

Warnings Unheeded in Darkest Night

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Warnings Unheeded in Darkest Night

by [Gibraltar](#)

Summary

The starship Reykjavík is dispatched to investigate the disappearance of a Starfleet colonization survey ship, uncovering a harrowing mystery with potentially lethal consequences.

Chapter 1

USS *Reykjavik*

Federation Frontier – Sector 37044

“Scratch three Gatherer marauders,” Nandi Trujillo said by way of greeting to her two fellow starship captains.

They were displayed on a split-screen image imposed on her ready room tabletop interface. Captain Demora Sulu of the Excelsior-class *Yorktown*, and Captain Serma of the Belknap-class cruiser *Aenar* sat in their respective ready rooms aboard ships in adjoining sectors.

Serma, the first Bolian officer in Starfleet to make captain, smiled thinly. “Did you take any prisoners?” he inquired.

Trujillo nodded. “Indeed, twenty-three of them. Following their interrogation we’ll be handing them over to Deep Space Two for repatriation back to Acamar.”

“How bad was the attack on Sedrosis II?” Sulu inquired, her features creased with concern.

“Thankfully there was very little damage and few casualties,” Trujillo explained. “The last time the Gatherers raided the planet all we had there was a pre-colonization survey station. I think they were surprised to find a full-blown colony established there this time. They made quite a mess trying to dismantle a fusion reactor located on the colony’s college campus but couldn’t get past the safety interlocks that they clumsily triggered. They gave up trying after we pulled into orbit and then attempted to shoot their way past us.”

“And?” Serma prompted

Trujillo shook her head with derision. “Play stupid games, win stupid prizes.”

Sulu chuckled. “You sound disappointed.”

Trujillo cocked her head then candidly offered, “No, not disappointed. This just really wasn’t worth our time, Captain. This would have been a perfect operation for the Border Service, except they aren’t allowed to operate out this far yet.”

“You realize that the Border Service expansion has been significantly slower than the regular fleet’s,” Serma noted.

“Only too well,” Trujillo acknowledged. “And that’s because the powers-that-be decided to push Federation expansion into these sectors without sufficient appropriations for Border Service coverage. *Reykjavik* should be patrolling the Romulan Neutral Zone or keeping the Kzinti in check, not rounding up Gatherers that I could have brought to heel with a Daedalus-class crewed with midshipmen.”

The comment elicited smirks from the other two.

“Speaking of that,” Sulu observed, “you’ve been pushing Border Service expansion out here pretty hard with Admiral Markopoulos lately.”

With a mock-roll of her eyes, Trujillo said, “If the Chic Greek has become tired of my constant entreaties, he need only give me what I want. They built DS2 with expansion in mind. The Corps of Engineers could add a full Border Service command and logistics hub onto the station in less than six months.”

“Is that all?” Sulu replied with amusement.

Trujillo directed a pointed look at her comrades. “If the two of you added your names to the request, it would give the idea more weight with Command.”

“You’ll have it,” Serma offered without hesitation. His eyes then turned to Sulu as well.

“The Sulu name wields a lot of influence,” Trujillo observed emphatically. “Especially since a certain captain’s father just retired from the C-in-C post.”

“Fine,” Sulu relented after a moment. “I’ll back your play, Nandi. But if I end up commanding a deuterium-hauler because of this, I know where to find you.”

Trujillo inclined her head gratefully to the both of them. “You have my thanks, Captains. And Demora, if it comes to that, I’ll kneel to accept my just rewards. Just make it a clean killing stroke.” She turned her eyes to Serma. “How goes it for you? Still chasing sensor ghosts?”

He sighed. “No sign of whatever’s been shadowing us, if there was ever really anything other than a sensor malfunction. In other news, did either of you know that a Class-Five comet is comprised of thirty percent or more of carbon monoxide, methane, and ammonia?”

That triggered laughs from the women.

“What about your diplomatic mission to Baohiri?” Trujillo inquired of Sulu.

“We’ve got all the factions to the negotiating table,” Sulu divulged, “but I’m not holding my breath. There’s a lot of bad blood there, and too many of the parties are still yearning for vengeance. If it all blows up in our faces, both of you should be ready to run out here and help me flex Federation muscle to discourage another shooting war.”

"I'm always up for a little intimidation in the guise of diplomatic neutrality," Trujillo confirmed.

"Count me in," Serma agreed. "If I have to read one more long-range sensor sweep analysis I'm going to pull out my hair." This coming from a man as bald as billiard ball.

An alert icon began to flash in the corner of Trujillo's screen. "Duty calls," she announced. "It appears that something that requires my attention may have actually happened, unless Commander Glal has taken to triggering the notification merely out of spite."

"That would be so unlike him," Sulu laughed. "Please give the crusty old space dog my regards," she offered in parting.

"I'll do that, and before you ask, no you can't have him back," Trujillo said as she terminated the comm-link and cut over to a visual feed from the bridge.

Glal's porcine, tusked face appeared on the monitor. "We've picked up a distress signal from the USS *Esau*, Captain. She's one of our colonization survey ships in Sector 37128. It's an automated beacon with no encrypted substrate."

"ETA to intercept," she asked.

"Thirty-eight hours at maximum sustainable warp, sir."

She frowned. A lot could happen in thirty-eight hours. It was a long time for a small ship and crew to fight for their lives, if that scenario had prompted their call for help.

"Inform DS2 of the distress call, then set course and engage at best possible, Commander. Stand to yellow alert."

"Aye, sir."

Trujillo drummed her fingers on the desktop, lost in thought. Once again they were rushing headlong into the unknown, the dependable old soldier pushing into the deepest, darkest cave with her sword in one hand and a torch in the other. *Be there dragons here?*

Such was their calling.

* * *

USS *Reykjavík*

Deck One – Conference Room

Trujillo strode into the conference room, as always the last to arrive. As she saw it, her time was the most valuable aboard ship, and so she elected not to spend it awaiting others.

The senior staff stood in unison as she entered, pausing for her to take her seat at the head of the conference table before resuming theirs.

Unlike the designs of most newer starships, *Reykjavík's* conference room had no exterior view ports and was instead situated behind the bridge under the same armored blister of tritanium and duranium composites that protected the command center. However, the compartment was tastefully decorated with realistic-looking faux wood paneling, giving it an ancient Earth nautical aesthetic. Along the bulkheads, pictures of previous Starfleet vessels named *Reykjavík* were interspersed with photographs of the ship's namesake, the Icelandic capital city.

On one bulkhead was mounted the ship's seal, an inverted yellow triangle emblazoned with the dragon-head prow and sail of an ancient Viking longboat bearing the ship's name, registry and motto. U.S.S. REYKJAVÍK NCC-3109. *'First to Advance, Last to Retreat.'*

Arrayed around the table were the ship's executive officer Lt. Commander Glal, Operations Manager Lieutenant Arwen DeSilva, Chief Engineer Lt. Commander Kura-Ka, Chief Medical Officer Dr. Lawrence Bennett, Chief Security Officer Lieutenant Gael Jarrod, and the junior-most of the senior staff, Ensigns Farouk Naifeh and Rachel Garrett, of Helm and Sciences respectively.

"What have we got?" Trujillo asked.

Glal toggled a control interface set into the tabletop, triggering the large painting of a Viking longboat sailing Reykjavík's Faxaflói Bay set into the interior bulkhead to vanish, replaced by a viewscreen displaying the image of a Federation starship.

"USS *Esau*," Glal said. "Soyuz-class, crew complement of one-hundred eighty-three officers and enlisted personnel, plus fifty-seven civilian personnel from the Bureau of Colonization. Lt. Commander Ngư Minh Thông commanding."

Glal nodded to Lieutenant DeSilva who picked up the narrative from there. She self-consciously brushed a cascading bang of brown hair from in front of her eye as she began, "For the past eight months, *Esau's* been assigned to surveying Class-M planets in four adjoining sectors for potential Federation colonization efforts. These are the preliminary studies that determine if an uninhabited planet would be biologically compatible with one or more Federation member species, prior to a dedicated science vessel being dispatched to conduct a more comprehensive ecological analysis."

DeSilva gestured to Jarrod, a striking young Caucasian Human male with well-kept wavy black hair and neatly trimmed mustache and goatee that seemed to emphasize his reserved demeanor. In a clipped Oxonian-English accent, Jarrod said, "*Esau* had been transmitting scheduled updates to DS2 every twelve hours until forty-six hours ago. At that time, she went emissions quiet. DS2's long-range scans have proven inconclusive as *Esau* was surveying a planet in a particularly volatile binary star system. The system's radiation emissions have created a corona effect that's especially difficult to penetrate with long-range sensors."

Glal frowned, the gesture accentuated by his tusks and bushy beard. "Why would they be surveying a system that basically blocks sensor

activity?”

At the end of the table, a young woman with reddish hair tied into a bun and piercing brown eyes cleared her throat. The crispness of her uniform spoke to its newness, as did the shine on her ensign’s chevron affixed to her tunic’s division-gray shoulder clasp.

All eyes turned to her and Rachel Garrett seemed to gather herself before speaking. “If I may, sir, the radiation profile of this close binary pair, called the Abemeda Sisters, may have little effect on the Class-M planet in question. If the planet’s electromagnetic field is sufficiently strong, it would shield life-forms from the localized stellar radiation.” She turned her gaze from the XO to Trujillo. “Additionally, locating a Federation colony and perhaps a space station in a system immune to long-range scans could prove a strategic asset, should we encounter any adversarial species in the vicinity.”

Trujillo smiled at this and shared an approving look with Glal. Garrett had been a very recent addition to the crew, coming aboard two weeks earlier during their last layover at Deep Space Two. The young woman was fresh from the academy, having graduated fifth in her class. She’d originally been slated to serve aboard the Centaur-class *Hemingway* as a third-string science officer, but that ship’s captain had owed Trujillo a rather sizeable favor, and subsequently Garrett’s orders had been changed. She was now Chief Science Officer aboard a cruiser at the age of twenty-two. Granted, it was an attack cruiser with little for a science officer to actually do, but she would gain invaluable leadership experience in heading up a shipboard department that would hold her in good stead.

“What if this is just some kind of comms failure?” ventured Dr. Bennett.

The Zaranite engineer, Kura-Ka, turned his fleshy head toward the physician. His voice issued through the face mask which delivered his homeworld’s fluorine-rich atmosphere. “If it were a communications systems failure, Doctor, there has been more than sufficient time for them to effect repairs. Failing that, they would have dispatched a communications relay buoy out of the system to update Starfleet as to their situation.”

Bennett accepted the explanation with an inclination of his head.

“Known threat species in the vicinity?” Trujillo queried.

Jarrold responded, “The Gatherers, though owing to our recent experience with them I’d hardly credit them with being able to overwhelm a starship. There have been some few incidents of Orion piracy, but they don’t tend to venture this far out into the frontier. And again, attacking a Starfleet vessel would only attract unwanted attention to them. There are dozens of softer, far more lucrative targets for piracy in this region. We’re on the opposite side of the quadrant from either the Klingons or Romulans, and we’ve had no reports of any Tholian or Gorn activity out here.” He shrugged with his hands, palms up. “This could always be someone new. More than a few of our First Contact’s have resulted in attacks on our deep space explorers. We may have inadvertently wandered into someone’s backyard.”

“Perhaps, but not likely,” Glal countered. “We’ve been sending deep-space probes out here for decades. There haven’t been any indications of aggressive space-faring civilizations anywhere within thirty light-years of our position.”

Trujillo scanned the faces around the table. Her officers knew that she appreciated brevity, and anyone without something valuable to add to the conversation remained silent. “Very well. Anything else?”

No one replied.

She continued. “In that case, we’ll continue on course. I want a Class-II probe fitted out to reconnoiter the Abemeda system before we make our final approach in three hours. Doctor, prep Sickbay for a potential mass-casualty response, utilizing whatever cargo space and other resources you deem necessary.” She nodded her head in Jarrod’s direction, “Weaps, I want you to compile a list of tactical contingency plans based on potential multi-threat encounters. Work with Ensign Naifeh on pre-planned attack and evasion patterns for such an eventuality. Commander Kura-Ka, have an engineering team equipped and standing by in case we need to assist *Esau* with emergency repairs upon arrival. Everyone keep the XO updated as to your readiness, final reports due thirty minutes before system penetration.”

She made another visual scan of the room. “Questions?”

There were none.

Trujillo stood, prompting the others to rise from their chairs. “This meeting is adjourned,” she announced. “Resume your stations; XO has the bridge. Ensign Garrett, please remain behind,” she added as the assembled officers began heading for the exit.

Garrett stood at the opposite end of the table. Trujillo gestured for her to take the seat closest to her. “I make it a point to meet with all of my officers after they’ve reported aboard. I regret our recent situation with the Gatherers has delayed my speaking with you until now.”

“Thank you, Captain.” Garrett moved to the offered chair, seating herself only after Trujillo had resumed her own.

“You did well, especially for your first senior staff meeting,” Trujillo observed. “I hadn’t expected any less, but it’s gratifying to see one’s hopes realized.”

“Thank you again, sir,” Garrett demurred. “On that point, Captain, may I ask a question?”

“By all means.”

Garrett took a moment to collect her thoughts before speaking. “Have I done something wrong, Captain?”

Trujillo was unable to stop the surprised expression that flit across her features at that query. “Not in the least, Mister Garrett. Why do you ask?”

“My appointment to the *Hemingway*, sir. Based on my graduation standing, I was afforded the opportunity to choose my first posting. I selected *Hemingway* based on Captain Erlichman’s reputation and the fact that she was just completing a refit prior to being assigned to a three-year deep space exploration assignment.”

“Ah, yes,” Trujillo cocked her head, totally unprepared for this reaction from the newly minted ensign. “You realize, of course, that you’d have been a junior science officer aboard, working the worst shift rotations and grinding out all the scut-work those more senior to you in the division didn’t feel like doing?”

Garrett nodded. “Yes, sir. I knew that going in, Captain. That’s the expectation, no matter what ship or installation I ended up on. When I last spoke to Captain Erlichman, he’d expressed excitement about my joining his crew. So, if I may, I’m understandably confused by my sudden change of orders. I was placed aboard a high-warp courier for a five-week trip out to DS2, followed by two weeks since I’ve taken up my post here. Still, I’ve received no explanation.”

“Fair enough,” Trujillo assessed. “Ensign, I make it a habit to recruit the finest officers I can so that this can be one of the best, most sought-after posts in the fleet. In the four years since she launched, *Reykjavík* has garnered an admirable number of unit citations, as well as individual medals and awards for her crew. After reading your academy transcripts, I identified you as being a high-achiever and one whose career I wanted to advance to the extent that I’m able. Because of that, I took the opportunity to steal you away from Captain Erlichman’s command.”

Garrett absorbed that for a long moment before replying. “While I very much appreciate the promise you see in me, Captain, I hope you will understand that I had my own expectations of the kinds of experiences, knowledge, and training I was going to gain on a deep-range mission. I recognize that leading a department here will doubtless look excellent on my service jacket. However, there’s very little genuine scientific opportunity to be had on an attack cruiser, even one with *Reykjavík*’s sterling reputation.”

Then she added, “And if I may speak freely, sir?”

Trujillo nodded silently as she digested Garrett’s words.

“With all due respect, Captain, you did not recruit me. You poached me from another command. I was never consulted about the change of orders.”

It was not often that Nandi Trujillo was rendered speechless, but this was definitely one of those moments. The import of what she’d done crystalized in her mind, and the conversation took on an almost out-of-body quality for her. Trujillo had simply taken it for granted that any new officer starting out would jump at the chance to serve aboard a cruiser as a senior division officer rather than a long-range explorer as a junior one. She hadn’t even bothered to ask Garrett what it was that she’d wanted, if a move to *Reykjavík* would be compatible with Garrett’s own ambitions. With a sudden thrill of dread Trujillo realized that if someone had done the same to her right out of the academy she would have been incensed.

The captain sat back in her chair, her expression somber.

Garrett blushed fiercely. “I apologize, Captain. I was out of line. Please for—”

Trujillo silenced her with a raised hand. “The only one owed an apology here is you, Mister Garrett. I… I can’t begin to explain the thought process that led me to believe that ripping you away from Erlichman without your consent was in any way appropriate. I suppose it’s the difference between the way things *should* be done, and how we actually do them in the fleet.”

She shook her head as if trying to cast away a bad dream. “I’m sorry, Rachel. The last thing I want is for you to feel like I’ve derailed your career at the outset.” Taking a moment to compose herself, Trujillo offered, “I’ll make you a deal. You give me two years here, and I promise that I’ll call in every marker I have to get you your choice of next posting. With your graduation standing, you’re almost guaranteed to make jay-gee after one year. You give me three years here, I can get you posted anywhere you want as a full lieutenant. That would go a long way towards getting a senior science officer post on an *Excelsior* or *Constellation*.”

Garrett dipped her head. “I thank you, Captain, but that’s really not necessary. I just needed to be heard on the matter, and I feel I’ve done that.”

“No dice, Ensign,” Trujillo countered. “I’ve wronged you, and whatever other character flaws I may have, I always pay my debts.”

“In that case, Captain,” Garrett said, extending a hand, “I accept.”

Trujillo stood, prompting Garrett to follow suit. She shook the ensign’s hand firmly.

“I know I have a reputation for being stern and uncompromising,” Trujillo confided. “It took a great deal of poise and courage for you to confront me about this. Don’t think I haven’t noticed.”

“Yes, sir,” Garrett offered, not knowing what else to say.

“Dismissed, Mister Garrett.”

The ensign made good her escape and Trujillo sat heavily back into the chair.

“Well… shit,” she said disconsolately, then heaved a deep sigh.

* * *

Chapter 2

The turbolift doors parted to admit Trujillo onto the bridge, prompting the computer to issue a specific alert chime.

Glal half turned in the command chair at the sound to confirm Trujillo's presence before announcing, "Captain on the bridge." He stood to surrender the seat.

Trujillo offered a perfunctory, "As you were," to dissuade the bridge crew from coming to attention. She stepped over to Glal. "Report."

The XO handed a data-slate to her. She perused the information displayed there as Glal updated her. "We are five minutes from system penetration, Captain. The probe we sent ahead confirmed *Esau* is still intact but detected no active life-signs aboard the ship. She's adrift mid-system at approximately three-hundred kph and is not presently near any of the system's planets. We've been unable to detect any structural damage to the ship's exterior. *Esau*'s warp reactor appears to be in standby mode and she's running on auxiliary power. The ship continues to broadcast an automated distress beacon."

"No signs of threat vessels in the vicinity?" she asked.

"None, sir. Also, no signs of wreckage indicative of a battle having been fought."

"Understood. You are relieved; I have the conn."

Glal accepted the slate back from her. "I stand relieved."

Trujillo seated herself and completed a slow rotation in her chair to survey the bridge. Her officers were working diligently at their posts, with some of them conferring in hushed tones on matters of import as they approached the system boundary.

She gave herself a moment to mourn what she presumed to be the loss of *Esau*'s crew. Starships were designed to prevent complete ship-wide atmospheric loss or bacterial/virologic contamination, so the fact that *Esau* was intact but bereft of life-signs could only mean that her crew had been either abducted or killed. A major shipboard disaster that hadn't consumed the ship itself would have left *some* survivors, she thought.

Trujillo had called up *Esau*'s commanding officer's service record, and found that despite being relatively young, Lt. Commander Ngur had a reputation for being thorough and cautious. He was not someone to walk blindly into a trap, nor one to ignore signs of potential danger.

She forced herself to relax, making herself ready for whatever they were to encounter in the Abemeda system.

"Dropping out of warp in three... two... one..." Ensign Naifeh counted down through the deceleration curve as the streaks of light on the main viewscreen retracted into singular points of luminescence.

"Ahead one-quarter impulse," Trujillo ordered.

"One-quarter impulse, aye," Naifeh confirmed. "Now crossing the heliopause threshold and entering the Abemeda system."

Trujillo turned slightly in her chair to glance towards the science station, where star system diagrams and data began to pop up on Ensign Garrett's displays. Garrett caught a glimpse of the captain's patient stare and announced, "Beginning sensor sweep."

From Ops, DeSilva called out, "Confirmed sensor contact with *Esau*, Captain. Her situation appears unchanged from the information we received from our probe."

"Weaps?" Trujillo called over her shoulder to the Tactical station.

From long experience, Lieutenant Jarrod replied without the questions even having to be asked. "No anomalous sensor contacts, Captain. No signs of any other craft in or near the system to within two light-years."

DeSilva confirmed, "*Esau* is structurally intact, but registers no life-readings. Life-support systems appear to be functioning normally."

"Captain..." Garrett had begun speaking, but her voice trailed off as a new stream of data scrolled across the monitor she appeared fixated on.

Trujillo turned fully in her chair to face the ensign. Her raised eyebrow demanded elaboration.

"...I'm reading a detectable increase in bacteria-generated trace gasses onboard," Garrett finally continued. She turned to look at the captain, her complexion suddenly ashen. "It's the kind of increase you'd expect from early necrotic processes, sir."

"Corpses, you mean," Trujillo probed.

Garrett swallowed hard. "Yes, sir."

Trujillo gestured to Glal, seated at an auxiliary station. “Commander, pull up *Esau*’s command prefix codes. I want to access their internal visual recorders.”

“Aye, sir,” Glal affirmed as he set to work.

Turning back to Garrett, Trujillo asked, “Ensign, any sign of viral or bacterial pathogens aboard?”

“I’m unable to make that determination at this distance, Captain. In fact, depending on the pathogen, it may not be detectable even at close range without atmospheric sampling from the ship itself.”

Trujillo scowled. That would not be her first choice. She turned back to Glal.

Red icons flashed across his display and he shook his head in frustration. “Sorry, sir. Their main computer and all secondary processors are offline. I can’t access any of *Esau*’s command and control functions.”

“What’s maintaining their life-support systems then?” she asked.

From the Engineering station, Kura-Ka spoke through his concealing mask. “The remaining ship’s systems are running on tertiary backups, Captain. From what little I can tell from here, it appears the damage to their primary and secondary computer cores was deliberate. It’s far too comprehensive to be a cascade failure or accidental damage.”

Trujillo leaned back in her chair, pondering their dilemma. “Mister Glal, prep a boarding party in full EVA gear. I want all necessary precautions taken to safeguard against chemical and biological weapons. Take Commander Kura-Ka, Dr. Bennett, Ensign Garrett and a full security team.”

“Aye, sir,” Glal responded, turning back to his console to make the necessary arrangements.

“Mister Naifeh, set an intercept course with *Esau* and execute at half-impulse.”

As the crew carried out her orders Trujillo sat and feigned an air of detached calm as her mind spun with possible scenarios, none of them good. Something or someone had killed the starship *Esau*, and now she was potentially taking her crew into the sights of that very same danger. The dark cynic at her core reminded Trujillo that she had, in fact, wished for an assignment more out of the ordinary only weeks earlier.

And that, dear Captain, was your first mistake, she mused.

* * *

USS *Esau*

Reykjavik’s away team materialized in a corridor intersection, all of them facing out with phasers drawn. They were clad in bulky EVA suits, the kind worn for work in hostile planetary environments or the vacuum of space.

There was a sudden intake of breath that carried across their mutual comms frequency and it took Garrett a moment to realize that the sound had come from her. They had beamed into utter bedlam, a scene that each of them knew instantly would haunt them for their remaining days.

Blood and gore were splashed across the ceiling, floor, and bulkheads in great swaths, making it look as if the carnage was intended as an artistic statement as much as a slaughter. Bodies littered the corridors, many of them mangled almost beyond recognition and contorted into impossible positions either through the efforts of their attackers or the ferocity of their own death throes.

Garrett’s head spun as she fought the overwhelming urge to expel the contents of her stomach. She was reaching reflexively for the faceplate of her helmet when Glal’s hand clamped firmly around her wrist like a vise. “Don’t even think about it, Ensign,” he told her in a serious tone tinged with sympathy.

“Breathe,” he told her. “Just close your eyes and breathe. It’ll pass in a moment.”

She did as he instructed, and a minute later the panic and nausea diminished. “S—sorry, sir...” she murmured between shuddering breaths.

“No, no apologies. Not for this. Never for *this*.”

Glal gestured to the security team. “Take up blocking positions in those corridors and cover our advance towards the computer core.” He turned to face Kura-Ka, whose broad, placid features struck Glal as particularly alien in the EVA suit helmet. He so rarely ever saw the Zaranite’s true face that he realized he’d begun to confuse the mask with the man behind it. “Be ready to run a bypass on the core access hatch if the doors are in security lockdown,” he told the engineer.

Glal regarded Dr. Bennett who was studying the readouts of his trilling tricorder.

“No indications of pathogens, either viral or bacterial,” the doctor reported.

He checked back with Garrett, who gave Glal a thumbs up despite looking pale and stunned.

“Commander,” Bennett called in surprise. “Is that...? It can’t be.”

Glal turned to see Bennett kneeling next to the body of an enlisted crewman, one whose remains were more or less intact, relative to the others. The doctor was pointing to what appeared to be the shaft of a wooden arrow protruding from the back of the man’s torso. There were colorful feathers for fletching at the end of the shaft, an incongruous detail in such a horrific scene.

The XO looked on as Bennett swept the detachable cylindrical hand-sensor from his medical tricorder over the body. “Sharp force injuries from the arrow and what looks to be some kind of bladed weapon,” Bennett observed clinically. “Additional to blunt force trauma and crushing injuries from... I don’t know what.”

Bennett paused to open his medical kit and retrieve a pair of forceps. He reached into a gaping wound along the man’s side to gently pluck something small and dark from out of the exposed tissues. He held it up to the light, turning it to examine his find.

Glal squatted next to him, squinting at what appeared to be a shard of dark, hardened material. “What is it?” he asked.

Bennett opened a small sampling port at the base of his tricorder and dropped the shard inside before closing it. “It’ll take a moment to analyze, sir.”

The comm interface in Glal’s helmet chirped and he winced, realizing that it had been a full two minutes since they’d beamed in and he’d neglected to update the ship. He stood and opened the channel.

“Glal here, sir. Apologies for the oversight. Things are... rather gruesome over here. I’m switching on my camera now. Be prepared, this isn’t pleasant.” He toggled a control on his suit’s forearm interface, activating a helmet mounted camera which broadcast an image from his perspective back to the ship.

There was a prolonged silence on the comm channel before he heard Captain Trujillo say, “Understood, Commander. Please proceed,” in an understandably tight voice.

The doctor held up his tricorder toward Glal to indicate that he had results. “It’s a shard of obsidian, sir. Very sharp. Likely a piece of whatever produced the wound in his side.”

Garrett stepped over to the two, her eyes wide, but this time with intense focus rather than horror. “Doctor, are there any traces of wood particles on that obsidian, by chance?”

Bennett studied the tricorder’s display for a moment, fiddling with the settings to adjust its analysis parameters. He gave the young woman a puzzled look through his helmet’s faceplate. “Yes, actually. How did you know?”

Garrett’s own expression was guarded. “Lucky guess,” she said cryptically. She looked to Glal. “I have a hunch, sir, but I’ll need more evidence before I’m ready to offer up a theory.”

Glal nodded. “Fine.” He gestured down the corridor with his drawn phaser pistol. “Let’s keep going.”

The signs of massacre continued in much the same fashion as they moved through the ship. Some corridors had fewer bodies than others, some had none. There was a wide variety of damage to the victims. Some of the crew had been felled by arrows or wooden spears, while others had been dismembered by catastrophic physical trauma of unknown origin. Still others had suffered grievous wounds from what must have been bladed weapons of some kind.

Many of the bulkheads bore scoring from phaser impacts clearly set to lethal levels.

“This *has* to be Klingons,” one of the security officers muttered over their shared channel.

“No,” Glal countered in a heavy voice. “I’ve seen my share of *bat’leth* wounds, and these aren’t from those.” He paused to run a gloved hand across a phaser blast mark seared into a tritanium bulkhead support beam. “The Klingons also use Type-III disruptors. The only energy weapons impacts we’ve seen so far have been from Starfleet phasers.”

The team approached an intersection that had been sealed off by a massive pressure door. The tritanium alloy of the two-centimeter thick barrier had been rent open as though something had simply peeled apart a cardboard sheet placed in its path.

A security man turned to fix a dumbfounded look on Glal. “What could do that?”

Glal merely shook his head and increased his phaser setting to maximum.

* * *

USS Reykjavík

The reaction on the bridge to the macabre telemetry from Glal’s helmet-camera on the main viewscreen was visceral.

Trujillo's eyes were riveted to the screen as her mind struggled to absorb the full horror on display. Someone stationed at a console behind her gasped, and another person off to her left gagged as they fled the bridge for the turbolift. Trujillo refused to look back, determined to allow her people to recover their dignity in private.

A pang of regret welled in her chest with the thought that she'd sent Ensign Garrett into that particular vision of Hell. Trujillo and most of the other senior officers had experienced many tragedies in the course of their careers. These were the smaller, repeated traumas that hardened one's heart and mind against the onslaught of the truly ghastly. Garrett had no such defenses.

In the span of two days, Trujillo had failed the young woman twice, and in disgraceful fashion.

With a few quick keystrokes at her console interface Trujillo initiated a program to effectively pixilate the remains of *Esau's* crew, sparing at least those on the bridge the full brunt of the nightmare discovered aboard their fellow starship.

* * *

USS *Esau*

Something had forced its way through multiple pressure doors and into the ship's computer core where it had wreaked havoc on the delicate contents within. Shattered isolinear optical chips littered the floor, along with larger pieces of data-ware substrate and crystalline memory wafers. The destruction was thorough, to be sure, but something here also spoke of untempered rage.

Glal pursed his lips in irritation, certain that the smaller secondary memory core would be similarly destroyed.

Bennett stepped up to him to make his report. "Still no indications of any pathogens, though there are some viral strains that are too small to be readily detected by tricorder. I'd still recommend we take samples back to the secure analysis station I've set up in our shuttle bay."

Glal started to object, but Bennett pressed, "It's surrounded by vacuum, Commander. There's no chance of anything being transferred to the rest of the ship."

"You can't beam your analysis gear over and run the tests here?" Glal asked.

Bennett glanced around, "This... environment would make accurate testing more problematic."

"It'll be the captain's call to make," Glal told him, secretly relieved the decision wouldn't be his.

"It's also notable that I haven't detected any non-Federation cellular residue. There's nothing on the weapons used by whoever or whatever perpetrated this attack. Nor is there any residue on the doors that were forced open or torn through. Any creature strong enough to exercise that level of violence would doubtless leave at least microscopic tissue traces behind."

Glal pointed to the scorch mark left over from a phaser impact on the door frame. "Their phasers were set to kill. You're saying that none of them hit anything?"

Bennett shrugged inside his environment suit. "At the very least they hit nothing that bleeds, Commander."

It was then that Glal noticed Garrett with a pair of her own forceps, prying another shard of obsidian out of what remained of a bank of smashed processor towers.

"How's that working hypothesis of yours?" he asked.

"Firming up, sir," she replied, placing the shard into a small sealed container which then went into a carryall slung over her shoulder.

"Care to share with the class?" Glal asked dryly.

"Yes, sir. I believe that one of the weapons used here was an analogue of an ancient-Terran *macuahuitl*."

He folded his arms across his chest impatiently. "Explain," he instructed.

"The Terran version of this weapon was utilized by the Aztec civilization of Mesoamerica in roughly the 13th to 16th centuries, AD. It's essentially a wooden club or paddle, the outer edge of which is inset with sharpened pieces of stone, usually flint or obsidian. It's a slashing weapon, excellent for close-quarters combat. That jibes with the arrows and spears we've seen employed in this attack, as they also utilize arrowheads and tips of shaped obsidian."

Hlavic, one of the security team, moved to join the conversation. "Who attacks and overwhelms a starship with paleolithic weapons?" she asked incredulously.

Glal gestured to the heavy door leading out of the compartment which had been peeled back with evident ease. "What force armed with such weapons could tear open a tritanium hatch? And why are there no enemy bodies?"

"*I hate to cut short your meeting of the minds,*" Trujillo's voice broke in, "*but I'm recalling the away team. Secure your samples, and we'll beam you back to the isolation lab in the shuttle-bay. Your team will be quarantined in the dormitory there until we can be*

absolutely certain no pathogens were involved here.”

Glal cut over to a secure channel, limited to himself and the captain. “Sir, has something happened?”

“No, Commander. Given the circumstances and what you’ve discovered so far, I’m going to bring you home, raise the shields, and alert Starfleet to what we’ve found. If we fall prey to the same force that attacked Esau, I don’t want yet another starship blundering in here and having to start over from square-one.”

That decision made sense both scientifically and tactically, Glal thought. Not for the first time he mused that Nandi Trujillo might just have made captain for good cause.

“Copy that, sir. Give us five to collect our gear and samples and we’ll be ready.”

* * *

Chapter 3

The atmosphere in the conference room was dour, as was to be expected after such a harrowing discovery. Trujillo had called the meeting to order while she herself struggled to cast out the mental images of those slaughtered aboard *Esau*.

The conference had been held two hours after the away team's return. Those officers who had participated in the mission were appearing via video-feed from the isolation laboratory and dormitory structure built in their now depressurized shuttle-bay. They sat in a cramped dining module, still dressed in the tan form-fitting bodysuits worn under their EVA's.

DeSilva nodded to Glal, Dr. Bennett, Kura-Ka, and Garrett on the viewscreen before turning to address the captain. "Sir, we're now holding position five-thousand meters from *Esau*. We're at yellow alert, our shields are up and weapons systems are on hot-standby. We've compiled preliminary reports on the *Esau*, both from remote scans and the away team's findings."

"Very well," Trujillo intoned. She nodded to DeSilva to continue.

"Scans of the ship indicate no hull breaches, nor were any of the exterior airlocks accessed. However, the away team found no residual transporter signatures onboard, though depending on the type of transporter used, these may have degraded by the time we arrived."

Trujillo acknowledge the information and then turned the briefing over to Glal and the away team members. They each gave a brief recitation of the information gathered so far from their respective specialties. The captain couldn't help but notice the haunted thousand-meter stare on Garrett's face when she wasn't speaking. Trujillo knew from her own experiences that the young woman's mind was struggling to place recent events into some kind of contextual framework.

Dr. Bennett offered, "On scene scans and further analysis of the atmospheric samples we brought back with us show no signs of any pathogens, Captain. I think it's safe to say whatever killed *Esau*'s crew, it was limited strictly to the macro-level."

Glal asked Garrett a question and had to repeat himself before she heard him. "Sorry, sir," she said, obviously drawing herself back from her dark reveries. "Yes, initial analysis did confirm no cellular traces on the arrows, spears, or obsidian residuals recovered from the victims. However, Dr. Bennett and I have determined that the arrowheads and spear-tips were coated in a broad-spectrum neurotoxin, one that appears lethal to a surprising number of humanoid species."

"Our first real clue," Jarrod remarked approvingly.

"Correct," Bennett added. "Thanks to the ensign's efforts and Starfleet's comprehensive remote biological-surveys over the past few decades, if this toxin has a biological component, we may be able to trace it to a specific sector or even star system."

After a few more questions and answers regarding ship's business, Trujillo asked if anyone had anything else to add. No one had anything further to offer and she brought the meeting to a close. "Given Dr. Bennett and Ensign Garrett's findings, I'm cancelling the quarantine. We'll re-pressurize the bay and you can all return to your quarters for some well-deserved rest. Engineering personnel will disassemble and stow the quarantine structure."

The collective relief on the faces of the away team was evident.

"I've alerted Command to what we've found here and forwarded our findings so far. Our next move will be determined by what we hear back."

Glal raised a hand. "Captain?"

"Yes, Commander?"

"The two-hundred and forty bodies of our brothers and sisters remain aboard that ship. They deserve some kind of... interment."

Trujillo inclined her head towards her XO's image on the viewer. "I fully understand the feeling, Mister Glal. However, we're going to have to determine when and if it's safe to return to *Esau* for a complete forensic analysis of this... crime scene. Only after that's been completed can we see to the remains of our comrades."

Glal dropped his chin in resignation. "Yes, sir." He understood the reasons behind her answer, but he was not required to like them.

"This meeting is adjourned."

* * *

Lines of static and momentary image freezing garbled the comm-link with Deep Space 2, grating on Trujillo's already taut nerves.

Commodore Jiemba, a mocha-skinned Human of Australian Aboriginal descent stared out at her from across several light-years. His salt and pepper hair was wavy, nearly unkempt, and his brown eyes had an intensity that even Trujillo occasionally found unnerving.

"We've run all the data you sent us through our tactical simulator and we believe there's a high probability that whatever attacked *Esau* may be awaiting a response from you. Either that, or with your shields up you're not vulner—" the image froze, flickered, and resumed "—ame

kind of attack that overwhelmed them.”

“We’d come to much the same conclusion, sir,” she confirmed. Trujillo leaned closer to the screen, consternation evident on her features. “I’d planned to take *Esau* under tow and return her to DS2 for a full forensic analysis, stem-to-stern. You know I hate to admit it when I’m in over my head, but we lack a dedicated science vessel’s resources in that regard.”

“I’d send you some help, Nandi, but our nearest science asset, *Calypso*, is more than two weeks away at top speed. You’d be almost back here with her by then. Best you tow her in.”

Trujillo nodded reluctantly. “If you can find who did this, and if it’s deemed actionable by Command, I want first crack at these bastards.”

Jiembra offered a cautious, patient grin. “Who else would we send?” His expression grew more somber, and Trujillo intuited where the discussion was headed. “Unfortunately, you know as well as I that this will almost certainly earn the Abemeda system a warning buoy and a hazard marker on our star-charts. They’ll chalk it up to a disastrous First Contact overreaction by a heretofore unknown and highly xenophobic species.”

“The system’s Class-M planet was charted seventeen years ago by probe and scanned multiple times by *Esau* since they arrived. No sentient life that we can detect.”

“It could be a yet-to-be-contacted regional power,” Jiembra riposted. “All the better reason to back off and demonstrate that we’re not invaders.”

Trujillo sat back in her chair, suddenly infused with a surge of energy that she had no immediate outlet for. “How long can you give me here before we tow *Esau* back?”

“Nandi,” Jiembra cautioned, “please, despite the horrible circumstances, don’t make this personal.”

“Three days, Jemmy,” she pressed. “I promise that if we find anything concrete I’ll call it in before taking action. You know I won’t strike without official sanction.”

Now it was his turn to inch closer to the screen. “Here me well, Captain. I have the highest regard for your capabilities and professionalism. That being said, I am ordering you *not* to place yourself into a situation where *Reykjavik* provokes an attack by whomever this is. You forget, I know how you think.”

She opened her mouth to reply and he cut her off.

“This is already a tragedy. The only thing that would make this worse is if you start an unnecessary war that someone else is going to have to finish. Sometimes when these things happen, galling as it is, it’s our duty to walk away to prevent something even worse.”

She closed her eyes, dipping her head in an abrupt nod. Her familiarity with those words sat in her chest with the weight of a stone.

“I served under an outstanding captain who taught me that,” Jiembra offered conciliatorily. “You may be familiar with her.”

“Is this where you remind me of my bad luck in serving under my former XO?”

“From where I’m sitting, Captain, you’re very lucky indeed.”

She raised her gaze to meet his, locking eyes through popping static, distortions and across multiple sectors. “Meaning?”

“Three days, Captain, and not a minute more. And *Reykjavik* doesn’t come off the leash until I let it go. Are we clear?”

“Perfectly clear, Commodore.”

* * *

USS *Reykjavik* – Captain’s Ready Room

Glal blinked at Trujillo, either truly not comprehending or putting on a very good show. “So you hurt her feelings?” he asked incredulously.

Trujillo scowled at her exec before taking a sip of her tea. “It took a lot of guts for her to confront me. Credit where credit is due.”

“Bah,” he waved a hand dismissively. “She’s brand new, right out of the package. She’ll go where she’s assigned and she’ll like it. The fact that they’re now allowing the top five percent of their class to choose their own assignment is ridiculous. The needs of the service should outweigh personal preference. We’re coddling these kids. Next thing you’ll know we’ll be handing over starship commands to raw cadets!”

In contrast to the tea she’d prepared herself, Trujillo had poured Glal a glass of Deltan brandy from a bottle he’d gifted her on her last birthday. Thus, his tongue was somewhat more free than he’d typically allow. However, Trujillo knew a brace of the liquor would also help the old Tellarite to relax and provide a much needed distraction. The away mission to *Esau* had affected him deeply, regardless of his willingness to show it.

“You have a unique perspective,” Trujillo observed. “You’re one of only a handful of command officers currently serving who started as an

enlisted rating.”

“Too old to quit, too stubborn to die,” Glal said with a smirk.

“What’s your take on all this?” she asked him, waving in the general direction of where *Esau* now held station.

“A bad business, Captain,” he muttered somberly in reply. “That crew wasn’t just murdered, they were butchered like animals.”

She nodded silently, staring into her cup. Finally, she said, “The commodore gave us three days to solve... whatever the hell this is. After that, answers or no, we tow her back to base.”

Glal’s eyes narrowed and his large nostrils flared. “What’s his definition of ‘solve?’ Does it include excessive numbers of photon torpedoes?”

“He doesn’t want a war,” she explained.

“If you don’t want a war, don’t kill our people,” was Glal’s retort. He drained the glass with a dissatisfied grunt. “They threaten us and we sue for peace. They attack us and we fall back. They slaughter a ship full of peaceful explorers and we slink away with our tails between our legs.”

“We’re soldiers you and I,” Trujillo sounded a confessional note. “We share the same uniform as the explorers, diplomats and Border Dogs, but we’re an altogether different breed. A dying breed.” She cast a faraway look out the ready room viewport, towards the glare of Abemeda’s twin suns. “Our days are numbered, Glal. I can see the direction the wind’s blowing with the Security Council and Starfleet Command. The reason *Reykjavik* is dispatched all across the Federation is because there’s so few dedicated warships left. We’re a shameful necessity, an uncomfortable reminder that diplomacy doesn’t always work. We simply don’t fit their new narrative.”

Glal reached out to grasp the bottle and pour himself another half-measure of the brandy. He gestured towards Trujillo’s cup with the bottle.

She turned to pour the lukewarm contents of her cup into a nearby potted plant and accepted a shot from the bottle.

Glal raised his glass in salute. “To the warriors. Reviled but necessary. Long may we serve, because gods help them if they rid themselves of us all.”

“To the warriors,” she echoed, and they drank.

* * *

DeSilva found Garrett in the science lab on deck four, despite Dr. Bennett having previously ordered the ensign to a minimum seven hours restricted to quarters for mandatory rest.

The lab was an abbreviated affair, nothing like what one would expect aboard a ship dedicated to exploration. The fundamentals were present, however, and that would have to be enough.

The lieutenant turned a wary frown on her younger counterpart. “Mister Garrett, if the XO finds out you’re playing hooky from rack-time, there’ll be hell to pay. Commander Glal doesn’t mess around. And may whatever deities you worship take pity on your soul should word get past Glal to the captain.” DeSilva mock-shivered as she made this pronouncement.

“Couldn’t sleep,” a bleary-eyed Garrett replied, not bothering to look up from where she was studying what looked to be a start chart with various graphic and text overlays.

“Okay, all warnings of your imminent demise aside, what are you looking for?” DeSilva plopped down in a seat next to Garrett.

“Are you familiar with the concept of panspermia?” Garrett asked her.

“Yes,” DeSilva nodded. “Biological material, primarily DNA or its precursors, is ejected into space from an asteroid strike on a life-bearing planet. Said genetic material becomes dormant in absolute zero and floats for eons until the galaxy’s rotation swings other star systems through that same patch of space. The debris carrying the genetic material from the first planet is drawn into the gravity well of other planets where it survives atmospheric entry and introduces those genetic building-blocks to the new host planet.”

Garrett pointed to her screen. “Precisely. We’ve seen it throughout the explored galaxy, with examples far too numerous to count. Now, the doc and I have isolated DNA-markers in the toxin used on the weapons in the *Esau* attack. It appears to be a plant-based toxin that’s likely been artificially modified to make it more lethal. Taking advantage of Starfleet’s volumes of bio-sampling information from our deep-space probes, I’ve plotted out a map of Class-M worlds in this and neighboring sectors where similar genetic markers to the toxin have been identified.

Garrett called up the graphic, displaying a roughly elongated cone-shaped swath across the nearby sectors. The focal point at the narrow end of the cone lay squarely on the Abemeda system. “The farther away from this system our samples get, the larger the degree of genetic drift, indicating that the original genetic material has become more diluted by the individual evolutionary processes of these planets.”

DeSilva appeared surprised. “So... you’ve confirmed that this toxin may have originated in *this* system?”

The ensign turned in her chair to face DeSilva. “No, and that’s the problem,” she exclaimed, her voice tinged with frustration. “Our records show no genetic sampling has ever been gathered from the Class-M planet here in the Abemeda system.”

“I thought you said all the Class-M worlds in this region had been sampled?” DeSilva asked.

“Two different probes have transited this system in the past forty years, and both of them launched genomic-sampling drones into the atmosphere of Abameda II. Neither of those drones ever sent telemetry back to the probes that launched them.”

“Coincidence?” DeSilva posited, not believing it herself.

With a definitive shake of her head, Garrett said, “I don’t trust in coincidences, Lieutenant.”

“Nor do I. Why don’t we send one of our own probes to the second planet?” DeSilva offered.

Garrett pondered that. “We should. Only...”

“What?”

The science officer sat forward, toggling a different display to reveal a course-chart of *Esau*’s journey through the system.

“Given that *Esau* hadn’t entered orbit around the second planet yet, my guess would be she was still engaged in in-depth system scans. That’s done in order to chart all asteroid and cometary activity in or near the system. No sense dropping a colony on a planet if a massive asteroid is going to cause an extinction-level event six months later.”

DeSilva studied the young woman. “Okay. Where are you going with this?”

Garrett now seemed infused with a manic sort of energy, no doubt fueled by her exhaustion. “We need to scan *Esau* and see if she’s missing any probes.” She initiated a sensor sweep of the derelict vessel, eyeing the results. “Damn,” she murmured. “One Class-I probe is missing from their inventory.” She gave DeSilva a wide-eyed look of realization.

“Someone or something down there doesn’t want to be found,” DeSilva speculated, deducing Garrett’s line of reasoning. “They jammed the previous probes’ drone telemetry, but they couldn’t do that with *Esau* parked just a few AU away in the same system. *Esau* launched a probe into the planet’s atmosphere, one that the locals couldn’t spoof, and that must have provoked the attack.”

DeSilva tapped her combadge, “DeSilva to the captain...”

* * *

Chapter 4

"May I presume you've had the chance to look over our working hypothesis, Commodore?" The comm-link to DS2 was much clearer this time, as Trujillo had moved *Reykjavik* out of the Abameda system in order to make the call.

Jiamba inclined his head in acknowledgement. "I have, Captain. It's an intriguing theory, but your evidence is circumstantial at best."

"No arguments here, sir. However, it's the best we're going to get without launching a probe of our own. Given the situation, that might instigate the very confrontation you'd warned me against."

The commodore sat back in his chair, his expression thoughtful. "You believe the second planet to be inhabited, despite multiple probe scans and *Esau's* own sensors saying otherwise?"

"We think it likely, yes."

"Some kind of underground civilization, or are they spoofing our sensors?"

"Impossible to say," Trujillo admitted. "I'd almost hope for the subterranean option. The power requirements necessary to effectively trick our sensors on a planetary scale would be tremendous. Hell, at that rate, you might as well just cloak the whole thing for as much energy as they'd be expending."

"It sounds very much as if someone or something down there wishes to maintain their anonymity badly enough to kill to prevent even the possibility of discovery," Jiamba countered. "We'd ought to leave well enough alone."

Trujillo gestured expansively with her hands. "I'm absolutely prepared to warp out of here immediately if that's your order, sir. However, if you'll allow me to play devil's advocate?"

The hint of a smile crossed Jiamba's features at her request. "You always entertained my arguments aboard the *Phobos*, Captain. I'd be happy to return the favor."

"In that case, sir, I'm sure you're aware that there are at least two other systems in this sector that have been provisionally selected for colonial settlement. Now, given that *Esau* is bristling with sensor arrays, I think we can agree that nobody simply snuck up on her. The attack likely came from one of two places. Either she was surprised by a cloaked vessel, or the attackers transported directly from the planet, over three and a half AU away from the ship. Either way, we have a potential hostile force that could soon be in striking distance of multiple Federation colonies. Are we prepared to simply roll the dice and trust that whatever attacked *Esau* will simply ignore colonies just a few light-years away?"

"The Bureau of Colonization may have to reassess its priorities in that sector," Jiamba offered.

Trujillo cocked her head with a raised eyebrow for emphasis. "Do you want to be the flag officer who informs the bureau that they'll have to scrap decades of survey efforts and years of planning and logistics prep for an entire sector because Starfleet is afraid to send a probe down to what at least appears to be an uninhabited planet?"

Jiamba sat with that idea for a long moment, clearly not savoring it. "I see your point," he finally conceded. "What would you like to do?"

"I want to maintain battle readiness and attempt communications with the planet. I'll leave a reconnaissance probe behind to monitor our progress so that if we're ambushed unexpectedly as *Esau* was via some means we're not able to defend against, at least you'll know how it happened this time.

"If there's no response to our hails, I intend to launch a probe from two AU out from the planet. If the probe is destroyed or its telemetry is jammed or appears to be altered, I'll take *Reykjavik* into orbit and begin full sensor sweeps at maximum power. Let's see them try to jam *that*."

Jiamba cleared his throat. "That seems very aggressive, Captain. Very provocative."

"I disagree, sir," Trujillo returned. "It's a proportional response to the murder of two-hundred and forty Federation citizens engaged in a mission of peaceful exploration. Killing those people without warning, without giving them the chance to leave or prove their non-belligerency was the provocation in this equation."

The commodore sat in silence, a pose Trujillo remembered well from his days as her XO. It was Jiamba's habit when weighing the potential outcomes of a course of action on those occasions when he had the luxury of time.

"And if they attack, Captain?" he prompted cautiously.

"We'll defend ourselves, of course," she answered. "We'll use only the amount of force necessary to repel the attack. I will continue to try to open communications throughout, in hopes of averting further unnecessary violence. Failing that, I will withdraw *Reykjavik* from the system and tow *Esau* back to you. Then, at the very least, we'll know."

Jiamba nodded as though to himself. "Understood." He tugged unconsciously at the bottom of his uniform blouse to straighten it, another old habit of his she recognized. "Captain Trujillo, I hereby authorize your proposed course of action. May fortune favor you and your crew."

“Thank you, sir. I hope to speak to you again, soon.”

Trujillo leaned back in her chair, deep in thought. She silently vowed to try and keep an open mind, whatever happened next. Despite her warrior ethos, she had a duty to her crew, to the fallen aboard *Esau*, and to the Federation to try and make this situation right somehow. In the coming confrontation, that might take the form of listening rather than acting, or perhaps withholding fire in circumstances that seemed to call for retaliation.

Yes, she was a soldier, and *Reykjavik* was a warship, but Trujillo was convinced they could both be *more*.

* * *

“*Bridge to captain.*” Glal’s voice over the intraship brought Trujillo instantly awake on the day bed in her ready room.

“Go ahead, Commander.”

“*We’re at two hours, sir. We’ve broadcast over everything from subspace to old RF channels with no response.*”

“On my way,” she said. Trujillo stood to pull on her uniform jacket over her white command undershirt, belting it at the waist and fastening the shoulder clasp. She smoothed out any wrinkles in the fabric and then checked that her braided hair was still in place. She picked up a phaser pistol from atop her desk, checked its setting, and attached it to her uniform belt via magnetic coupling.

After a quick double-check in the mirror, she headed out onto the bridge.

She stepped around a heavily armed security officer holding a phaser rifle across his body-armored chest plate.

“Captain on the bridge,” Glal called.

“As you were,” she replied by rote, sliding into the command chair Glal had just vacated.

“Class-I sensor probe ready to launch in forward tube one, Captain,” DeSilva advised as Trujillo seated herself.

“Thank you,” she replied. She activated the ship’s PA from her swing-arm LCARS interface. “*This is the captain. There has been no response to our hails, and now we will launch a probe towards Abemeda II. This may provoke a violent response. All hands should have been provided phaser sidearms at this point. Make sure those are set to level nine, and report to your battle-station assignments. Security personnel armed with phaser rifles have been stationed in all mission-critical areas of the ship. Stand to red alert.*”

The alert klaxon warbled three times as the status indicators throughout the bridge switched to red.

“Weaps?” she called out.

“Shields up, weapons hot, sir,” Jarrod replied.

“Engineering?”

“Nominal, sir,” answered Kura-Ka from his station.

Trujillo turned to examine Garrett at the Science station. “Ensign, status of the probe’s comms array?”

“We’ve uploaded the latest encryption matrices into its array, sir. It should prove very difficult to jam or for its telemetry to be altered. The Klingons and Romulans would have a hard time with it, at any rate.”

That brought a slight smile to the captain’s lips. “Very good.”

She cast a quick glance around the bridge to ascertain her people’s readiness. “Launch probe,” Trujillo ordered.

“Probe away,” Jarrod advised.

“ETA to planetfall is two hours, fifty-two minutes,”

“Well,” Trujillo remarked, “this could take a whi—”

The ship lurched slightly, buffeting the crew in their seats.

“Hold that thought,” Trujillo added.

“Shields registering kinetic impacts,” Jarrod noted from the Weapons station.

From Ops, DeSilva called out, “Multiple impacts detected along the shield perimeter, but no sensor contacts with incoming ordinance.”

Reykjavik trembled again, a series of jolts with a noticeable increase in intensity.

Trujillo stood and moved around the perimeter of the bridge's upper level to Garrett's station. "Ensign, let me see a visual representation of those impacts."

The younger woman took a moment to enter a series of commands into her station, producing a rotating graphic of *Reykjavik* encased in her ovoid shield bubble. At random points across the shield blister blossomed waves of kinetic energy, the surges lasting less than a second each.

Trujillo turned her gaze to Garrett. "What's causing that?"

"A trans-spatial energy transfer, but it's not transporters," Garrett observed. "At least, not as we traditionally understand them."

"Shields holding firm," Jarrod offered, swaying back and forth at his standing workstation.

Garrett pointed to a sensor display showing energy analysis equations. "The energy signatures from those 'blooms' suggest some kind of trans-dimensional extrusion into our subspace domain."

The next series of impacts felt like the blows from powerful energy weapons against the shield grid, forcing Trujillo to lose her footing and grasp the safety railing behind the Science station for purchase.

"Can you predict their appearance based on the pattern we've seen so far?" Trujillo asked.

"I'll try, sir," Garrett said, setting to work.

Trujillo turned to send a concerned look towards Jarrod at the Weapons station.

"Holding at eighty-eight percent, sir," he replied to her unasked query.

"DeSilva," Trujillo called to Ops, "if the attacks continue growing in intensity at the same rate, how much time do we have before shields are overwhelmed?"

DeSilva ran a quick series of calculations. "Six minutes," she said. Another powerful jolt shook the ship, causing a number of bridge consoles to flicker troublingly. "Possibly less," she added hurriedly.

"We are experiencing some moderate power interruptions in secondary systems throughout the ship," Kura-Ka said from his place at the Engineering station. "EPS feeds are beginning to show some strain, but primary systems are being given priority allocation."

"I... I think I have a working predictive algorithm," Garrett spoke up, calling Trujillo's attention back to her console. "It's a bit rough, sir, but I—"

Trujillo cut her off. "Can we use it to fire a phaser burst through one of those blooms before it closes?"

"I'd have to slave phaser control through the algorithm at my station, but yes, sir."

"Do it," Trujillo said before using the railing to navigate her way safely back to the captain's chair.

She sat down and activated the safety restraints in her chair that extended across her waist and shoulders to secure her in place as the ship bucked around her.

"Engineering, route all auxiliary power to shields and the structural integrity field."

There were more impacts, this time powerful enough to challenge the ability of the inertial dampeners to compensate. Standing crew or those not strapped into their seats were thrown to the deck.

It took a considerable amount of self-control to prevent Trujillo from staring expectantly at Garrett. She knew the talented young woman was working as hard and fast as she could. Adding more pressure in a critical situation wasn't going to help anyone. Trujillo pulled her swing-arm console interface to her and began working on her 'Plan-B' in case Garrett couldn't deliver.

As Trujillo pondered the probability of surviving an in-system warp jump to near orbit of Abemeda II, Garrett called out, "I think I've got it, sir. It may take a couple attempts, though, to get the phaser emitters synchronized with the appearance of the blooms."

Trujillo wondered silently at the 'I think' part of Garrett's pronouncement, but kept her reservations to herself. She was sure she must have qualified a few statements of her own in her time as a junior officer, decades prior.

Trujillo gestured towards the ensign. "Execute."

The Weapons board's customary warbling came from the Science station this time, indicating out-going weapons fire. On the viewscreen, blazing twin bursts of phaser energy shot out just an instant too late as a vortex of energy along the shield's perimeter vanished. Another bloom assaulted the shields just after a phaser discharge had terminated at that spot a second before.

"Shield strength at sixty-four percent and falling."

Phasers lashed out yet again just as a bloom erupted and the blazing twin beams vanished into its swirling maw.

There were two more blows against the shields, both of considerably lesser magnitude than before. Then the bridge was suddenly silent and still, bereft of anything but the continued trilling of the active phaser alert.

Trujillo looked around and found confused expressions staring back at her. "Cease fire," she ordered.

DeSilva finally spoke up. "Negligible hostile activity, Captain."

Determined to take advantage of the situation, Trujillo said, "Mister Naifeh, lay in a course for the second planet and engage at full impulse."

She didn't know if *Reykjavík* had hurt their attackers or merely outlasted them, but she decided it was time to take the fight to Abameda II.

Glal left his customary place at an aft auxiliary station and stepped over to Trujillo. He moved close and spoke in a low tone, asking, "What now?"

"Now we go and pay them a visit in person," she replied coldly.

"At this speed we'll get there long before our probe does, sir," Glal noted.

"I trust our full sensor suite will burn through any sensor trickery," Trujillo said with what even she had to admit was exaggerated bravado.

Glal shot a glance at the doors to the ready room. Trujillo nodded fractionally and stood. "Mister Kura-Ka, you have the conn. Keep me apprised of any changes to our situation."

Glal followed her into the ready room, but Trujillo didn't move to the desk, instead rounding on him as soon as the doors closed.

"What is it, Glal? We haven't much time."

"We're two AU from the planet, an hour away at full impulse," he countered. "We have time."

She sighed impatiently. "Proceed."

"We've ascertained what we set out to, sir," Glal pressed. "It's clear by what means and for what reason *Esau* was attacked. We've even tried to talk to them, and they refused. If we go further, we become the aggressors here."

Trujillo met the old Tellarite's eyes. "I have to know why, Glal. Walking away at this point means leaving with more questions than answers. Captain Ngur and his crew deserve better."

"Will adding the lives of this crew to that equation make it balance out, sir?" he asked sharply.

She turned away, bracing a hand on the front of her ready room desk. "What you're asking..."

"Walking away goes against everything you hold sacred," he finished for her. "I know you well enough to realize that."

Trujillo straightened, turning back to face him. "Glal, I'm taking the ship to that planet. The Federation has plans to establish colonies out here. If we don't claim these systems, someone else will."

"It appears someone *has*, Captain," he rejoined.

"Perhaps," she allowed. "Depending on what we find when we get there, I'm planning on leading an away team down there."

Glal's tusks quivered. "I would argue against that in the strongest possible terms, sir."

"I knew you would." She reached out to place a hand on his upper arm. "Glal, I trust you implicitly. I'm... trying something new on this mission. If I fail, I need you up here to carry on. Fight them or walk away as you see fit if I'm... removed from the equation."

"Now it's you that's asking me to go against my better judgement," he observed.

"So it is, Commander." Trujillo looked to him expectantly. "Will you?"

"You've never had to ask, sir, and I'd rather you didn't start now."

* * *

Trujillo pulled on her durable landing party boot, tucking the pant-leg of her sturdy cargo pants into the footwear. The locker room adjoining the transporter room had been filled with landing party members gearing up for their forthcoming excursion to the surface. The last of them were now donning their specialized clothing and equipment.

Upon entering orbit, *Reykjavík* had encountered a sensor scattering field that attempted to fool their scanning equipment into registering no sentient life-signs on the surface. The starship's robust sensor suit had burned through this ruse and revealed a humanoid pre-industrial

agrarian society of some fifty-million individuals spread across the planet. There were no signs of any technology more advanced than windmills apparent in this seemingly peaceful society.

The sole high-output energy reading they had detected was coming from a cavern system located under the foothills of a large mountain range. The readings were sporadic, as if the energy source was damaged somehow.

Trujillo stood and turned to find Garrett struggling with her science kit. She stepped over and helped the young woman to place the various equipment properly into the carryall. Trujillo then checked Garrett's phaser and the placement of her other gear onto her away team field jacket.

Garrett blushed fiercely. "Thank you, Captain."

Trujillo chuckled. "No problem at all, Ensign. Everyone aboard gets a little mother-hen treatment on their first few away missions, isn't that right Mister Jarrod?"

The security officer looked up from calibrating his phaser rifle, speaking in his peculiar, Oxonian-English accent. "Oh, yes indeed, sir. I remember it like it was just yesterday. I had my phaser holstered backwards and my pants on inside out before the captain fixed me up. It was awkward. I may have cried."

Garrett burst out laughing and Trujillo rolled her eyes. The captain gestured to the ensign and pointed at the doors to the transporter room. "Off with you, young lady. I'll catch up."

After Garrett had headed out of the compartment, Trujillo looked to Jarrod, her expression softening. "I need you watching out for everyone down there today, not just me."

Jarrod slung the rifle over his shoulder and busied himself servicing his assault phaser pistol. "Are you suggesting I don't know how to perform my duty, Captain?"

"I'm reinforcing that I need you at your most professional, Lieutenant."

He stepped over to her, looking down into her brown eyes with his piercing green counterparts. "Is this a captain and lieutenant conversation, or a Nandi and Gael conversation?"

"Fine," Trujillo said with a pronounced sigh. "Nandi needs Gael to get everyone back in one piece."

"Gael needs to get Nandi back aboard safely so that the XO doesn't blow Gael out an airlock," he replied with a smirk.

"That's fair," she responded.

"This isn't like you. You've never commandeered one of Glal's landing parties before."

"New situations, new solutions," she countered.

He holstered his phaser pistol and held his hands up in a gesture of surrender. "I'm capable of safeguarding the team and professional enough to put my feelings aside for the duration of this mission."

"Thank you," she said. Trujillo opened her mouth to say something else but instead she turned abruptly and walked through the hatch into the transporter room beyond.

Jarrod closed his eyes briefly, emitting a sigh of his own as he rested his back on the bulkhead behind him. Captain Trujillo was an easy captain to follow. Brave, daring, and forthright, she inspired loyalty from her crew. Nandi Trujillo, however, was a difficult woman to love. And yet, love her he did.

* * *

Chapter 5

Abemeda II

The humanoids were tall, over two meters on average, and had dusky skin tone that varied in hue from burnt orange to a dark caramel. Even here in the planet's northern climes, the weather was semi-tropical, a byproduct of the world's proximity to the star system's twin suns.

Their hamlet was a kind of collective, with large family groups living in their own mini-communities, connected to the larger village by roads and footpaths along which commerce traveled. The larger village contained a sizeable market area and stockyard, as well as an outdoor amphitheater and structures suggestive of houses of worship.

The buildings here were between one and three stories high, mostly of kiln-hardened mud-brick construction over wooden frames. The dominant shape was round, tapering to a conical dome above the final story.

The smell of wood-smoke wafted through the air, accompanying the scent of newly cut grasses that were being bound and transported by animal-drawn carts to the community's market area.

Trujillo and her away team studied this scene via binoculars, the image enhanced with tricorder information linked to the binos' internal display. The team lay along the crest of a ridge overlooking the community, trying to remain unseen while observing the goings-on below.

"Well," Trujillo commented as she scanned the pastoral scene with her binoculars, "these people don't appear to be worried about an alien invasion."

"Agreed, sir," Garrett said from where she lay beside her, studying her tricorder intently. "Odd, though, you usually don't see mud-brick construction techniques used in semi-tropical climates. It suggests a wide variance in this region's seasonal temperatures. Probably something to do with the accelerated rotation of the binary pair..."

Trujillo cast a glance at the younger woman, who remained completely engrossed in her readouts. The captain looked over Garrett's head to share a knowing grin with Kura-Ka, whose responding smile could be deduced from the flexing of his cheeks at the edge of his breather-mask.

"Commander," she asked him, "any indications of transtator technology or electronics of any kind?"

"None, sir," he replied in his mask's slightly digitized tone. "Wheel, axel, and lever-based technology, roughly analogous to pre-Columbian Mesoamerica on Earth. The most developed mechanization we've seen has been windmills and water-wheels utilized for grain milling, but that's the extent of it. Their clothing is all fashioned from natural animal and plant fibers, no synthetics."

"Captain, something of note," Jarrod offered, moving to lay next to Trujillo as Garrett scooted over to accommodate him. Jarrod painted one of the villagers in his binos with a target indicator, then transmitted that information to Trujillo's optics. An orange field highlighted one of the aliens in Trujillo's field of vision, and she saw the man carrying a wooden object shaped vaguely like a cricket bat.

"It's one of the swords Ensign Garrett hypothesized about, wooden core with what looks to be sharpened rock on the cutting edges," Jarrod pointed out.

"Indeed it is," Trujillo breathed, enhancing the image to magnify the weapon clutched in the man's hand. "We've also seen spears and arrows similar to those found aboard *Esau*."

"But how do people with this level of technology stage an attack on a starship?" Jarrod asked.

"I've got Glal working on that upstairs," Trujillo responded. "If everything goes according to plan, that will be our next stop on our tour of scenic Abemeda II."

"Comaoura," Garrett corrected her by reflex, still engrossed in her data.

"Beg pardon, Ensign?" Trujillo couldn't contain a mischievous smile that Garrett was unable see with Jarrod in the way.

Garrett blanched. "I—I'm sorry, Captain. I didn't—"

Between them, Jarrod dropped his head to his arms, his shoulders shaking with silent laughter.

"Please explain, Mister Garrett," Trujillo asked with cloying sweetness.

"Sir, the name for this world in the local dialect is 'Comaoura.'" Garrett gestured vaguely behind them. "I found it etched into that shrine near where we beamed down."

"Comaoura," Trujillo repeated, sounding out the word. "I like it." She gestured to Garrett's tricorder. "Make sure you note that in our reports and let astrometrics know to add it to our star-chart updates for the sector."

"Yes, sir."

"Glal to Captain Trujillo," the XO's voice issued from her combadge, sounding tinny and distorted due to local electromagnetic interference from the system's binary pair.

Trujillo rolled onto her side and rifled through a pocket of her away mission jacket, producing a flip-grid communicator. She flicked it open, finding the old-fashioned activation chirp comforting somehow. "Trujillo here, go ahead."

Glal's signal was much clearer over the handset. *"We've recovered the reconnaissance drones we beamed into those caverns, sir. It's a massive network, extending out for dozens of kilometers. Some of the chambers are big enough to park Reykjavik in."*

"What did you find?"

"Lots of technology, or more accurately, it's remains. DeSilva's been looking at the telemetry and she believes that those energy blooms they attacked us with were actually some kind of two-way transit portal. It's her best guess that our phasers may have exited the other end of the portal within the cavern system and started a destructive chain reaction."

"Any life signs down there?" Trujillo inquired.

"Indeterminate, sir. That cascade of explosions released a good amount of radiation and hazardous chemical residue, which made reading life-signs in all that mess problematic."

Trujillo stifled a sigh. "May I presume we'll need to beam back to suit up in EVA gear?"

"That's correct, Captain. And may I convey my everlasting gratitude for your taking my place on this landing party."

This time Trujillo did sigh. "Don't mention it, Commander."

* * *

Garrett's first thought was that she and the others had beamed into her distant ancestors' concept of Hell.

They had materialized onto an outcropping of rock halfway up the wall of a gigantic subterranean chamber, its ceiling towering another hundred meters overhead. This enormous cavern was lit from below by burning, twisted metal that cast eerie, writhing shadows dozens of meters high along the cavern walls.

"Well, this is... cozy," Jarrod quipped from within his EVA suit's helmet.

"Perimeter scans," Trujillo ordered, looking to her own tricorder. "If anything looks like it may be building to another explosion, call out. This isn't the time to be bashful."

Jarrold nodded to Garrett with an appreciative expression, making a sweeping gesture with his rifle to encompass the apocalyptic scene below them. "When you break something, you don't mess around."

Garrett merely goggled at the havoc her calculations had wrought.

Kura-Ka pointed down to a passageway leading to another chamber, barely visible against the smoky haze from the smoldering equipment below. "The recon drones showed the next chamber over suffering significantly less damage than this one. However, that chamber is also partially shielded by heavy elements in the rock strata. We nearly lost the drone we sent in there when we beamed it back. It's safer to walk there from here."

There was a roughly hewn rock staircase leading down from their perch to the next chamber's entrance, some eighty meters below.

Trujillo looked to the two security personnel accompanying Jarrod, all three of which had transport pattern enhancers strapped to the backs of their EVA packs. "Be careful with those," she said. "If we get stuck in there for some reason, those may be our only way out."

The away team descended carefully, panning their suit-mounted lights around to illuminate the steps which became intermittently shrouded in the smoke-laden air.

"Radiation levels are rising, but are well within our suits' safety tolerances," Garrett noted as she swept her wedge-shaped hazardous-environment tricorder back and forth. "No life-sign readings," she added.

They passed through the tunnel into the next chamber, where true to Glal's word the damage appeared considerably less severe. This cavern was less than half the size of the one they'd just left, and here they found row upon row of ovoid-shaped pods, each about four meters in diameter.

On a raised platform at one end of the cavern was located an enormous crystalline prism, surrounded by numerous articulated arms, each one ending in a different sized circular aperture. These in turn were flanked by a row of conical structures that bore a striking resemblance to stacked warp coils from an engine nacelle.

Hlavac, one of the security detachment, frowned at the grouping of pods. "Please tell me those aren't eggs," she joked over the shared comm-net.

Trujillo silenced her with a stern look before turning her attention back to the bizarre looking structure.

“Advanced metallurgical techniques,” Garrett marveled at her tricorder’s readings. “Equivalent to or even exceeding present Federation abilities in that area, sir.”

“Beyond the capabilities of the native population, certainly,” Trujillo assessed.

Jethridge, another security specialist, called Jarrod’s attention to a long, angled rack set between two rows of pods. The rack contained hundreds of spears, arrow-quivers, and swords similar to those observed in possession of the villagers, and those found aboard *Esau*.

Garrett had completed cursory scans of the pods and had moved towards the assemblage of robotic arms surrounding the large milky crystal. The entire structure was some forty meters in height, and closer inspection of the arms revealed intricate scroll-work patterns set into the metal.

Kura-Ka joined her and he and Garrett switched over to an private comms frequency and began theorizing about what they were seeing.

Jarrold checked to ensure his security people were situated properly in places from where the landing party was in clear view before kneeling to better examine the weapons housed in the storage racks.

Trujillo turned in a slow circle, scanning with a standard tricorder that while less sturdy than the HazEn versions was more discriminating. She paused, detecting a weak life-sign distinct from those of the away team. Trujillo moved in that direction, realizing that she was walking towards the rows of pods. The life-sign began to grow stronger as she approached. “Mister Jarrod, I have something here,” she called, drawing her phaser from its holster on the EVA suit’s abdominal plate.

“Hang tight, sir,” Jarrod’s voice echoed in her helmet, “I’m on my way.”

There was a cracking sound from somewhere nearby, but as exterior sounds were translated through her helmet’s comms system, it was difficult to attribute a direction to it. Trujillo stepped back a pace, raising her phaser.

Her tricorder began to trill as one life-sign became two, and two became four...

“Set up the pattern enhancers, now!” she commanded.

Sudden movement in her peripheral vision caught her attention, and Trujillo turned to see one of the pods split open along a previously invisible seam. A flood of pinkish fluid spurt forth from where the seam had separated. A large, pale, three fingered hand reached out from inside the pod and grasped the edge, levering it upwards.

More cracking sounds and the splash of more fluid spattering on to the roughly hewn rock floor convinced Trujillo that this phase of their investigation was quickly drawing to a close.

“Trujillo to *Reykjavik*, we’re setting up pattern enhancers now. This will be an emergency beam-out. Do you copy?”

There was no response and it suddenly occurred to Trujillo that she had failed to confirm an active comm-link with the ship when the team had entered the second cavern. *Rookie mistake*, she thought dully. *That’s what happens when you haven’t led an away mission in over five years...*

“Fall back!” she yelled to the others. “Back to the other—”

An enormous hand, identical to the one she had been fixated on, collided with Trujillo’s helmet and sent her sprawling.

She landed faceplate down, her head reeling from the impact. The whine of multiple phasers reverberated through her helmet as heated voices called out over the team’s comm-net.

“More of them!” Hlavic warned.

“Behind you!” Jethridge shouted. “Look out!”

“Captain’s down!” someone yelled.

“Stun isn’t working!” Jarrod advised. “Max your phaser settings!”

Trujillo gasped, coming suddenly to full consciousness. She pushed herself up into a kneeling position, her hands casting about for her fumbled phaser as she cursed the occluding spider-web of cracks marring her faceplate.

Streams of blue light sizzled past, seemingly at random, and a weirdly detached part of Trujillo’s mind appreciated the play of light and shadow in the otherwise darkened chamber. *Focus*, she raged at herself. *Focus or you and your people are going to die here!*

She found her phaser and clutched it awkwardly in her heavily gloved hand, trying to increase its setting despite her blurred vision and cracked faceplate.

A shadow loomed over her and she looked up to see a monstrosity revealed in flickering phaser light. It stood nearly two-and-a-half meters

tall, bipedal with short trunk-like legs and a broad torso that looked like an inverted triangle supporting two massive arms. There was no head, only two dark, watery eyes set at the top of the torso where a neck should have been.

As she watched the creature brought a massive wooden club encrusted in razor-sharp rock chips over its head. Without warning, the monster and its weapon vanished like a wraith in a swirling corona of energy, courtesy of a phaser beam set to disintegrate. Trujillo glanced down and realized the beam had come from her own weapon.

Someone grabbed her EVA by the carry-handle at the top of her atmos-exchanger pack, pulling her to her feet. "Come on, sir," Hlavic panted. "We have to get out of here."

The security specialist threaded an arm under hers and helped guide her through the obstacle course of pods, racks, and power trunks towards the exit. Hlavic would pause occasionally to let loose a phaser beam at an unseen opponent, and during one of these moments Trujillo caught a fleeting glimpse of another of her people.

This figure was shooting, ducking and moving among the pods, clearly trying to draw the golem-like creatures away from the others. This person vaporized multiple of the towering horrors before another of them rose up directly behind the individual. The beast brought an obsidian-edged wooden sword slashing down at the figure, only to have it parried by the individual wielding their phaser-rifle like a polearm.

Then Hlavic and Trujillo were through the narrow entrance and into the cavernous chamber beyond.

DeSilva's voice suddenly crackled in Trujillo's helmet, "*—tus report? Away team, can you read us? This is Reykjavík on emergency channel Theta-Four.*"

Hlavic moved to hand Trujillo over to Kura-Ka who stood nearby, applying a pressure-seal to a vicious-looking tear in one arm of Garrett's EVA suit. Trujillo was still having difficulty with her vision, and her awareness continued to ebb and flow, laser-sharp one moment, fleeting the next.

She saw a line of other EVA suited personnel, all armed with rifles, charging down the steps she and her team had descended less than fifteen minutes prior.

Trujillo thought she heard Glal's voice order, "Get back to the ship, we'll cover your egress."

Hlavic clutched her phaser pistol and fell into line behind the others as they rushed past, vanishing back into the passageway from whence they'd escaped.

A phaser-toting Garrett moved to follow, only to have Kura-Ka restrain her. "No, Ensign, we're going home," he said in an astoundingly patient voice, given the circumstances. "You too, Captain."

Trujillo turned to put the chief engineer in his place, only to have her eyes roll back into her head as her legs gave out.

She fell then, into the blackness, further and deeper than even the subterranean chambers they had come to explore.

* * *

The gentle, steady beeping of a bio-monitor usually provided a soothing background sound for those confined to Sickbay. Not so for Nandi Trujillo and her troubled dreams. Her mind was awash in images of monstrosly deformed creatures assailing her in a poorly lit cavern.

She only vaguely heard and felt the touch of a hypospray at her neck, the dispensed medications prompting her eyes to flutter open. Trujillo started, reaching her hands out in a defensive gesture towards the face hovering over her.

Dr. Bennett grabbed her hands gently. "It's okay, Captain. You're okay. You're back aboard *Reykjavík*."

Trujillo exhaled loudly, blinking. "Doctor?" She tried to sit up, but Bennett maintained steady pressure on her shoulder to keep her supine.

"Let's just take it slow, shall we, Captain? You suffered substantial neural trauma from that attack. If you hadn't been wearing an EVA helmet, I dare say that blow would have crushed your skull."

"How long have I been out?" Trujillo asked, still blinking dazedly.

"The landing party and rescue team returned to the ship about eight hours ago, sir."

"How... how many did we lose?" Trujillo didn't want to know, but she *had* to know how many lives her carelessness had cost.

"No fatalities, sir," Bennett answered evenly. "However, a number of our people suffered significant injuries, yourself included. Lieutenant Jarrod just came out of surgery, as did Specialist Jethridge. They both had multiple fractures and serious internal injuries from blunt-force trauma. Five others from the rescue team also incurred less serious injuries."

"Rescue team?"

Bennett turned to look at someone else in the exam room, and a moment later Glal's visage replaced the doctor. "How are you feeling, sir?"

"A little... light-headed. Kind of fuzzy. That... thing really rung my bell, didn't it?"

"Apparently so, Captain," Glal confirmed. "Doc says he spent hours realigning your neural pathways. I asked him to make you nicer, but he told me he's a Doctor, not a miracle worker."

Trujillo emitted a laughing snort, and immediately covered her mouth, looking mortified. "I don't do that!" she squeaked from behind her hands.

Glal's tusks quivered from barely contained mirth as Bennett stepped back into view. "Don't worry, Captain," the doctor said. "The sedative is still wearing off. Your reactions may be a bit exaggerated for the next few minutes."

She blinked, trying to steady her thoughts, and turned her head to look at Glal. "Someone mentioned a rescue team?"

"Yes, sir. As soon as we lost comms with your landing party after you entered the second chamber. I led a rescue team down and arrived just as you were exiting. You don't remember?"

"Vaguely..." she trailed off, a faraway cast to her eyes as she struggled to recall those last, confusing moments.

"We were able to extract Jarrod and Jethridge and get everyone back to the ship." Glal informed her.

She nodded faintly, still trying to piece the events together into some kind of cogent narrative. "Good work, Commander." Glal noticed Trujillo's customary spark seemed to reappear in her eyes, or he at least imagined that it had.

"What happened to the... laboratory, or launch site... whatever we're calling it? Were we able to recover any technology or did those things chase us off?"

Glal's expression became grim. "No, sir. After we recovered our personnel, I was concerned about the possibility of a follow on attack. The recon probes we sent down there apparently mistook inert equipment for damaged. The technology in the second chamber was largely operational when you arrived. Ensign Garrett believes the device at the front of the chamber with all the arms was a kind of focal refractor for the long-range transporter they attacked us with. Despite our firefight in the cavern, most of their equipment remained intact. But, in all the confusion, they must have overlooked the pattern enhancers we'd left behind. So, I used them to beam three photon torpedoes into the chamber on a five-second delay."

Trujillo's eyes widened. "That must have made for an impressive explosion."

"Brought down an estimated fifty-million metric tons of rock, collapsing four-fifths of the cavern system."

Trujillo nodded distractedly, craning her head around to locate Bennett. "Doctor, I'd like to see the men who just came out of surgery."

"Of course, Captain," the doctor replied. He stepped forward, and he and Glal helped Trujillo up into a sitting position on the bio-bed. "Mister Jethridge is still sleeping, but Lt. Jarrod is awake."

Glal leaned in to whisper, "I'm putting both of them and Hlavic in for citations for valor, Captain."

Trujillo walked toward the recovery rooms, assisted by the two men until she was steady on her feet, then under her own power.

She spent a few moments with the sleeping Jethridge. Half of the young man's head was encased in an osteo-therapy cradle, fusing the multiple fractures in his skull. Long hours of exhaustive neural realignment and reconstruction awaited him, similar to what Trujillo had just undergone. She whispered her thanks for his efforts and then proceeded slowly into the next room.

There Jarrod lay with his left arm and both legs encased in osteo-therapy sleeves. He sipped at a cup of water with a straw, held in his one working hand. As Trujillo entered the compartment, Jarrod tried to sit up straighter, wincing with the effort.

"At ease, Lieutenant," Trujillo said gently.

"Hello, Captain," he said simply. He set the cup down. "I... regret you were injured down there, sir. I shouldn't have—"

She held up a hand to silence him, sitting down on the edge of his bed. "I remember someone down there running around vaporizing those things and drawing them away from us. That was you?"

"Yes, sir."

"You and your security team saved us, Mister Jarrod."

With a pained expression, Jarrod shook his head fractionally. "No, sir. Those things got the drop on us. That shouldn't have happened."

"There were very few seconds between when the creatures began waking up and when they attacked. I never saw the one that got me, and I thought I was being hyper-vigilant." Trujillo took his hand in hers. "I led the team, and I neglected to keep an open channel with the ship, compromising our safety."

“Sir, I—”

“Thank you for my life, Gael,” Trujillo murmured, squeezing his hand.

Jarrood’s eyes widened, focusing on Glal and Dr. Bennett, both of whom stood transfixed in the doorway.

“Nandi,” he whispered hoarsely, “we have company.”

“I know,” she replied. “I don’t care. I don’t care anymore if the crew knows. I’ve been treating you... us... like some dirty little secret for far too long. You’re an amazing person, and you deserve much better than that.”

She glanced back at the doorway where Bennett was trying to pull a goggling Glal out into the corridor to give the two of them some privacy.

Trujillo smiled at her XO. “Commander, be advised that Gael and I have been romantically involved for the past four months.”

A slow smile spread across Glal’s features. “No shit?” he wondered aloud.

* * *

Epilogue

USS *Reykjavik*

“Thank you all for being here,” Trujillo said as she took her seat at the head of the conference table. The assembled senior officers followed suit.

It had been four days since the ill-fated away mission, and *Reykjavik* had departed the Abameda system, towing *Esau* at a leisurely warp four back to Deep Space Two.

All the usual players were present, with the exception of Jarrod, who was still recuperating in Sickbay. Standing in for him was Lieutenant (junior grade) Levana Mendlowitz, assistant security chief and weapons officer.

Trujillo still sported a small neural monitor on her right temple, the device observing her engrammatic responses for any aberrations as her injuries continued to heal.

“I’m preparing my after-action report for Commodore Jiemba, and I felt it would be beneficial for us to meet and discuss what we know, or what we *think* we know about the attack on *Esau* and what we found on the planet Comaoura.”

She looked to DeSilva first. “Go ahead, Lieutenant.”

“Yes, sir. In compiling the various data we’ve gathered so far, it seems safe to say at this point that the attack on *Esau* was the work of the installation we located on the planet. We’ve seen no indications of involvement by any known or unknown interstellar power. The destruction of the equipment in the cavern system also knocked out whatever was generating the sensor-scrambling field that was masking the presence of the humanoid population on the surface.”

“And what is that assessment based on?” Trujillo asked. Both she and DeSilva knew she wasn’t trying to be difficult, but Starfleet Command would be making important decisions based upon their findings. If their theories proved inaccurate, further lives could be endangered and precious time would be lost.

DeSilva in turn looked to Garrett. The young science officer had a padd on the table in front of her, the culmination of all the data collected so far in their investigation.

“Firstly, Captain,” Garrett began, “the technology we discovered in the caverns had markings and inscriptions that appear to be from a root-language that many of the current dialects spoken on Comaoura are based on. Using a variety of techniques, we’ve managed to date both the equipment and the excavation of the caverns themselves to half-a-million years. Orbital scans conducted after our away-mission reveal the remnants of large, relatively advanced cities buried beneath the surface. They date back to roughly the same time period.”

Trujillo looked intrigued. “Did their civilization collapse? Some kind of planetary catastrophe?”

“We don’t believe so, sir. It’s our working hypothesis that their culture made the decision to forego their technology and regress to their current state of development.”

“Backed up by what?” Trujillo inquired, again playing devil’s advocate.

“The temple we inspected near the village had inscriptions in much of the stone-work throughout the structure. Once translated, many of these bore references to the ‘evil’ of machinery and the dangers of scientific advancement. They certainly seem to have strong cultural taboos regarding this, which is supported by the conditions we found in their village.”

“What about the creatures we encountered in the caverns?” Glal asked. “They didn’t look anything like the native species you found living on the surface.”

Dr. Bennett fielded the response to that question. “Tissue samples we recovered after our engagement with them indicate that the creatures are the result of significant genetic engineering. Their base DNA is clearly that of the surface species, but it’s been heavily altered to produce what are essentially biological drones.”

Mendlowitz from security added, “We believe those creatures are what boarded *Esau* and killed the crew in close-quarters combat, utilizing the weapons left aboard the ship.”

The captain appeared thoughtful. “Those things are strong, and I’ve got the scrambled neurons to prove it,” she said, tapping her temple. “However, not even one of those things could penetrate a tritanium pressure door. And why using such primitive weapons?”

“No, sir, they’re not that strong,” confirmed Garrett. “It appears the transport ‘blooms’ they used to attack our shields were also used to board *Esau*. The difference being *Esau*’s shields were down, while ours were raised. Additionally, as we saw, the portal apertures are able to generate significant kinetic energy. Commander Kura-Ka, Lieutenant Mendlowitz and I think that when the drone creatures reached a pressure door, they would facilitate an aperture opening to tear through the barrier.”

DeSilva added, “And we think that their portal system may not be able to transport anything fashioned from metals, sir. The drones are biological, and all the weapons they utilized were fashioned from wood and rock with negligible metallic content.”

“But why?” Bennett pressed. “Why would their civilization leave something like that behind to prey on anyone unfortunate enough to enter their star system?”

“It’s possible they had knowledge of other spacefaring civilizations before they decided to give up their technology,” DeSilva theorized. “Perhaps they left the transporter system and bio-drones behind as a defense mechanism, to prevent their being conquered by more advanced civilizations in the region?”

Bennett shook his head in disgust. “At least put out a bloody warning sign,” he grumbled.

Trujillo looked around. “Anything else that we’ve failed to touch on?” There were no affirmative responses and she said, “That’s a good start, people, thank you. The commodore has dispatched the science vessel *Calypso* to conduct a more detailed investigation into the Abemeda system. Your work will give them a solid foundation to start from. Please have your individual and collective reports completed by fourteen-hundred hours tomorrow.”

She stood. “Thank you again, this meeting is adjourned.”

The senior staff filed out, with the exception of Glal and Ensign Garrett. Trujillo gave Garrett an inquisitive look and gestured for the younger woman to take the seat next to her, directly opposite the XO. “May I presume you’d like to discuss something with me, Ensign?”

“Yes, sir, if you’ve the time?”

Glal and Garrett were seated after Trujillo resumed hers. Garrett pushed her padd across the table to the captain. “These are provisional specs for a significant upgrade and expansion of *Reykjavik*’s science facilities, sir.”

Trujillo took the padd and scrutinized the contents, her eyebrows lifting as she digested the ambitious plan. She passed the padd to Glal and directed an inscrutable look at Garrett. “These modifications would require significant drydock time, the better part of a week. Additionally, you’d be reallocating space currently dedicated to the security division and environmental engineering.”

Garrett nodded. “I’m aware, sir. However, the Shangri-La-class starships have a woefully inadequate science and research capacity. That disadvantage made our current mission significantly more difficult. I’m confident I could have given you better and faster answers to your questions about the Abemeda system if I’d had access to resources like this.”

The captain looked to the XO, who sat frowning at the padd while idly stroking one of his tusks. “These changes are going to aggravate Kura-Ka and Jarrod, as well as require the moving of several quartering billets.” He turned to favor Garrett with a skeptical expression. “This is no small ask, Ensign.”

“I understand that, Commander,” Garrett replied, unfazed. She looked to Trujillo. “Captain, with respect, what was the point of poaching a promising science officer if I don’t have the resources I need to maximize my utility to you and the crew?”

Trujillo inclined her head, conceding the argument. “A fair point, Ensign. I will take your recommendations under advisement.”

After Garrett had been dismissed, Trujillo and Glal shared a knowing look.

Glal burst out laughing, “She’s good! Any kid that can stare down the pair of us shouldn’t be underestimated.”

“Not in the least,” Trujillo agreed. “She handled herself well in that shit-show of an away mission… both of them, actually, if you’re counting beaming over to the slaughterhouse aboard *Esau*. And damn it if she’s not right. What’s the point of stealing her away from Erlichman if she hasn’t the equipment and facilities to properly do her job?”

He threw up his hands. “I can’t argue that, sir.”

Trujillo drew in a deep breath. “I’ll contact Starbase 177 about getting us a priority drydock berth. We’ll head there after dropping *Esau* off at DS2. Don’t you have a few favors owed from your old friend in the Corps of Engineers there?”

“Cambermyer, yes. She owes me for covering her ass with Command after the Tomed Incident.”

“Any heartburn over calling in some of those markers to bump us to the front of the line?” she asked.

“None whatsoever, sir,” Glal said with a smile. “Though, why 177, sir? Starbase Earhart is closer, and their drydock facilities are just as good.”

“Because Starbase Earhart isn’t in orbit of Pacifica, and 177 is. After a mission as grueling as this one, the crew deserves some prolonged down time.” Trujillo tapped at her own padd, calling up the ship’s maintenance records. “We’re due for a refit of the main deflector anyway, so we might as well get both projects done simultaneously. That’ll put us out of commission for two weeks.”

Glal grinned approvingly. “Any plans of your own, sir?”

“In fact I do, Commander,” Trujillo answered with a wistful smile. “Demora Sulu owns a beachfront cottage on Isla del Paraíso on Pacifica. She’s offered to let me use it whenever I get the chance. I’m going to invite Gael to spend a week with me there. No Starfleet, no responsibilities, nothing but sand, sea, and shellfish.”

“Sounds wonderful,” Glal noted. “And if it’s not too forward of me to say, sir, it’s very nice to see you happy in that regard. I knew something had changed with you in the past few months, but I didn’t know the specifics.”

“I’d been in a rut,” she admitted with uncommon candor. “Both professionally and personally. That’s what prompted me to lead that team down to the planet. Hell, it’s why I went out on a limb to bring Garrett to *Reykjavík*.”

She looked to the ship’s seal and motto. “Things are changing, Glal. The Federation has fewer uses for dedicated warships these days. We have to adapt to the changing times, or risk becoming an anachronism.”

The old Tellarite inclined his head in response. “Sound advice, sir.”

“Thank you for pulling my hide out of the fire down there,” Trujillo said suddenly. “I almost got people killed because I was trying to play explorer. It took another soldier to come rescue us.”

“Next time, sir, let me try my hand at explorer. You’re too valuable to this crew. I may be old and crusty, but I *can* adapt, too.”

“It’s a deal, Mister Glal.”

* * * END * * *

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