried pushing one of the bars. It shifted a fraction of a centimetre in place.

“You’re here to rescue me?” Kalleg’s jaw dropped open as Chekov looked back over his shoulder.

“Why else do you think I am here?”

The boy ignored the question. “But you are human!”

“Am I?” Chekov turned away to examine the bars again, more to the point, to avoid showing Kalleg the grin he couldn’t quite contain. Sarcasm, however, was entirely in order. “How strange, considering that we are in Federation space. I suppose I might have been Andorian or Deltan or—”

The boy moved to stand beside him, and Chekov shifted back to young man in his head. ‘Boy’ wasn’t fair. Probably in mid-adolescence, Kalleg had nearly as much height as Chekov himself and certainly more muscle mass. “I don’t care where we are. If there was going to be a retrieval team, it should have been Klingons coming under my father’s orders.”

He raised an eyebrow on that side. “Did I say I was the only one here? Yell for the guard, if you please.” Reaching out to the bar with the weak setting, he grasped it with both hands for an experimental twist, rewarded with an easy quarter turn.

With a huff, Kalleg moved to the front of the cell. “If it will shut you up for a few moments.” He began rattling the bars as hard as he could and raised his voice. “Filthy Romulans! I demand you remove this human from my cell. He is obviously insane and not fit to be housed with a Klingon.”

Rolling his own eyes, Chekov continued to work the bar. “Not exactly what I had in mind, but I suppose it will do.” Payment for the sarcasm, he assumed.

Kalleg grinned, somehow contriving to look fierce and innocent at the same time, eyes bulging above a full set of teeth, and continued shouting. “Are you listening? Get this petaQ out of here!”

*

“Keep pushing!” Cestor crouched behind a wrecked bulkhead, the bit of weapons fire dropping off further. “There aren’t many left standing.”

From somewhere ahead of him, in engineering itself, he heard a harsh battle cry that he thought should sound familiar, at least when it came to the voice shouting it, but couldn’t place it in his mind. There were several pounding steps, repeated blows, a single blaster shot, and by the time he peaked over the shattered, half-melted wall to look, Lieutenant Shran stood over three unconscious Romulans, grinning. “Correction, Lieutenant. There aren’t *any* left standing.”

He raised both eyebrows as he stood. “Mr. Shran. I’m... impressed.”

Antennae twitching, which Cestor read as excitement, Shran bowed slightly. “I spent two years in the Imperial Guard before joining Starfleet, Lieutenant. I am perhaps a bit less practiced than your average marine at this point, but I can manage if I have to.”

“So I see.” He looked around Shran into the mild war zone engineering had become. “Is everyone on your crew okay?”

The antennae drooped a little. “Petty Officer Rajin was hit by two stun beams at once. I need to get her to sick bay. Otherwise, we’re all fine. Your timing may have had an effect on that, though I think the skipper may not be happy with the overall damage level. I’m certainly not.”

Cestor let that go by. He already knew he’d have to deal with that later. “Stunned. These Romulans seemed very intent on taking prisoners.” At least until they pulled the explosives out.

The frown on Shran’s face didn’t quite match the stiffening antennae, but Cestor knew he had a lot to learn about non-human facial expressions, and not just Andorian ones. Warrant Officer Grev gave him all kinds of difficulty. “I hadn’t considered that, but it’s an interesting point. Prisoners with current technical knowledge and ability might be quite an asset.” He nodded. “Still, your assault was well timed. They had us backed into a corner before you decided to, hmm, remodel my engine room.”

It was hard to argue with the phrasing, considering the amount of rubble and damaged equipment involved. “Yeah, well. Sorry about that. I suppose it’s not worth a reminder that they started it? No? I’m sure we can get things fixed up when we get back to Starbase.”

The sigh was the loudest he’d ever heard from an Andorian. “One of the reasons I left the Imperial Guard, Lieutenant, was the cavalier

attitude everyone always had towards breaking things.”

Smiling, the marine at least managed not to laugh. “Yet I’ve noticed most engineers are only every truly happy when they’ve got something to fix. Maybe the rest of us are just trying to help.”

“I’m not sure I find that humorous, Lieutenant.”

Cestor caught movement in the corner of his eye but wasn’t nearly fast enough to stop the recovering Romulan from firing into the engine room. The beam wavered on a downward slanting arc that ended in a small explosion.

“*Tesellek rax!*” Shran spun and lashed out with his right foot, connecting a heel with the gunman’s forehead. The Romulan’s eyes rolled back in his head and he slumped back to the deck.

The computer’s voice was only a second or two behind. “Warning. Antimatter Containment System has suffered severe damage. Failure imminent. Estimated fourteen minutes to warp core breach.”

“Something I’d rather not have to fix, Lieutenant.” Shran growled and took rapid steps into Engineering.

Cestor wondered if the engineer meant the warp core containment or the whole ship. “That I can understand.” But he didn’t have enough time to start thinking about his next smart comment before another blaster beam flashed through the remains of the corridor, sending him for cover. “Dammit! How many Romulans beamed aboard?” His own weapon leaped back

into his hand and fired blindly in the direction the beam had come from. “Take cover and return fire!”

Chapter 17

Grev dropped into a shadowed depression next to the tall human woman just in time to feel the rumble of a not so distant explosion. He glared at her, trying to read the expression on the too-smooth face. “For Roxar’s sake, Grant. How much in the way of explosives did you bring with you?”

She frowned a bit. “Plenty, Warrant?”

“Did I ask the wrong question?” The real problem with humans, he’d long since decided, was that they were too variable. They were nice enough to have around, and mostly competent in their jobs, but you could never tell if one was going to understand the subtleties of expression, emotion, and sarcasm needed to function in mixed society. There was a lot of frustration available for a Tellarite in a unit that had more than a few humans in it. Or not enough Tellarites. It made life interesting, but annoying sometimes.

Grant’s eyebrows rose and he wondered if she were having similar communications issues, just from the other side of the credit chip. “Um, there are three more charges set, but I’d thought to save at least one or two for distractions while we retreat.”

“Not a bad idea, I suppose.” He struggled to not let a sigh out. She still hadn’t answered the question. “But how about you tell me what you’ve got left in your backpack.”

Her face brightened with understanding. “I can make half a dozen good-sized holes in the walls of the fortress if we need to, or—”

“Or you can blow up something pretty big, I guess.” His own eyebrows rose, which had to be more impressive than when she’d done it. “You’re even stronger than you look to be carrying that much still.”

Grinning, she got into the spirit of things, missing the nuances of what he’d said, but here was a human who took most things at face value. “I have extra power cells for the phasers, too, Warrant. Milano is carrying most of the grenades, but I’ve got a handful if you need a couple.”

And then again, there might be more to her than he’d initially thought. “You know, if more humans thought ahead that far, I’d probably like you better.”

“Thank you, Warrant.”

He grunted. “That wasn’t exactly a compliment, Corporal.”

“Closest thing I’ve ever heard from a Tellarite noncom, Warrant.”

“Heh.” Maybe she paid more attention than he thought. “I’ve got 0835, standard. We need to be on the other side of the rock pile in six minutes to meet Schulman and Milano. Any idea where the Klingon went?”

The happy expression disappeared. “I, um, thought he was with you, Warrant.”

“So did everyone else when we split up, I’ll bet. Probably what he intended. Ah, well.” Grev shrugged. “He’ll turn up or he won’t. In the meantime, we’ve got another Klingon and our Lieutenant to bust out. Can’t speak for the kid, but I hate to lose an officer with half a brain, even if he is Fleet. Let’s go.”

*

Tired of working on the bars, which, while rotating just fine, very much didn’t want to come out of their settings, Chekov had practiced a little linguistic systema on Kalleg to convince the boy he was certainly strong enough to kick the door of their cell clean off the hinges if he focused that considerable strength effectively. Now it was just a matter of goading the boy into the correct application of that strength. Truth be told, he felt a bit guilty over how easy it was.

Kalleg grunted as his heavy boot connected with one of the hinges.

“That was an excellent kick, Master Kalleg, but that particular hinge looks quite solid. I wonder if the locking mechanism might be a better weak point.”

Kalleg kicked the same hinge again with another grunt. “When I want your assistance, I will remind myself that you are a human weakling so I do not ask.”

Chekov shrugged. “Well, it is up to you, of course. I had just thought you might like show your warrior spirit by fighting back against your captors. Such a thing is difficult while still confined.”

Another grunt, another kick. "If you are trying to make me angry, you have already succeeded. Shut up!" Another kick. "Argh!"

Biting a smile, Chekov did his best to look solicitous as he leaned forward pretending to get a closer look at the lock. "Perhaps I underestimated the amount of strength necessary to break the cell door down. You look like you could use a rest."

Kalleg roared as he wound up and planted his foot in the same spot once more. A heavy crash and the sound of shearing metal as the hinge separated far enough for them to step through. He turned to look at Chekov, breathing heavily, mouth twisted, and skin flushed dark with effort. "I... do *not*... need to rest."

Chekov let the smile free. "So I see." It was a simple matter to slip through the gap and he turned to pull on it a little more so Kalleg would have no issues, even as the young man's chest continued heaving. "We need to go this way to reach the stairs back to the ground level." He gestured to the right, met with Kalleg's scowl.

"How could you possibly know that? You were unconscious when they brought you in."

"You're right, of course." He tilted his head. "Which way do you suggest?"

Kalleg's whole face wrinkled. "Bah. They stunned me on the shuttle before I even knew we'd landed. One way is as good as another." He looked both ways down the corridor leading away from the cells.

Chekov kept hold out his hand. "Shall we try this way, then?"

"Fine." The boy huffed. "But I go first."

Nodding, Chekov fell in behind him, smiling again. "I will try to keep up."

*

A light breeze in his ears, along with the sounds of stirring bugs and night birds, whatever shape they took on this planet, Grev stared at the bush for a long moment before reaching out and tapping it with his left foot. In the near-darkness, a pair of too-white eyes suddenly blinked and looked up at him. "You're better hidden than I expected, Petty Officer Schulman, but you're still in my way."

The grin the human returned had too-white teeth. "Less than I was a moment ago, Mister Grev."

"Ha." Sometimes, humans did show that they appreciated humour. "Do you need to be helped up?"

Slithering out from under the bush, Schulman shook his head before rising. "No, thank you."

With a grunt, Grev looked around. "Where's my lazy Corporal hiding?"

"Just thinking about having a nap, Warrant."

The voice came from nearby, but he couldn't pick the patch of darkness that went with it and that warmed his heart a little. "On your own time. We've got things to do." He squinted over his shoulder. "Grant, I think one more of your distraction charges about two minutes from now would be good. That should give us more than enough time to reach that crumbled wall." He pointed to what was probably one of the castle outbuildings or had

been once upon a time, now not much more than a rubble pile by moonlight.

“Two minutes, mark.” He heard the beep but didn’t see a flash of anything that otherwise betrayed any electronics present.

“You do understand the word ‘about’, don’t you Corporal.” Grev shook his head. “Never mind. So we’ve got a little less than two minutes before our next distraction puts a new hole in this poor old pile of rocks. Anyone seen the Klingon?”

Milano appeared at Grev’s side. “No, Warrant.”

Shculman had the grace to look embarrassed. “We thought he was with you.”

“Observant bunch we brought to this planet.” He shook his head. “Well, he’s going to miss all the fun then. Dawn’s not far enough off for my liking. Let’s move.”

Chapter 18

Adjusting its volume to be heard over the alert klaxon and weapons fire, the computer reminded everyone of the current situation. “Warning. Antimatter Containment System has suffered severe damage. Failure imminent. Estimated ten minutes to warp core breach.”

In between weapons’ fire, Cestor shouted to be heard over the stuttering klaxxon. “You don’t have a lot of time, Lieutenant.”

Hands in a control panel up to the elbows, Shran didn’t even look up. “I’m a little busy,

Mister Cestor. Don't you have something you're supposed to be doing?"

Cestor squeezed the trigger on his hand phaser in the same moment a Romulan blaster fired. "I'd prefer not to be dying in an antimatter explosion if it's all the same to you."

With a muffled curse, Shran took one hand out of the panel and shook it. "Then I'll thank you to take care of the Romulans and let me work."

"As if I'm doing something else?" The alarm seemed to get louder and he shook his head. "I wish we could at least turn that off." A Romulan down the corridor howled just as his communicator vibrated. Squeezing back a little further into cover, he pulled it from his belt and pressed it to his face. "Cestor here."

"This is Lieutenant Commander Sarin." A cool Vulcan voice. He'd never guess she was under fire as well. "Though they have some shelter, we have the Romulans in a crossfire, Lieutenant. Only three remain conscious. If you could intensify your rate of fire, we will be able to resolve this situation rapidly."

"Knowing that, ma'am, I'm going to suggest you look away for a moment." He nodded to Bhatti. "Corporal!"

She didn't look at him, pulling something from a pocket. "Understood, sir." A quick twist and she launched the small round object down the corridor like a bowling ball. The hum that had begun to build receded rapidly. Turning a grin on him, she held up some fingers before dropping them one at a time. "Three, two, one..."

A small explosion came with a brilliant flash of white light.

“Let ‘em have it!” He stepped out from behind cover and began fanning the area the Romulans had been trying to hold with phaser fire. It lasted several seconds, but the rattled, half-stunned Romulans didn’t really have a chance.

Weapons fell silent and for a few seconds, Cestor only heard the alarm klaxon with a muffled curse or two behind him. After a few more seconds, Lieutenant Commander Sarin stepped out from behind a distant corner, her voice growing louder as she approached. “Thank you for the warning, Lieutenant.”

Grinning, Cestor holstered his weapon. “It seemed courteous, Skipper, especially in light of the split-second decision.”

“A productive tactic.” Sarin nodded. “Though I believe the Romulans should have considered the possibility of a grenade, even if only of the ‘flash-bang’ variety, after your use of explosives to dislodge them from their foothold in Engineering, much less their own in attempts to gain entry.”

“Different group of Romulans, ma’am. They obviously weren’t communicating closely enough.”

“I suspect you are correct.”

Anything he might have been about to say in return got swallowed by the computer’s next warning. “Warning. Antimatter Containment System has suffered severe damage. Failure imminent. Estimated eight minutes to warp core breach.”

Sarin pulled out her communicator rather than bothering to scan the walls and consoles for an intact comm panel. "Sarin to bridge."

"Bridge here, skipper."

"Chief Rankins, ship wide communications if you please."

"Aye, aye, ma'am. Whenever you're ready."

"All hands, this is the Captain." The words echoed down the corridor. "The Romulan boarding threat has been neutralized. You will, however, have noticed the core breach alarm. Please be assured we will eject the warp core should it prove necessary. In the interim, all hands are to arm themselves and assist Lieutenant Cestor's marines in confining the Romulan prisoners to the cargo bay. Sarin out." A click. "Chief Rankins, you may transfer the command functions back to me at your earliest convenience."

"Aye, aye, skipper. Um-"

"Instruct the computer to transfer all command codes and authorizations to me as of this moment and give your voice authorization code." If the Vulcan was at all perturbed by Rankins' inability to remember the command sequence, she didn't show it.

"Um, aye, skipper. Computer, transfer all command codes and authorizations to Lieutenant Commander Sarin as of this stardate and time. Authorization Rankins one-two-seven-omega."

The ship's computer didn't waste any time. "Working. Command authorizations transferred. Lieutenant Commander Sarin now in command of NCC 9767, USS *Nancy Wake*."

Stardate 6250.8, 2019 hours. Warning. Antimatter Containment System has suffered severe damage. Failure imminent. Estimated seven minutes to warp core breach.”

“Thank you, Chief. A moment.” She took the few steps into Engineering to stand close to the chief engineer without looking over his shoulder. “Mr. Shran?”

Cestor didn’t know if Sarin could hear the clenched teeth, but he certainly could. “I am doing everything I can, ma’am.”

Sarin merely nodded. “I expected no less, Lieutenant. Will you be able to restore containment in time?”

Running his eyes over the readouts even as his hands continued to work at their unseen task. “I, ugh, don’t know, ma’am. There is insufficient information available at the moment. At this instant, I can only say maybe. I’ll do my best.”

With a nod, Sarin began to turn away. “I am certain. At the one-minute warning, I will require you and your crew to vacate engineering.”

The antennae stiffened, maybe or maybe not in Sarin’s peripheral vision. Whatever that meant to an observant Andorian, Cestor was convinced he would have to pay attention as they got close to that warning mark. “Understood, ma’am.”

But Sarin either didn’t notice or chose to ignore the reaction, raising her communicator again. “Chief.”

“Skipper?”

“Put us on a return heading back to Harak, as direct as possible, maximum warp.”

“And the Romulans, ma’am?”

“Any possible encounter with the Romulan destroyer will of, necessity, be brief at that velocity. At the moment, I am less concerned by that than I am about the warp core.”

“Aye, aye, skip.”

Closing the communicator, she turned to the ensign she’d arrived with. “Ensign Ogden.”

The young woman came to attention.

“Ma’am.”

“Please join the chief on the bridge. You have the conn until I arrive. At that time, you will shift to the weapons console, leaving helm and navigation to him.”

“Acknowledged, ma’am.” Not waiting for a dismissal, Ogden took off at a run. Cestor doubted it was eagerness to be in command, but more interest in having the weapons systems up and running before the skipper got there.

And said skipper had already turned her attention on him. “Mister Cestor, I expect all of the Romulans to be secure before Mister Shran’s repairs are complete or we are forced to eject the core.”

He nodded. “We’ll do our best, ma’am.”

“I am certain.” Funny how something that would probably have been sarcasm from almost any other species was more a verification of expectations when coming from a Vulcan. Sarin expected everyone’s best and made no attempt to hide that. Oddly, Cestor realized she seemed to get it, at least in his observations so far.

“Warning. Antimatter Containment System has suffered severe damage. Failure imminent. Estimated six minutes to warp core breach.”

Which only gave him five minutes to make sure those prisoners were taken care of and be back to haul Shran’s blue hide out of Engineering if he couldn’t get the containment field stabilized.

Chapter 19

“Warning. Antimatter Containment System has suffered severe damage. Failure imminent. Estimated three minutes to warp core breach.”

“I’m well aware of that, computer. Thank you and shut up now.” Knowing it wouldn’t listen and he was just releasing a bit of stress, he released some more by jamming the electron probe into the field modulation unit and thumbing it up to full power. “Come on.”

From several directions at once, he hear the low-high-low whistle that signalled an intra-ship communication. Someday he’d look up what it meant, but not today. “Sarin to Lieutenant Shran.”

“Busy, Captain. You’ll have to wait. Sonic driver goes there.” But not at full power. He was worried he was going to have to rip out the whole board and rebuild the system on the way back, but that wouldn’t matter unless he could get the field stabilized now.

“I do not expect you to respond, Lieutenant.”

“Ha. Then why are you calling, Captain?”

“However, I feel obligated to remind you to vacate Engineering at the one-minute warning to facilitate the ejection of the warp core.”

“I haven’t forgotten, ma’am.”

“Though if someone is available to answer, a status update would be appreciated.”

He’d already sent everyone else away, though he suspected none of them had gone very far. If he got this working in time, there were still a lot of other things to get done in a very short period to make sure the engines, and the ship as a whole, held together. They still had a mission to complete and their lives to escape with. “With respect, ma’am, please go stick your antenna—”

A throat cleared behind him and Lieutenant Cestor spoke. “The Skipper doesn’t have antenna.”

Electron probe and hyperspanner both moved, not quite switching places. “You’re not helping, either, Cestor. Go find some more Romulans to bother.”

“We’ve got them all.” A pause. “My people are pretty quick and most of the rest of the crew helped. It was taken care of before I got involved.”

“Warning. Antimatter Containment System has suffered severe damage. Failure imminent. Estimated two minutes to warp core breach.”

He swapped the probe for the spanner, almost tossing them between his hands in the

confined space. A tingling sensation in his left arm told him there was still some loose power somewhere near at least one hand. “Then why are you here?”

“To drag you out of the engine room when you refuse the Captain’s direct order to vacate.”

“I’m almost there.” He tried not to make a disgusted noise as he lost feeling in two fingers on his right hand. That’s where it was.

“But are you going to get there in time to prevent us from blowing up?” The bosun’s notes sounded again. Cestor took several footsteps to reach a comm panel. “Engineering. Lieutenant Cestor here, ma’am.”

Sarin’s response was immediate. “Are you able to provide a status update, Lieutenant?”

“Mister Shran says he nearly has the system repaired but has not committed to how much longer it might take.”

Shran growled, stabbing the probe forward and regaining the use of the fingers. “Jury-rigged. This is irreparable.”

“Little time remains available.”

“Understood, ma’am.”

Keeping his voice as calm as possible, Shran spoke loud enough to be picked up by the panel. “With respect, if the two of you will stop being a distraction—” Something shocked the entire right side of his body and he pulled the hand free just long enough to dent the top of the panel, fortunately not breaking the spanner in his fist.

“Warning. Antimatter Containment System has suffered severe damage. Failure

imminent. Estimated one minute to warp core breach.” And there it was.

“Lieutenant Shran.”

“Not now, Captain.” He almost had this. The readouts said so.

“Lieutenant, I will remind you that the one minute given by the computer is an estimate. It could be less.”

He hated arguing with her, especially considering Vulcans’ generally low error rate. but he wasn’t going to let this happen. “And it could be more, ma’am. This is my first assignment as Chief Engineer and I am *not* going to lose the warp core.”

“While I understand the sentiment, Lieutenant, the available time is too limited.”

“Just a few more seconds. Ma’am.” The last word came through clenched teeth. Probe there. Spanner there. Power up.

“Warning. Antimatter Containment System has suffered severe damage. Failure imminent. Estimated thirty seconds to warp core breach.”

“Mister Cestor.”

“Understood, captain.”

Cestor’s hand clapped onto Shran’s right shoulder just as another shock rippled up that arm, but the shock came with a rising hum that broke the threshold of hearing. “Ha!” He smacked the panel again, but with much less force behind the blow.

“Antimatter containment system restored. Magnetic containment at seventeen percent and rising.” He watched the number rapidly rise above twenty-five percent and the klaxon shut

off. In the several seconds of relative silence that followed, Shran allowed himself a deep breath before turning a satisfied smile on Cestor.

Sarin's filtered voice reached out of the comm panel. "Well done, Lieutenant Shran. We will, however, discuss this again at a later time."

He certainly had that coming, but he'd stand by for whatever disciplinary action was required. Results mattered, sometimes more than orders. They'd be able to complete their mission and outrun the Romulans. That wouldn't have been the case without a warp core. And he was pretty sure the skipper would take that into consideration. "Understood, ma'am."

"Sarin out." A click from the panel as the connection cut out.

Shaking his head, Cestor took a step back. "Rode that pretty close to the wire, didn't you?"

Setting the tools down on top of the panel, Shran shook both hands to try to restore more feeling to the extremities, especially the right. He should probably stop into the infirmary before too long. "I don't understand the idiom, exactly, but there wasn't much time left, if that's what you mean."

With a remarkably Vulcan eyebrow raise, Cestor smiled. "Enough for me to drag you out of here and eject the core?"

"Plus a few seconds, yes."

"Would you have come?"

Shran turned both his hands over. "Only if forced. As I said, it is my first assignment as Chief Engineer. I would prefer to have been lost with the warp core in the event of an ejection."

“Ah, but he who repairs and runs away...”

Cestor let the words trail off into a long pause that quickly irritated Shran. “Yes?”

The marine’s smile disappeared. “Um, just another human idiom. I was trying to be funny.”

“You could explain it to me.” He tried an eyebrow raise of his own, but felt like the antenna twitch probably gave away more of his feeling.

“At the expense of the humour.” Cestor sighed. “Maybe later. I’ll leave you to your repairs and see if any of the Romulans have woken up yet.”

He saw one of his techs poke her head around the corner behind the marine. “As you will. We do have significant damage to repair, some of it even caused by the Romulans.”

Rolling his eyes, Cestor started to turn away. “Now you’re trying to be funny.”

It was hard not to grin, but he had a reputation to maintain. “Not at all, Lieutenant.”

“Have it your way, Mister Chief Engineer.” Cestor stepped out of Engineering as two red jump suits came in through the ruined door.

“As much as possible.”

Chapter 20

The Romulan Sub-Commander surveyed the increasingly lit rough land stretching away towards the distant forest. Between the light breeze, the pleasant temperature, and the birdsong, this could have been an enjoyable

posting, but he was, if he wanted to be honest with himself, extremely unhappy with how the situation was playing out. Klingon brat aside, there were far too many explosions occurring around the abandoned fortress for his liking. He sighed as another reached his ears, the fourth so far that morning. “Range and bearing?”

Beside him, Mahrek scowled at his sensor pack. “Readouts are unclear, Sub-Commander. The fortress—”

“Has far too much magnetite in it, as do many of the rocks in the valley. I know. All are posted to the walls?”

Looking up, Mahrek nodded. “Yes, Sub-Commander.”

“Go find someone who saw it. I would like to know what they are blowing up. These are obviously meant to annoy us, but...” He let the words trail off as another thought occurred.

“Sub-commander?”

Shaking his head, he looked at the junior officer. “A distraction. There are several places where a single determined being might get into the fortress. Without completely stripping the walls, send two to each, then take one other with yourself to ensure our prisoners are comfortable.” That would spread his force thin, but they would manage.

Mahrek came to a rigid attention and smacked his fist to his chest. “I obey.” He immediately ran off, opening his communicator as he moved.

“Likely we are already quite late and one, at least, is inside.” He sighed and turned his

gaze on the young woman guarding the entrance to the observation room. "Centurion!"

She straightened and took several quick steps to his side. "Here, Sub-commander."

"I no longer care where the explosions occur but, as much as our sensors will tell us, I want to know if and where there are any additional explosive charges laid." Busy work, and he knew it. Likely the Centurion did as well. The sensors would give them next to nothing they could verify from a distance due to the magnetite.

Another fist to another breast plate. "Your command, Sub-commander." She began to move away and he called after her.

"My preference is for no one to be near them when they go off." The Centurion was quickly out of earshot. He shook his head, continued speaking if only to himself. "How many soldiers could the Federation have landed and how could they even have learned of our hiding place? I fear we may yet need every side arm."

*

Kalleg dragged a bit keeping pace with Chekov but seemed unwilling to let a human get more than a few centimetres ahead of him even when that human was leading the way. Eventually, he sighed again. "How can you possibly know where we're going, human?"

Chekov smiled, ready to show the young man he didn't know everything. He pointed ahead of them. "They dragged me down that flight of stairs. It goes up approximately five metres and empties out into another hallway.

Two left turns back from that I smelled a fresh breeze from the outside. A right turn after that would bring us to the corridor that leads to the interrogation room.”

Scowling, Kalleg stared daggers into the side of Chekov’s head. “But you were almost unconscious when they threw you in the cell?”

“Ah, I was, wasn’t I?” Chekov shrugged. “Well if that is what you saw, then it must be so.” From the interrogation room, things would get more difficult, though. He had been actually unconscious when they’d brought him in from outside the wall. Unless his hearing really was working as well as he thought. Young Kalleg made it difficult to be certain.

“What? Weren’t you?” Kalleg appeared to give it a few seconds of thought. “Ah, you deceived them!”

He shrugged again. “If your opponent isn’t playing fair, then he should not expect you to do so, either. Deception is a fair tactic in many situations.” Perhaps most situations where the outcome might be in doubt.

The thought of tactics brightened the young Klingon. “Of course! Deception is important in combat. If you can hide what you are doing, you will kill more enemies.”

“True, though winning is not always about killing your enemies.” He smiled. “Sometimes, it’s a matter of determining who your enemies really are. Sometimes there is a difference between enemy and opponent. Sometimes your enemy can be your friend.”

“Ha! And sometimes your friend can be your enemy.”

“This is also true.” Chekov nodded. “At the moment, however—”

“At the moment, human, we are escaped prisoners who need each other. After that—”

“We shall see. I know.” He sighed. “Would it offend your honour to use my name?”

Kalleg’s head jerked back. “What? I, uh, don’t understand.”

I know. “Pavel Chekov, Lieutenant, Starfleet. Yes, I am human, but it is not how I identify myself. Are you first a Klingon or are you Kalleg son of Rakag?”

“I am *always* a Klingon.” Back rigid and chest puffed out, Kalleg stepped ahead to turn the corner and stopped.

“Of course, but—”

With a sigh, Chekov joined him, standing in the path of a pair of waiting Romulans with weapons drawn. Chekov recognized Mahrek of the two. “I think that is enough discussion for now.”

“Romulan filth! I will—”

Raising his pistol to stop Kalleg’s lurch forward, Mahrek smiled. “Yes, yes, kill us all. However, the Centurion and I hold the weapons at the moment. You will return to your cell now.”

A shadow shifted behind the pair of Romulans as Chekov raised his hands, smiling himself. “The door is in a state of disrepair.”

“Then we will find another. Centurion.”

The second Romulan took a small step forward. “Turn around. Return to the stairs and walk slowly down them.”

Lips pulled back from his teeth, Kalleg growled. His fists balled and Chekov worried for

a moment that the young man might actually launch himself forward. Perhaps he could be distracting long enough to find an advantage for one of them. “An inconvenient situation.”

Mahrek shrugged. “If you’d not been so intent on your conversation, perhaps you might have heard us approach, or at least look around corners in case someone lay in wait.”

In fact, they had been doing just that until moments ago. Smiling, Chekov gave an exaggerated shrug. “Perhaps not the best decision, tactically.”

Shaking his head, Mahrek chuckled. “No. It is unfortun—” The Romulan’s eyes rolled up in his head and he began to slump even as J’dek loomed out of the darkness, a knife in one hand and his pistol in the other. The Centurion saw the movement, beginning to turn and able to raise a hand to block the coming blow, lifting his weapon but not quickly enough to intercept the knife thrust under his lowest rib. In a moment, both were on the floor.

J’dek shook his head and bent to wipe the knife clean. “Romulans gloat too much.”

“It is a common failing.” Chekov tried not to smile, considering the current circumstance, and he wished J’dek had managed to deprive both of consciousness rather than one of their life. “Thank you for the assistance, though I am surprised you waited so long.”

“Hnh. You drew them out to make easy targets. Here, young one.” J’Dek tossed the pistol to Kalleg who caught it clumsily. “Please try to shoot only the enemy.”

The young Klingon quickly changed his grip and was careful to point the weapon downward. "I am an excellent shot."

"One hopes." J'dek turned away. "We have far to go. Come."

"What, nothing for me?" Now Chekov did smile. The poor human, forgotten again.

Without looking back, J'dek grunted again. "I thought you capable enough to take what you need from one of the dead green-bloods."

Which shone an entirely different light on things. "The greatest compliment I have received in a very long time." He dropped to one knee to retrieve Mahrek's weapon. Almost as an afterthought, he scooped up the one dropped by the fallen Centurion as well.

Kalleg, unsurprisingly, began to bristle. "You insult—"

"Later." Chekov stepped passed him following their rescuer, "There is a passage leading to the outside not far from here."

"A large window, waist-high above what was once a garden." J'dek's nod was almost lost in shadow. "I entered through it, but thought a different way out in order, especially since I have left dead behind me."

"I bow to your sense of direction, Colonel."

"Colonel?" The confusion in Kalleg's voice might have warranted real discussion at a less critical moment. "Who are you? I demand to know!" But J'dek only grunted as he continued walking.

“Later, if there is time.” Interesting that he’d not demanded to know who Chekov was. “We are not off the ice field yet.”

Chapter 21

Sarin recognized the cadence of the gamma shift bridge crewman coming from the stairwell. She waited until he got close enough that he should have cleared the doorway to the bridge then spoke without looking at him. “Thank you for joining us, Mister Alyx. Please take a spare station. Communications and Engineering.”

“Aye, aye, skipper.” He slid into the spare seat and reset the boards to take over the appropriate functions before looking at the next station over where Ensign Ogden nodded.

“Transferring communications now.”

“Received. Engineering systems up and running.” He popped an earpiece in, apparently just in time to receive a message. “Ensign Engel and Crewman Sheingold report Auxiliary Control secure and online.”

“Thank you, Crewman. Mister Ogden, I assume the Romulan ship is still moving to intercept.”

“It is, ma’am.” She checked several readouts. “ETA to weapons’ range one minute, ten seconds.”

An eyebrow raised, Sarin looked at the back of Ogden’s head. “Our weapons’ range or

theirs, Ensign?" The young woman didn't turn around, however.

"I'm sorry, captain, I should have specified. Theirs. The range limit of the plasma weapon a V4 carries is fairly well known and the estimate takes into account our closing velocity."

"And our weapons range?"

She watched Ogden's spine stiffen.

"Seventeen seconds later. They may wait a few seconds to discharge the plasma weapon to cut our response time."

"Understood. Mister Rankins, You may need to react quickly." She glanced down at the miniature set of readings on the arm of the command chair, finding nothing to fault in Ogden's analysis.

"Yes, skipper." He dialed up the sensitivity of the controls. "I could wish for a photon torpedo or two."

"Really, Chief?" She hadn't thought there to be much bloodthirst in the older human.

Rankins risked a look over his shoulder but didn't visibly react when he realized she was looking at directly him. "Yes, ma'am.

Theoretically, a photon torpedo detonated as it connects with the plasma ball's envelope would break it apart and we could probably pass right through the dissipating plasma without much effect on our shields."

"Interesting." But less for the idea itself than for its source. She thought perhaps the chief might have missed part of his calling.

"Perhaps we can recommend it for the next design phase."

Shaking his head, he smiled as he turned back around. "I'm sure you knew that already, Skipper."

While true, completely irrelevant. It hadn't been a consideration since her input hadn't been sought in the design phase. And since a torpedo launcher wasn't part of the *Nancy Wake's* armaments, it hadn't been a consideration in her calculations. "I agree that a photon torpedo launcher could serve several uses in the next few moments, but until such time as we have access to that launcher, we will depend on your reflexes, Chief." And he'd proven capable enough so far.

Ogden came back into the conversation without any preamble. "We're running at Warp 9, Skipper. They're not likely to get a second shot off on the plasma weapon. It's the blasters I'm more worried about."

Something she'd considered. "At this velocity, Ensign, we won't be in range for more than a single exchange of fire. We are significantly outgunned, but speed works to our advantage."

"As you say, ma'am, so long as our shields hold during single exchange, and they're at full power, at least." She watched the sensors carefully. "Entering plasma weapon range in three, two, one." Sarin could hear the frown in the woman's voice when she continued. Interesting that humans coloured so much of what they did with emotion. "Sensors indicate the weapon is hot but has not fired."

Beside her, Rankins nodded. "You were right, Ensign. Trying to cut our reaction time."

“Indeed.” At a certain point, reaction time became irrelevant, however. “Maintain course and speed.”

“Phaser range in ten, nine, eight—” she looked back over her shoulder. “The plasma weapon has discharged, skipper.”

“Slightly earlier than optimal. Interesting. Evasive at your convenience, Mister Rankins.”

“Evasive, aye.” The engines surged in the background, their normal hum increasing in pitch for a few seconds. “That should more than do it. Can’t change the course of plasma already in motion.”

“Phaser range now!”

“All phasers, fire, Mister Ogden.”

Both banks that could be brought to bear fired within a second of each other. “Range closing. Almost point blank. They’re firing blasters. Captain!”

The ship rocked as the blasters impacted on her shields. Considering the relative firepower of the Romulan destroyer, Sarin was surprised that the broadside hadn’t been more effective.

“Evasive!” Rankins’ hands played over his board, but it was Ogden who jumped in. “The Romulans have fired a second plasma ball!”

Sarin felt her fingers wrap around the arms of the chair. “Mister Rank—” but she didn’t have time to issue the order before the ball of plasma discharge exploded against the *Nancy Wake’s* shields.

*

“We should attack!”

Blaster in his hand as he tried to peer around the rock, Chekov raised an eyebrow but

didn't bother to make eye contact with the young Klingon. There were more critical things to watch for. "Which group?"

"What?"

No movement as far as he could tell, but every so often a blaster shot hit the scenery nearby. "We are taking fire from two directions, Master Kalleg. Which group of Romulans would you prefer shoot us in the back?"

"There are three of us!" Kalleg growled like he might say more but left off.

J'dek made a disgusted noise. "And at least eight of them, if I count correctly. A warrior needs patience. Its lack has killed many fierce fighters and spoiled plans too numerous to count."

Strange to agree with a Klingon, and yet Chekov found it easy at the moment. J'Dek seemed less typical each time he spoke, or perhaps Chekov's experience was just getting deeper as he knew an individual Klingon for longer. Either way, he felt there had been a bit of a change between the J'dek traveling with them to Harak and the J'dek crouching in the dawn with them now. "There is a time and a place for a frontal assault. This is not it."

"Bah! There is no reason we cannot return fire, at least."

Chekov risked a grin at J'dek to find the Klingon sharing the expression, though with considerably more teeth in view. "He has a point."

"Agreed." The intelligence officer and the young Klingon turned together and began a

rapid assault that threatened to overheat their weapons, howling fierce battle cries.

“Ah, such enthusiasm.” He turned and raised his own weapon. But before he could pull on the firing stud, weapons fire came from several directions around them. He heard distant Romulan shouts and several explosions shook his eardrums and the ground under his feet. After a few seconds, a Tellarite slid in on one knee to take cover beside him. “Bozhe moi!”

Grinning as wide as Chekov had ever seen, Grev clapped him on the shoulder. “Ha! Still alive then. And I see you found both the Klingons.”

“Da.” He couldn’t help but smiling. He’d never been so happy to see the grouchy little sapient. “All is well.” Another explosion and the sound of shouted orders in Romulan. “I think they are pulling back.”

“Good. We probably shouldn’t stay here, anyway. They won’t likely go far and I think Milano only has one grenade left.”

The man peeked over the rock Chekov had been hiding behind. “Two, Warrant.”

“Hnh. I must have miscounted. It’s good you’re in one piece, L-T.”

“More or less, Mister Grev. I didn’t know you cared.”

“I just don’t want to carry you.”

Chuckling, Chekov slapped a hand on Grev’s shoulder, though the doubted any feeling got through the armour. “I—”

“Humans! More humans!” Kalleg looked as if he might howl. “And I don’t even know what

that is.” He flinched, hunching his back as the older Klingon slapped the back of his head.

“*That* is a greater warrior than I currently believe you have the potential to become. If this is the future of the House of Rakag, the Empire may be doomed.”

Kalleg bristled, puffing out his chest. “I am twice the—”

“Brat I originally took you for.”

It was a hard thing to interrupt. “He is young yet and will learn.” Chekov wondered how he found those words, considering how young he’d been when first coming on board the *Enterprise*. “We all do.”

“I do not need a human coward to defend me!”

J’dek ignored the outburst. “Hnh. If we live, perhaps I will explain reality to him.”

“If you wish.” Words weren’t going to sway the boy’s opinion, but perhaps the next few minutes or hours would. With a shrug, Chekov turned his attention to the marines. “Mister Grev, have you had any signal from *Nancy*?”

“None.” The Tellarite shook his head. “Not much we can do about that. Orders?”

“We have achieved our primary objective.” Chekov paused to take a breath and make it look like he was considering options, but he’d already made the decision. “There is nothing to be gained by staying here. I think we make our way back to the beam down point and find somewhere defensible until assistance comes. I leave the route to your discretion.”

“A good plan.” Grev flashed hand signals. Grant and Schulman appeared out of nowhere

as Kalleg pushed into the space between Chekov and Grev. "I've got several spots in mind."

"Retreat? Klingons *never* retreat."

Grabbing the young man by the collar, J'dek jerked him back half a metre. "No, they do not. But manoeuvring for distance is an acceptable tactic in some circumstances. This is one of them. We do not know how badly we are outnumbered by our enemies, but we are only seven. Stronger ground might be better for the final bloodbath."

The Tellarite jerked a single nod. "Let's get moving, then. There's a lot of ground to cover and they'll be chasing us all day, I'm sure." Grev hefted a pack Chekov hadn't even seen and started off in a very specific direction, making Chekov think he'd either figured out Chekov's plan before he'd spoken, or was merely experienced enough to always know where the beam down point was.

He turned a pleasant smile on the young Klingon warrior. "Cheer up, Master Kalleg. Perhaps the Romulans will be foolish enough to engage us with only a part of their number and we'll slaughter them a few at a time."

With a shrug, J'dek smacked a hand to Kalleg's back to propel him in Grev's direction. "Or they will come all at once and we will die with honour."

The young lad brightened. "That would be glorious."

Grev's voice floated back. "Klingons."

*

The Sub-Commander growled at the sound of distant weapons fire, seeing the flash of

green light at the base of the hill. Opening his communicator, he tuned it to the frequency of the relevant squad. “Unless you can actually see them, I can’t imagine what you’re shooting at. Stop wasting power cells.”

An emotionless response came back. “Yes, Sub-Commander.” The weapons fire ceased a moment later.

With a sigh, he re-adjusted his communicator to broadcast on the general frequency. The immediate search was getting them nowhere. Taking great care to moderate his own voice, he addressed everyone. “All groups to gather at the front gates of the fortress. We will organize into search parties based on their last known direction.” If their quarry managed to leave the valley, sensors would actually be worth something. Part of the location’s original attraction was now his biggest annoyance.

He closed the communicator without waiting for any acknowledgements. “Even if they manage to get off planet, they won’t get far without the transport they arrived on and the *Stalker* should give us plenty of warning.”

With a sigh, he turned and made for the front gate himself.

*

Underneath the main klaxon, Sarin could hear seven different systems alerts, but the fact that she was alive to hear them at all kept their odds of completing the mission successfully in positive territory. “My compliments on your initiative and reactions, Mister Rankins.”

Rankins breathed deep and turned just far enough to smile at Sarin. “Thank you, Skipper. I remembered what you said about forgiveness and permission.”

“And in a timely fashion, leaving us alive for me to grant that forgiveness.” Sarin nodded. “Mister Ogden?”

The young woman’s hands touched a variety of controls as she verified reads while speaking. “Starboard shields at fourteen percent and holding. We’re out of weapons’ range and increasing separation. Maintaining our current speed, even if they turn around right now, we’ll still beat the Romulans back to Harak by a few minutes, at least. Half an hour, if we’re lucky.”

Sarin nodded. “Please ensure the shields are at full capacity before then, taking power from anything but life support and warp drive as needed. If we cannot immediately extract our landing party, another confrontation with the war bird is inevitable while we conduct scans.” With the planet and two moons for potential cover, they might be able to draw things out a bit before being overpowered, but that would make their scans for the landing party equally drawn out, and much more difficult.

“Aye, aye, captain.” Ogden didn’t look back while she worked for shield restoration by shifting power flows throughout the small ship, and Sarin was impressed by the apparent change in the woman in so short a time. She’d not only done well in both the boarding action and during ship to ship combat but had stepped up in terms of normal operations as well. Sarin wondered how much of that was due to the

influence of young Lieutenant Chekov since the mission began. Either way, she strongly felt that Ogden would quickly grow into a solid officer.

“Mr. Rankins, I’ll ask you to slave all bridge functions back to your console. Mr. Alyx, damage control reporting and administration, and please direct Ensign Engel that Auxiliary Control should continue to be her station.”

Both men acknowledge, and for several minutes, all worked at their assigned tasks until Ensign Ogden cleared her throat. “Captain, how did they manage to fire the plasma weapon again so quickly?”

Sarin considered that for a moment in more detail. It had been something that she’d filed away for further examination in the future. “An equally interesting question is if they did so once, why didn’t they do so again when we began to pull out of range? I have insufficient data to speculate on either answer, Ensign.” The ability to channel so much power so quickly to that destructive weapon could certainly tip the power balance in certain confrontational situations.

“Maybe whatever they did to get the second shot damaged some of their control systems.”

“Random chance operating in our favour.”

Ogden nodded. “Aye, ma’am. And I hope that luck continues to hold.”

Humans were interesting creature, pinning so much on emotions. “Luck is no substitute for planning and preparation.”

Colour crept up the back of the young woman’s neck. “Of course not, ma’am. I didn’t—”

The bosun's whistle of requested communication preceded the chief engineer's voice. "Engineering to Bridge."

Sarin clicked a switch on her chair. "Bridge. Sarin here."

"Captain, are you familiar with the term 'jerry-rigged'?"

"A human term meaning an ad hoc repair." Though its flavour was a little odd when spoken by an Andorian. "Yes, Lieutenant Shran, I have heard the term before."

"I'm glad, ma'am. Then you'll understand when I tell you that such repairs aren't usually able to last long and don't take much in the way of stress."

"Your meaning, Lieutenant?" She could infer a great deal from the statement by itself but would much prefer to have more data to base her inferences on.

"That I don't know how much longer I can give you Warp 9, skipper."

Not truly a surprise, or even a low probability event. However, they still had a mission to complete and it was her experience that engineers tended to exaggerate dangers to protect their equipment, particularly warp engines. Still, she had insufficient experience with this particular engineer to judge Lt. Shran's statements fully. "Are we in imminent danger?"

"No, ma'am. You would have heard the alarm again." There was a short pause. "But we can't run at full emergency forever. I need to be able to take things offline for real repairs but dropping back to Warp 4 or so would make me

feel a lot more comfortable about being able to get back to Starbase intact.”

Yet they were not currently heading for any Starbase. A return to Starbase 67 was certainly high on her priority list, but she would vastly prefer to do so with the mission complete as well as her crew intact. “Impractical at the moment, Lieutenant. You will recall we are being pursued.”

“I’ll try to give you some warning before we blow up, ma’am.”

“That would be most appreciated, Lieutenant. Sarin out.” She turned off the comm panel.

Rankins whistled. “A Romulan war bird on our particle exhaust vents and Lieutenant Shran wants us to slow down?”

“The phrasing was more typical of an Engineer than other departments of service, Chief, but Mister Shran merely wanted us to be aware that there are more dangers to face than the Romulans.”

Shaking his head, Rankins appeared to check sensor readings on the closeness of that war bird. “He must have been exaggerating, Skip.”

“Perhaps, Chief. It is an engineering tendency to inflate estimates slightly to provide a safety margin. The likelihood of such an inflation in this case is non-zero, but I would prefer not to find out by how much.” The miniature readout she had indicated they continued to increase their lead on their pursuer. “We will not, however, be slowing down at this time. We will have a small buffer when we reach Harak before

the Romulan vessel catches up to us. Lieutenant Shran is likely to make use of that time to improve his 'jerry-rigged' repairs to the antimatter containment control system, among others."

"Yes, ma'am." He hesitated for a moment. "And if we don't track down the Landing party before the war bird catches up with us?"

"Then chances become more significant that we will once again be relying on your reflexes, Chief. Possibly in a more prolonged way." A conflict she would like to avoid, but it would be significantly preferable to abandoning the landing party.

"Yes, ma'am."

Sarin thought the Chief might have sighed but chose to interpret the loud exhale as just that.

Chapter 22

The shelter Grev picked was good, a mossy tor that gave them a protected view in all directions. But once they'd gotten out of the badlands area with all of the magnetite ore, the Romulan sensors hadn't had a whole lot of trouble tracking them and, it seemed, Romulan endurance matched Vulcan or even Klingon. Their pursuers had run hard to catch up with the little group, and Chekov suspected that there were still search parties closing in. The periodic weapons fire argued that they were nearly surrounded already.

“I wish we could have gotten somewhere a little more defensible than this pile of rocks. I had at least two better in mind.” Grev peered through what was to Chekov a tiny gap in the rocks, looking for targets of opportunity.

“It’s far better than we could have hoped for, Grev, but as long as we are wishing, I wish the Romulans would go away and leave us alone. Or at least that they ran slower.”

“Or that they weren’t so damned sneaky in the first place.”

Checking the power level on his blaster, J’ddek nodded agreement. “It is unfortunate that they are too cowardly to face us openly, but there would be little point in standing up to blaster fire without the opportunity to return it.”

Beside him, young Kalleg took a deep breath and let it out slowly through his nose, back straightening. He turned to look directly at the older Klingon. “It is a good day to die.”

“Ha!” J’ddek clapped a hand on his shoulder. “Agreed. And many of the Romulans will discover that before they reach our position.”

Smiling, Chekov shook his head. “Ah, such fatalism. If I closed my eyes, you might be Russian.”

Grev scowled at him. “That joke would be funnier if you made it less often.” He turned back to his search for Romulans to shoot at. “Or if the rest of us knew what it meant.”

“It so often seems appropriate lately. I—”

An explosion came from not far beyond the rocks and Chekov was sure there was a yell

or two buried underneath. Milano grimaced.
“That was my last grenade.”

“What, no more explosives in your pocket?”

Shaking his head, the marine’s face drooped. “No, Warrant.” Then brightened again as he had a thought. “Did you happen to bring any?”

“I’m too fat to lug much gear around outside of a training scenario.”

From the other side of their shelter, Grant chuckled. “Well, we didn’t want to say anything...”

“Ha! When I want a human’s opinion, I’m sure I’ll manage to rethink things first.”

General laughter in the group, and even the young Klingon tried a smile. When it faded, he looked intently at Chekov. “Lieutenant?”

Clamping down on the surprise at being called something other than ‘human’, Chekov looked at the young warrior. “Yes, Master Kalleg.”

He straightened even further, swallowing once before speaking. “I may have been a bit hasty in my judgement, if not of humans in general, then at least of those, and other non-Klingons, in this party.”

Chekov couldn’t help but smile, and he nodded enough that he might call it a small bow. “Thank you.”

“Die well, Lieutenant Chekov.”

He felt the impact of a blaster in the rock behind him and a few bits of dust rained down on him. “And you.” He took his own deep breath. “As will we all, I think. They are advancing.” His

own weapon had more than enough power for a last stand.

For a moment, the fire from the Romulans intensified to an almost battlefield level, but the sudden strike of a much louder phaser beam shook the very air around them.

“Bozhe moi!”

“QI'yaH!”

If he thought there had been dust in the air before, it was nothing compared to the amount that had come into being merely to shower them now. Chekov looked up in time to see the *Nancy Wake*, a tiny cutter, swoop in to hover a hundred metres or so above their heads. From the outside, it didn't look nearly so tiny. Judging by the distant Romulan shouts, he wasn't the only one having that thought. They might even be a bit panicked. At Grev's waist, a communicator chirped twice.

It took him a moment to recover. “Are you going to answer that?”

The marine noncom, always faster on the verbal draw, pulled the communicator from its place and held it out. “No. Since it's your communicator, it's probably for you. Here.”

He took it and opened the device, trying hard not to let his relief bleed too far into his words. “Chekov here.”

“*Nancy Wake*, Sarin speaking. I am gratified to hear your voice, Lieutenant. Sensors show an extra member of your party. Can I conclude your mission was successful?”

He looked around at the rest of the group, seeing the tension beginning to drain away from most of them. “It might have been somewhat less

successful if not for your timely arrival, ma'am. We are very glad to see you."

"Indeed. Stand by for transport."

"Yes, ma'am. Take everyone else first, if you will. Your arrival has sent the remaining Romulans scurrying. I think I will be safe enough for a few extra seconds."

"Understood. Stand by."

He closed the communicator to find Grev glaring at him again. "Are last minute rescues a Fleet specialty?"

"It seems that way sometimes. But we weren't quite in the last minute, I think. Perhaps only next to last." Not too far off, anyway. He grinned at the Tellarite non-com.

With a shrug, Grev stood, the only one of them short enough not to have needed to crouch in their hiding place. "Close enough for me. I've only got one power pack left."

"At least you had a spare. I do wonder why they didn't just beam us up from orbit."

"Your Captain has a good sense of drama for a Vulcan." Grev shrugged again. It seemed almost a twitch for Grev. He wondered if it was some kind of Tellarite expression of emphasis.

"Perhaps, but I had more in mind the Prime Directive. It may be a sparsely populated region, but I think we would rather not be seen by the natives and a Starship, however small, stands out very well in almost any environment."

Also standing, J'dek holstered his weapons. "As I have said, the fortress is haunted and there are no settlements nearby. It is unlikely there are any natives around to witness events."

Chekov felt both of his eyebrows go up.
“How— no, I remember. I would be surprised at what Klingon Intelligence knows.”

“Perhaps.”

And any remaining discussion would have to wait until they were all safe aboard the *Nancy* as the transporter beam took hold and yanked everyone but Chekov back to the ship.

“Or impressed, perhaps, Colonel. One hopes Starfleet Intelligence is at least as effective.” He looked around, alone, and allowed himself a deep sigh of relief. “I wonder if the Romulans have something like the Prime Directive.” It seemed unlikely.

*

The first thing Chekov noticed was how crowded the transporter room was, but he could tell that almost before the beam had him completely reconstructed. The second thing was that the red alert klaxon was far more annoying than the one aboard *Enterprise*. He hoped it wasn't a new standard.

Ensign Ogden stood behind the transporter console and she flipped a switch on the comm pad as he stepped down. “X-O is on board, ma'am. We're clear.”

The captain's voice came back immediately. “Thank you, Ensign. At your convenience.”

Only then did Ogden step out from behind the panel to greet him. “Welcome back, sir. You missed the party.”

“My apologies, Ensign. I had a prior engagement.” He couldn't help the smile and she returned it. “The Red Alert is because?”

“We’re still being pursued by the Romulan war bird. If it had taken much longer to pinpoint you with sensors, we’d be in even more trouble. “Captain’s compliments and would you join her on the bridge.”

“Lead on, Ensign.”

Of course, they had to get through the rest of the crowd first. Apparently, Mr. Sheingold had been assigned Klingon escort duty. He didn’t look happy about it, but wasn’t trying to start a fight, either, especially since he could see the mission objective had been achieved. “Colonel, if you and your charge will follow me, we’ll get him settled into quarters.”

With a dismissive wave, J’dek turned away from the young man. “He will be joining me. We require nothing extra.”

Leaving Sheingold standing in the middle of the corridor to stare after them. “I, well, of course, Colonel. You, um, know the way?”

“Yes.”

Chekov tried not to grin at the young man’s discomfort, even as they stepped past him and he listened to the retreat of the marine footsteps in the other direction. Ogden caught his attention quickly as they moved. “You look a little worse for wear, sir.”

“Hmm?” He looked down at his heavy jacket he was surprised he still had and the rough terrain landing party clothing, noting the various stains and tears. He’d returned from a landing party in worse condition in the past but had not usually gone straight to the bridge to assume a combat station when that happened. Hopefully, Commander Sarin won’t hold it

against him. "I suppose I do, at that. Romulan hospitality isn't what it used to be."

"I see." In a tone that said her mind was filling in too many blanks without data. "What was it like?"

"I'm not sure I understand the question, Ensign. What was what like?"

"An infiltration and rescue turned combat mission, sir." She turned to look at him as they walked. "The only landing parties I went on while on the *Champlain* were to unexplored, uninhabited planets, and nothing ever really happened. We walked around for a while, took some readings, took some samples, occasionally scared off a predator, and beamed back up."

"There's a lot to be said for things that are merely interesting."

"I suppose so, sir."

He grinned at her. "Besides, I seem to recall a transmission suggesting some excitement on board, as well. Something about being boarded and pursued by a Romulan warship?"

"Well, yes, sir."

"Excitement is where you find it, Ensign. Or where it finds you. Were there any casualties?" He had a feeling he knew the approximate answer to that, considering she hadn't reported it to him yet."

"Not until the final shoot up outside Engineering. Up until that point, the Romulans seemed to have a serious interest in prisoners and only used a stun setting."

"I see. What changed?"

“One group blew up the main entrance to Engineering and the marines blew a hole in the wall to get behind them.”

He nodded. That would certainly have stirred them up. Indeed, up to the point where they’d actually escaped and put some significant distance between them and the fortress, the Romulans on the surface had expressed a strong preference for prisoners as well. “So they decided they must be losing and didn’t want to be taken prisoner themselves.”

“I guess.” Ogden shrugged. “It’s definitely why there are two Engineering techs in Sick Bay, but Doctor Rachhak says they’ll both be fine. Otherwise just a few stun recoveries.”

“Very lucky.”

“We did almost have a core breach, though.” She hauled open the heavy hatch that gave them access to the ladder.

Chekov followed her in. “And you missed going on the landing party because it was... safer?” He pulled the hatch closed behind them and dogged it quickly. They started up the stairs.

Suddenly smiling, Ogden shook her head. “I guess I hadn’t really thought about it, sir.”

“It sounds as if I had the easy job, Ensign.”

A step behind, he saw the back of her neck flush. “Oh, I don’t know about that, sir. I had to duck a little, but the marines did most of the heavy lifting against the boarders.”

“And the war bird?”

“That was... a little more interesting.”

“Once we are safely under way ahead of our pursuers, perhaps we can compare notes.”

“I’d like that, sir.” She reached for the hatch almost before they reached the top of the stairs, and they opened and closed it quickly, slipping onto the bridge under the background of the activity, but hardly unnoticed by their Vulcan captain.

“Let’s hope we have the opportunity.” But he didn’t say it very loudly.

At one station, and likely with everything slaved to his board, Rankins spoke. “Clearing the atmosphere now, skipper.”

“Thank, Mr. Rankins. Maintain the helm.” Her eyes flicked to Ogden and Chekov. “Ensign, Lieutenant. Stations.”

Three times “aye-aye” almost together.

Noting that the first thing Ogden touched was the weapons icon, Chekov took over navigation and sensors, and then engineering almost as an afterthought. Sensors came up just in time to see the Romulan ship appear on local screens. “Captain, the war bird has just dropped out of warp. Her weapons are charged and she is coming into range.”

“Phasers on standby at full power.”

He glanced down again. “Shields at ninety-four percent capacity.”

The Captain took no time to react so far as Chekov could tell, and, unsurprisingly, spared no emotion for it, either. “You may fire at will, Mister Ogden. Chief, set a course directly for the war bird.”

The ship’s engines began to hum. “Aye, aye, skipper.”

Almost in the same moment, Ogden depressed a pair of switches. "Phasers firing." He felt the tremble of both banks firing twice and watched the readings.

"Her shields are holding." Quite well, in fact. The readings suggested more than ninety percent power. The war bird returned fire and the ship rock just a little with the impacts. "As are ours. Odd. Glancing blows with blasters only. The war bird does not seem to have powered her plasma weapon. By these readings, I don't think there's any power flowing to those systems."

The *Nancy* returned fire, again two blasts from each phaser bank. "Direct hit. Maybe she can't, captain. The double shot last time must have caused them some damage."

"Maintain course and rate of fire." Sarin didn't acknowledge the interplay between them, focused completely on the situation. "Distance?"

Chekov barely had to glance down. "Forty-three thousand kilometres and closing, ma'am." The ship rocked under a heavier blow just as Ogden returned fire again. "Shields at eighty-one percent. Ha! Playing possum. Plasma weapon is charging."

"Maintain course. Maintain rate of fire."

Nancy fired again. Chekov kept a close eye on several readings. "Shields at sixty percent. Twenty thousand kilometres and closing." He shook his head. "War bird's forward shields at an estimated eight-five percent."

Ogden fired the phasers again, and Chekov wondered if she were waiting for the capacitors to come up to full or if the *Nancy's*

tech was just that much better and newer than what he was used to. “Captain, we’re completely outmatched. Ten seconds to point blank.”

Behind Chekov, he heard the click of a comm panel. “Sarin to Engineering. Mister Shran, you have had all of the time I am able to give you.”

“You have emergency power available, Captain.” Was that a sigh from the Andorian? “Just not for very long, please.”

“Thank you, Mister Shran.” The same click. “Mister Rankins—”

The bridge, the whole ship really, lurched to port and Chekov was sure he heard the engines scream. Or perhaps that was the Chief Engineer. At almost the same moment, the ship shook with the largest impact Chekov had felt in several years, probably exaggerated due to the ship’s size. It stabilized quickly but left everyone gripping their panels.

“Sorry, Skipper.”

“You are forgiven, Chief.” Sarin’s voice betrayed nothing, not that Chekov would have expected it to. “Damage report.”

Far better than it might have been. “A glancing blow, Captain. The Romulans discharged their plasma weapon at minimum range but apparently at something rather less than full power. Forward shields down to forty-three percent. Starboard shields at thirty-nine.”

“And perhaps superior reflexes. It would, however, not be logical to allow them recharge time. Maximum warp, now.”

Rankins nodded and pushed the correct control sequence, pushed the throttle, and the

stars on the viewscreen stretched out into long, needle-thin lines. “Maximum warp, aye. I’m not sure we’ll get back to Warp 9, ma’am, but it won’t be too far off.”

“I will be content if we can outpace the war bird, Chief.”

The engine hum continued to build, quickly rising out of hearing range. Chekov kept a close eye on his aft sensors. “The war bird is making no move to pursue, Captain.”

Grinning in apparent relief, Ogden looked back over her shoulder. “Maybe not playing possum after all. Did you know, Skipper?”

With a head shake, Sarin leaned back a little in the command seat. “I had insufficient data to know anything about the state of their ship, Ensign, but I did suspect they would be running at something under normal efficiency as we have approximately one-sixth of their crew in our brig. In any case, had they truly been battle ready, they would not have waited for us to come to them. We were, as you suggested, completely outmatched.”

“Yet here we are.” Chekov resisted the urge to sigh. “It’s almost anticlimactic.”

“Perhaps, Lieutenant, but it is far preferable to the various alternatives.”

He didn’t resist the urge to grin. While the Vulcan wouldn’t acknowledge the expression, he had the strong feeling that she would note it and probably calculate the effect on local crew morale. “Aye, ma’am. There is no doubt about that.”

“Secure from Red Alert. Mister Rankins, please set a least-time course for the Organian Peace Treaty Zone.”

The alarm klaxon shut off, much to Chekov’s relief, as Rankins looked back over his shoulder. “Coordinates, ma’am?”

Sarin flipped several switches on her chair, pressed at least one button, and then nodded to the Chief. “Available to your console now.”

It didn’t take Rankins long to turn the raw data into useful navigation. “Plotted and laid in, ma’am.”

“Execute. I will also require a coded burst transmission to Starbase 67 addressed to Colonel Miller. Message reads Tango Bravo Three.”

“Working, ma’am.” Ensign Ogden didn’t question the message, probably, like Chekov, assuming that they were signalling a successful conclusion to the mission.

Chekov swore he could feel the shift change course, something he never would have noticed in the cruiser of his normal acquaintance. It seemed strange, but less so that his captain’s next words. “Mister Rankins, while I believe I said ‘least-time’, please lower Lieutenant Shran’s stress level by easing our speed back to Warp Six. It may not be what he asked for but should still prevent any pursuing Romulan vessel from catching us too quickly. Aft sensors to remain online and closely monitored. It would be preferable to know if the war bird alters its pursuit strategy.”

“Warp Six, aye.”

“Transmission sent, ma’am.”

“Thank you, Ensign. I believe the current shift is yours.”

“Yes, ma’am.” If the young woman had any unkind thoughts about having to take the watch immediately following a crisis, she kept them to herself. Chekov would have his own turn to not grown out loud shortly. “I mark the time as 1015 hours. I have the bridge.”

“1015 hours.” Sarin stood. “Ship is on course for the Organian Peace Treaty Zone. Crew is at work repairing damage from a recent boarding operation. I stand relieved. Thank you, Ensign.”

“Of course, Skipper.”

Commander Sarin turned at the door, looking back over the enhanced bridge crew just as Chekov finished transferring the functions of his panel to Ogden’s. “Mister Chekov, if you are none the worse for wear from the Landing Party operation, I believe a debriefing is in order.”

‘None the worse for wear’ was interesting phrasing, and one he wasn’t quite sure applied. He was certainly tired, a little battered, a little bruised, and his current clothing had seen better days, though quite recently. But denying your commanding officer an immediate report didn’t seem wise. He stood up, making sure the chair didn’t spin too quickly. “Of course, ma’am. At your convenience.”

Not that he had any illusion that convenience was anything other than right now.

Chapter 23

The new model transporter room still seemed a bit off to Chekov. Very different from the ones aboard *Enterprise*, but still completely recognizable in form and function. Maybe once his career had been a little longer, and he'd had the experience of a wider variety of transporters, he'd stop noticing the differences so much.

Ensign Ogden's voice came from the comm panel by the door. "IKV *Jej'etlh* signals it is well within transporter range and awaiting transport of its passengers."

"Thank you, Ensign." Sarin shut the panel off, turning to face the two Klingons standing beside the pad. "Colonel, I wish you well. Thank you for helping to avoid a war."

J'Dek nodded. "It is only a question of timing, Commander. War between us will come, and it will be glorious."

Sarin held up a Vulcan salute. "Until that time, Colonel, live long and prosper."

With a grunt, J'Dek turned towards Chekov and offered a hand. Chekov knew enough to grip by the forearm and didn't flinch when J'dek clapped a gauntleted hand to his opposite shoulder. "You fought well. I hope we meet on the field of battle."

Chekov grinned. "I would rather meet somewhere that serves cheap alcohol and consume large quantities of it while we exchange tales of past glory."

"That..." J'dek tilted his head to one side—"would also be acceptable. Die well."

“Die well, Colonel J’dek.” Released from the grip, Chekov turned to the other Klingon and offered the same shake. “And you, Master Kalleg.”

For a wonder, the young man took it. “Thank you, Lieutenant Chekov.” Chekov chose to let the use of both his name and rank pass without comment or even notice.

The two of them stepped up onto the pad as Commander Sarin moved behind the panel. “Energizing now.” She ran fingers up the energy throttles with one hand and manipulated the pattern buffers with the other. The blue beam sparkled into existed and took the two Klingons with them when it faded. She waited several seconds before flipping a switch on the comm panel. “Ensign?”

“*Jej’etlh* acknowledges receipt and is moving back to the Klingon side of the Peace Treaty Zone.”

“Very good, Ensign. Set course for Starbase 67, Warp 4. Sarin Out.” She stepped away from the panel, moving for the door.

Chekov quickly fell into step beside her as they entered the corridor. “That will extend our return trip considerably.”

Sarin nodded. “Perhaps, but it will also give Lieutenant Shran the opportunity to continue his repairs in a lower stress environment. I would anticipate our arrival at Starbase 67 to be only two or three days beyond the original mission projection. You will still have as much as a day of boredom to contend with.”

“I hope you are correct, ma’am.” Chekov chuckled.

“In the meantime, the regular course of duties aboard the *Nancy* will allow a certain amount of leisure time, even considering repairs and the prisoners.”

Chekov wondered where the commander was leading with that statement. Leisure wasn’t a well-used word in the Vulcan vocabulary in his experience. “The prisoners are mostly Lieutenant Cestor’s responsibility, yes?”

“They are.” Sarin nodded again. “As repairs will mainly fall to Lieutenant Shran and his Engineering personnel.”

“Ah, but I’m certain we will have plenty of paperwork to take care of.”

“Undoubtedly, but still.” Sarin paused while they walked. “Tell me, Lieutenant, are you familiar with the human game of chess?”

And the jaws of the trap closed tight. He felt the grip around both ankles. “I have played, though I will admit not often and not always as well as I might like. Why do you ask?”

“I have been studying the game and would like to experience it against a non-computer opponent.”

No escape, but it might provide him some interesting insights, an extra view into Vulcan thought processes. “Well, ma’am, as you said, I’m certain there will be some leisure time available for the next few days. I would be honoured to have you trounce me at chess.” And it would certainly help pass the extra time.

“Indeed?”

Chapter 24

First Officer's Log, Stardate 6282.3, Lieutenant Pavel Chekov Reporting. This will be my final log entry as First Officer of the *Nancy Wake*. We are only a few minutes from docking at Starbase 67. It has been a short but eventful assignment and while I am eager to return to *Enterprise*, I am a bit wistful to leave *Nancy*. In many ways, it has been a very interesting and... enlightening experience, and I look forward to the next opportunity I am provided to assume a leadership role, though it will be pleasant, and possibly somewhat relaxing, to return to the status of junior officer on a larger vessel.

The door to the transporter room slid open to allow Chekov and Ensign Ogden access. He dropped the small duffle bag on the platform and turned to face the younger woman.

She grinned at him. "This seems a little familiar, sir."

"If reversed, yes." He smiled back.

"Formalities all taken care of?"

"Before I left the bridge." He nodded. "The Captain left me in the corridor on her way to Engineering. Lieutenant Shran seems still unhappy with the condition of things."

"Well, when you turn Marines loose with explosives..."

"Exactly." He chuckled. "In fairness to Mr. Shran, I surveyed the damage. He and his team have performed spectacularly. As has the entire

crew during this mission.” More than well enough to warrant the variety of good comments he’d added to everyone’s records while still in his capacity as First Officer. He held out a hand.

Ogden looked down. “Sir, I...” She took a deep breath and then took the hand. “You’ve been a good XO, sir, and I hope to serve with you again someday.”

“I look forward to it, Ensign.” He stepped up onto the pad and turned to face her as she reached the panel. “Energize, please.”

The blue sparkles appeared in his vision and after an imperceptible pause in limbo, he found himself standing in a familiar *Enterprise* transporter room with an unfamiliar Andorian in uniform behind the station. “Um, permission to come aboard, Chief?”

The man smiled, teeth brilliant and antennae perking up. “Endriss. And granted, of course, sir.”

Retrieving his duffle bag, Chekov stepped down from the platform. “I don’t think I’ve seen you before, Mister Endriss.”

“Probably not, sir.” Endriss shook his head and moved to join him. “I’ve been on board for exactly a week today. Transferred from the *Axanar*.”

“Well then, perhaps I should be welcoming you aboard.”

“Thank you, sir. The Captain’s compliments, and he’d like you to join him in Briefing Room One.”

“Of course.”

The two of them stepped through the door and into the corridor. He heard the whoosh of

the door behind them before he'd taken three steps. "It's very strange."

"What's that, sir?"

Chekov looked around. "I hadn't realized just how spacious the corridors on *Enterprise* are."

The Chief followed his glance in several directions before shrugging. "Oh, I guess so, sir. Feels about the same as on the *Axanar*, but she's a *Larson* so the saucer is built on similar lines."

"Ah, I've just spent several weeks on a Cutter. A new one, *Solar* class, but still a much smaller ship. Space is at a premium."

"Of course it would be, sir. I've never served on a ship that small, but I'm sure there are other benefits."

Thinking back over the past few weeks, Chekov came to a similar conclusion. Several of them, in fact. "Yes, I believe that would be safe to say."

They stepped into the turbolift and Endriss spoke before Chekov had a chance to. "Deck two." The doors closed and the lift began to move.

Chekov raised an eyebrow, turning just a little towards the Andorian. "You know, Chief, I have been on the *Enterprise* for several years now. I can probably find my way to the briefing room."

Flushing a bit darker, Endriss' antennae drooped. "Of course, Lieutenant, but Captain Kirk used the word 'escort', so I'm just following orders."

The lift came to a stop. “Of course, Chief.” The door slid open, and Chekov read a label on a door not more than three metres down the corridor. Almost as if it had been planned that way.

“There you are, sir.”

He stepped out into the corridor. “Safe and sound, Chief. Thank you.” It didn’t take many steps to reach the briefing room. The door opened for it at the same time the turbolift door closed. He only took one step into the room before catching sight of Captain Kirk, seated at the table with another man. “Captain, Lieutenant Junior Grade—” did that feel just a little odd now?—“Chekov reporting for—” and then the identity of the other man sank in. “Colonel Miller!”

Laughing, Kirk pointed at a chair across the table. “At ease, Lieutenant. Junior Grade, eh? Not so sure that works for a recent First Officer.”

“You know, you might be right about that, Jim, especially considering his performance on this mission. We should look into it.” Miller smiled at Chekov as he sat.

“It’s a good thought, Reg.” Kirk leaned back and took in Chekov’s expression. “Oh, don’t look so shocked, Mister Chekov. Colonel Miller and I go back to the Academy.”

Practicing his raised eyebrow, Chekov shook his head. “With respect, sir, I’m beginning wonder if there’s a senior officer in the Fleet, or the Marine Corps for that matter, you don’t go either back to the Academy with, or have served with in some capacity.”

His captain had the grace to flush a little. “Well, I suppose we’ve run into one now and again. Never mind the rebuttal, Lieutenant. Have a seat. More important, have a drink.” From the chair beside Kirk, a bottle of Saurian brandy appeared, along with three glasses. He poured them and passed them out.

Chekov reached for his. “Thank you, sir. I believe I will.” He raised his glass to match Kirk’s. Miller wasn’t long behind.

“Absent companions.”

“Absent companions.” Though fortunately none from this mission. Chekov touched his glass to the other two and drank his brandy. While he waited for Kirk to refill them, he shifted a little in his chair. “Captain, Colonel, if I may ask.”

Miller grinned as he retrieved his glass. “You don’t need to, Lieutenant. Captain Kirk has been cleared to hear the details of the mission. I’ve given him a brief overview, and the official report will come later, but—”

Kirk took over. “But I thought I’d like to hear your view of the events of the past couple of weeks without the official-ese.”

Miller nodded. “Within the confines of this room, with only the three of us present, you may speak freely about the mission.”

He took a few moments, and a sip of brandy, which wasn’t vodka but still surprisingly good, to consider his response. “I, well, thank you sir. I suppose it began when you granted me permission to take the Advanced Tactics course.”

“I remember that much, Lieutenant.” Kirk leaned back and sipped his own brandy.

Chekov could only smile. Perhaps he'd be able to tell the entire story. He wondered how many drinks it would take to answer all of the questions that would surely follow. “Of course, sir. The morning after I received my final grade, Lieutenant Commander Sarin approached me in the Starbase 67 arboretum.” It seemed the best place to start.

Thanks for reading *A Matter of Honour*. I had a lot of fun visiting old friends in new adventures and I hope you enjoyed reading them.

If you like Star Trek TOS fanfic, and particularly if you liked this story, I do have others in various stages of completion. I enjoy working with the supporting and background characters from the series, using the Big Three in smaller roles, although I have managed a novel-length story, *Fractured Unity*, where Captain Kirk features prominently, but many characters have something to do.

I've also collected my first batch of shorter stories into a [single volume](#). Each of those stories in this book have appeared individually and are freely available on Wattpad or for download on my website.

I have written a second batch of stories, fewer in number but generally longer, two of them pushing deep into novella (or short novel) territory, and one of those taking a character of my own and putting her at the centre of the action.

A third batch of shorts is planned, and I might see another novel in the future.

Live long and prosper.

Fractured Unity

A Star Trek: Original Series Novel



by Lance Schonberg

Star Trek Voyages 1

by Lance Schonberg

