

To Triumph and Not to Mourn

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To Triumph and Not to Mourn

by [LordMcCoveyCove](#)

Summary

In this story that follows the popular crossover novel between [Star Trek: Gibraltar](#) and Star Trek: Full Speed Ahead, [The Chains of Error](#), continues with the USS *Gallant* as it is dispatched on a mission deep within Romulan space!

Stardate 54571.54: Nuhir t'Aimne risks everything to rescue her kin from being conscripted into the Rihannsu's most dangerous order, the Tal Priax. Carolyn Kircheis and the crew of *Gallant* are tasked with breaking into Romulan space and helping her escape with her family before they're discovered and the fragile alliance between the Federation and the Romulans is threatened.

Notes

Historian's Note: This story takes place immediately following the events of "The Chains of Error," the crossover story of Star Trek: Gibraltar and Full Speed Ahead.

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Prologue

Star Trek: Full Speed Ahead

Task Force Vanguard - A United Trek Event

"To Triumph and Not to Mourn"

by Lord McCovey Cove & A. J. Gertner

"In private, grief with careless scorn. In public, seem to triumph and not to mourn."
-- John C. Granville

Prologue

It was raining; the last thrashing of a storm which had soaked the coast for two days. Everyone walking about the city was hurrying in the same way; head down to avoid the puddles and not dallying in the streets. She was just another person trying to avoid the weather while going about her business. Neither her heavy cloak nor her boots nor any other piece of clothing betrayed her station. For all anyone could tell by a glance, she was just another employee on her way to her job.

She ducked into the communications center, quickly pushing back her hood to shake off the water in the entryway and made her way over to a free terminal. The center wasn't yet crowded since it was so early in the day. She chose a screen further in the back, one less likely to be glanced at by a neighbor, even though she had no intention of recording her message where someone could overhear it. She removed a isolinear dataslip from her pocket and inserted it, uploading the recording she had made in the privacy of her own quarters at the family home. Despite her purposeful movements, she hesitated once the transmission was ready to send. Her finger stilled over the button as her doubts came once again to the surface.

If she did this, there was no turning back. There would be no forgiveness if she was caught. Even thinking about sending the message was not just treason, it was a violation of everything she had been taught to believe. Everything she still believed. Their greatest strengths were their honor and their loyalty, their unity in the face of enemies from without and within. Could she really betray that?

She looked away from the screen and towards the entranceway. She could easily walk away right now. As of this moment, the only proof that she had done something wrong was in her own hands. She could simply wipe the chip and no one would be the wiser. She hadn't even told her cousin about the exact nature of the plan. There could... no, there *had* to be another way. There was no need to turn to outsiders and no need to betray her most deeply held values.

Just then, a man entered the center as she watched the doorway with a small child of about five or six by his side. The man's attention fully upon the rain, he pulled the child further away from the doorway with gentle command, pointing out how the water was nearly entering the shop itself. It took only moments for the child to grow more curious about the place they had entered than the power of the storm and she saw that the child was a little boy when he turned his face toward her. He was plain-looking but still retained the adorable nature of the very young, with bright brown eyes and shining black hair. Before she knew it, she found herself returning his own shy smile.

In looking at him, she felt her resolve strengthen. There was no other way. The family was barely a generation removed from the last time they had been "honored." When her uncle's oldest son made a rare trip to visit the family, her elders always whispered that nothing remained of the young man who had left them years ago. Their efforts to protect him had failed, as much due to those who really did see his conscription as an honor as the ineffectiveness of the plan to hide him among the family's vast estates. He was humorless now, a man who spoke only of his religious devotion and his duty to the state. Everything that had made him an individual was gone. The cousin who had gladly entertained her as a child with fantastical stories could barely carry on a conversation about his own siblings. They didn't even know much about his own children beyond their names and the name of their mother. He had never even seen fit to introduce them to the family of his birth.

There were two boys whose own smiles would be threatened by the "honor" which awaited them scant months from now. Two boys whose futures were in her hands, even if they did not know it themselves. Her expression faded as she turned back to the terminal. She had to protect her family from the enemies within and without. She was upholding her most sacred oaths, taken as she became an adult. Honor did not forbid this course of action, rather it demanded she save her family. These boys deserved nothing less than her best efforts at freeing them from a future without laughter.

Decision made, she sent the message without any further delay. Once the transmission was confirmed, she erased any record of the message on the chip itself, then pocketed it once again. Despite the pounding of the storm, she pulled up her hood over her own black mane and paused at the threshold to give the little boy a smile, one whose mere presence had given her the courage to save her own family. When she ventured into the rain once more, her steps rang confidently on the well-watered streets.

There were many travel arrangements to be made if she was to be at the rendezvous at the right time.

Chapter One

Chapter One

NCC-74429 (USS *Gallant*)
Standard orbit over Luna.
Captain's Ready Room
Stardate 54571.54 (28 July 2377)

Lieutenant Commander Carolyn Kircheis tugged on the right cuff of her dress uniform jacket as she used the smooth and reflective surface of the large, deactivated viewscreen to check her appearance. Her tug seemed to help fit the jacket just right, as it had a tendency to feel as though it were sliding to the left whenever she wore it. She lifted her head to address the computer, as her desktop terminal displayed text to inform her that it was recording her words for posterity.

"Captain's log; stardate five-four-five-seven-one-point-five-four. We have arrived in orbit of Luna after just over eight weeks in transit from the Badlands. Our duty as part of Task Force Indemnity, under the command of Captain Donald Sandhurst and USS *Gibraltar*, has formally been concluded and we're awaiting our next assignment while enjoying a brief respite in the Sol Sector. Along with the transfer of our prisoner, Commander Jesse Kincaid, we also conveyed the remains of Commander Ariel Elannis to her family on the moon's surface below," she began. On the last word, she felt her throat constrict involuntarily.

In a strained voice, she quickly ordered, "Computer, pause recording." As the computer chirped in the affirmative, she spun around to place her hands atop her desk to support the full weight of her upper body. The surface of the desk directly beneath her eyes held drops as though a leak had sprung in the ship from above.

"Get it together," she admonished herself aloud, her voice barely above a whisper. Kircheis brought herself upright, then wiped at her eyes with both hands. She held them there, after a couple of quick movements, then slumped into the chair. The muscles of her face painfully taut, she rubbed at her cheeks as she fought hard to maintain her thin composure.

She allowed herself a teary-eyed chuckle. "How the hell am I supposed to make it through this thing, Ariel? I can't even make it out of my own ready room." Kircheis ran a hand over the top of her short, dirty blonde hair, and then cleared her throat.

"Computer, play back the log so far, please." She listened to the sound of her voice and the words. Satisfied that she managed to hold it in beforehand, she ordered the computer to continue the log.

"A memorial service for Commander Elannis has been scheduled for today, which I will be attending. Lieutenant Merrit Kelley, my executive officer, will mind the store while I'm away.

"*Gallant* is also undergoing the standard crew rotation. We will be taking on a number of newly-assigned crew in the next few weeks as we will be stopping over at Spacedock for resupply. I would like to commend my crew, at this time, for a job well done in this most recent mission. Kircheis, out." She tapped a finger on the desktop panel, "Computer, end log. Attach to the final mission report and mark for the attention of Rear Admiral Krystine Leone, Deputy Chief of Starfleet Intelligence."

As the computer responded once more, the ready room door announced a visitor with a five-tone chime.

"Yeah?" she replied loudly.

The single-panel hatch slid open to reveal the aforementioned Lieutenant Kelley. Unlike her commanding officer, she wore the uniform of the day. "Good morning, sir."

"Good morning, Merrit." Kircheis gestured toward the only open seat within the office and watched as her Amazonian first officer seemed to glide across the floor gracefully. It always amazed her to see Kelley move so swiftly in spite of her size. Kelley was a contrast to her in almost every respect; over six feet tall with brunette hair that she kept long enough to tie up in a French braid or a ponytail in a pinch. "What can I do for you?"

Kelley peered at Kircheis briefly. In her dulcet contralto, she expressed her worry in her tone, "Sir, have you been crying?"

Instinctively, Kircheis' hands flew to her face again to wipe her cheeks from wet to damp. "Yes, I was. Just... still dealing with it," she managed to stammer out.

"Captain..." she said while approaching the desk. "If you're not feeling up to it... I'd be happy to go in your place."

"Absolutely not!"

Kelley blanched at the sudden, rather loud rebuke.

"Sorry... I... I didn't mean it to sound that harsh," Kircheis said quickly with a wan smile. "I only meant that this is something I have to do. I wouldn't dream of sending someone in my place... not for Ariel."

"Of course, sir," replied Kelley. Her eyes drifted down to the deck. "I wouldn't dream of insinuating disrespect toward Commander Elannis."

The right half of Kircheis' lips lifted up in a smirk. "You meant well by it, I'm sure." She swiveled around the desktop terminal to face the executive officer and changed the subject. "Looks like we're losing a third of the crew to rotation."

Kelley jumped at the opportunity to discuss ship's business. "A little under twenty enlisted and one officer, yes, sir."

"Who did we lose?"

Kelley reached into her uniform jacket to retrieve a PADD that was much smaller than its standard-sized cousins. This PADD was designed especially for engineers, but somewhere during her career, she appropriated one for her own use. "Ensign al-Adel. Oh, I guess it's *Lieutenant al-Adel*, now. He was selected for promotion in the last promotion cycle and it was confirmed earlier today."

"I'll have to pass my congratulations to him, then."

"I've already done that, sir."

Kircheis' smirk grew. "Thank you."

"No problem, sir." Kelley continued, "We're also losing Chief Skarn and one more NCO."

"Not Karis, is it?"

"No, sir."

Kircheis let out a relieved sigh. Senior Chief Petty Officer Karis Amdal was the ship's chief engineering officer. His years of expertise with the Defiant-class had been invaluable, so much so she had written to Admiral Leone directly on his contributions to their team in the recent past. "I don't know how we'd get on without him."

"Agreed," Kelley said, distracted by the stream of information. "It's a petty officer, if I recall correctly. Petty Officer, uh... there it is, one of the operations NCOs, Petty Officer Eugene Lassard."

"Gene's heading out, too? I guess Hiroko's going to be disappointed by that."

"I didn't really know him that well," admitted Kelley. She did not bother to look up from her PADD.

"He was the specialist we had running the decryption on those Cardassian intercepts nine months ago," explained Kircheis. "I wrote him a letter of commendation?"

"I know who he is, I'm merely stating that I didn't get to know him."

"He was on the ship for over a year."

Kelley offered nothing more than a light shrug, as was her nature. In spite of her position as the executive officer, she tended to keep her own counsel when it came to her free time.

The computer chimed once, then announced, "This is your pre-scheduled warning. It is now thirteen-forty-five hundred hours."

Kircheis touched the control panel on her desk to silence the alarm. "I should get going." She rose up from the desk and looked at her reflection once more, only to tug on the left sleeve this time. Kelley rose from her seat, as well, out of respect.

"Sir, if you'd like, I could have the uniform fitted for you."

"Merrit, you're not my yeoman," Kircheis sighed. She placed her right hand on the arm of her first officer. "But, thanks all the same. You have the ship."

The effects of the transporter beam lingered for the briefest of moments after materializing Kircheis on the surface of the moon within the Starfleet transporter room adjacent to the Tycho City base. With a nod toward the transport petty officer, she strode out into the complex.

Among the many uniformed personnel, she stood out in the dress uniform of all white. That particular dress uniform was reserved for use by ship captains, and even though she only wore the two solid and one open pip of a lieutenant commander, her position as commander of the *Gallant* entitled her to the privilege. She was one of the minority who were merely Captains in title but were not yet bestowed with the four solid pips of a Captain's rank. Whenever she stood among others in dress uniforms, she stood a little taller knowing that she could stand alongside those who commanded starships.

Today was not going to be one of those days.

The short trip outside of the main dome of Tycho City and along the outskirts into Ariel's childhood home of suburban Lake Armstrong was new to Kircheis. She wondered briefly how often Ariel had gazed upon the line of small residential habitation domes that touched the edge of the lake while making this same trip from the city. The magnetic levitation train slowed, then stopped to allow her to disembark and walk the distance toward the memorial gardens where Ariel's family had invited her friends and colleagues to join them as they mourned their loss.

Lines of other Starfleet personnel in similar dress flowed into the open-air garden. Rows of white seats faced a small gazebo with ivy wrapped in its supports. Kircheis did not recognize many of them, assuming they might have worked with Ariel at other times during her long career.

Her eyes continued to scan for familiar faces, when a hand touched her left shoulder. She turned and found herself looking at Commander Gregory Aspinall.

His expectant grin turned into a wide, warm smile. "I thought that was you. How're you doing, C. J.?"

Kircheis wasted little time in embracing her old comrade from *Farragut*. "Oh, my God, *Greg*!" He held her for a moment, before separating

with a step back. She said, "I haven't seen you in years. How's Abbie?"

"I'm doing just fine," he replied with a chuckled emphasis. "Thanks for asking." He nodded to someone standing to the right of Kircheis. "And naturally, Abbie's doing great, because I'm here to remind her how much she loves me every day." She could almost hear Captain Abigail Atherton's eyes rolling in response and turned towards the other woman to greet her as well.

"Hey!" Kircheis said, thankful to see another old friend. "I meant to thank you both for your messages last year."

Greg took his wife's hand in his as they stood next to each other. "We knew you were busy," he said.

"I was, but I still felt bad about it."

"You can make it up to us, later," Abbie said. "Where are you sitting?"

Kircheis turned to look at the crowd. "I don't know. Is there assigned seating?"

"No, but I thought maybe you'd want to sit with the rest of us," Abbie replied. She gestured with her free hand toward the open gate. The trio moved into the garden and took their seats. Within minutes, she had Abbie to her left and Commander Wilson Nieves to her right.

Her row filled up quickly with others from their former ship: Commander Petra Bartlet and her successor as chief engineer, Captain Diego Herrera. Commander Allen Tomita and his family sat in the next row, while the admirals all had front row seating to the memorial. Rear Admirals Leone and Monica Covey, Vice Admiral T'Ciryra, Vice Admiral Joy Aspinall, and Fleet Admiral Alynna Nechayev were all in attendance. She saw that seated nearby Admiral Leone were her parents, retired Vice Admiral Angelina Leone and her husband, Commander Patrice Leone.

Before she could spot anyone else, the service began with a single male voice speaking over the garden's address system. Kircheis recognized it as belonging to the man standing within the gazebo, wearing his dress uniform, although its design was far older than hers. Of small stature, he commanded the attention of those assembled simply with his presence. He stood before a black-and-white two-dimensional photograph of Ariel, smiling while wearing her dress uniform. It was obviously a candid shot, as the image depicted her winking at the camera, while pointing a finger as though it were a gun.

"My name is Master Chief Petty Officer Patrick Katayama. My wife, my family, and I would like to thank you all for coming to honor the memory of our daughter, Ariel," he began in his gravelly voice. Kircheis had met him once while serving on *Farragut* and another time when they all met at Admiral Leone's house for a reception for her son, Dominic. "In the weeks we've had to prepare for this service, we've agreed to let a few of Ariel's family and friends say a few words."

Ariel's mother, Henda, took the center of the gazebo and spoke about her daughter, followed by her cousins on her father's side. After that, the Starfleet contingent made their presence known; Fleet Admiral Nechayev spoke, then Admiral Aspinall, followed by Vice Admiral and Commander Leone.

Finally, Rear Admiral Leone rose up to take her place. Unlike the others, she did not seem to take prepared remarks to the podium. With downcast eyes, she turned to face the crowd, only to shift again to address the image of Ariel.

"I miss you, Ariel," Leone began with an expulsion of breath. Her hands broke free of one another and slapped against her thighs. "I remember the first day that we met on *Victory*. You were two weeks out of Officer Candidate School as an ensign with everything to prove since they commissioned you from the ranks. No one wanted to sit with you because you didn't go to the Academy, but there was something about you that drew me to you. That first dinner together, I knew that we would be friends." Her words came just a bit too fast and Kircheis saw the rear admiral lean up against the right support of the gazebo.

"We hit it off pretty quickly, and you told me about your parents and what it was like growing up near Tycho City. Our first leave together was on an outpost that had nothing but a bar, and two dom-jot tables, but you managed to drink me under the table every night and hand me my ass over the dom-jot every day." That brought the obligatory round of chuckles from the crowd. Kircheis joined in, but for a different reason; Ariel had once told her that between the both of them, they combined for twenty-three very fatigued men and women. Ariel was responsible for twenty-two of them.

Leone continued, "That was just the beginning. Throughout our time in service over the past twenty years, no matter what game we played, from poker to dom-jot and your favorite, chess... you were always the victor. You never let up on me, you never once stopped, uh..." Her voice softened and trailed off. She pumped her fist at the photo a couple of times, seeming to buy herself some time to keep a tighter grip on her composure.

Kircheis fidgeted in her seat, feeling the ball of sorrow in the pit of her stomach grow as she watched Leone ramble. She took a moment to swivel her head around and saw the same growing look of concern on Greg and Wilson's faces. When Leone cleared her throat, Kircheis drew her attention back forward.

"The first time I brought you to meet my parents at Starbase Six, you became an instant hit with them," Leone paused to turn and look at her parents. "We lived through *Victory* together, and you stood as my maid of honor at my wedding. You were the godmother of my son, Dominic, who you loved... just as if he was your own, for so many years-" Her voice cut off again and her head bowed down. Several *Farragut* officers, including Kircheis, rose up out of concern for their former commanding officer.

Vice Admiral Angelina Leone stood up, apparently ready to go and aid her daughter. A few steps later, she grabbed at her hand and pulled her close for a hug. It seemed a strange display of support from a woman who everyone knew to be a distant mother at best. Kircheis sucked in her breath roughly, sinking back into her chair, while most merely watched in stunned silence. Only Abbie seemed to be able to react, her tone quiet but sharp. "For the love of God, get that woman away from her. She's not there to comfort her."

Rear Admiral Leone turned, her eyes and cheeks a watery mess. She leaned in to her mother's shoulder and brought their joined hands upward

to her chest. "I'm all right," she said into the audio pickup. "I'm all right, Mom."

Her mother leaned, seeming to offer some words, but it didn't get carried over the speakers. Kircheis watched Abbie's head shake as Rear Admiral Leone stiffened visibly, then nodded a few times. Kircheis thought she heard a "Yes, sir," from the rear admiral, but she was not entirely sure that she did. The vice admiral retreated to her seat and silenced the concerned inquiry of her husband with a curt look.

Still standing, Rear Admiral Leone pushed herself upright and regained her composure noticeably. Leone turned to face the crowd and the evidence of her tears glistened on her cheek. "I apologize," she offered with a weak smile. More tears fell, and she looked down at her hands, letting her long reddish-brown hair fall in front of her face.

Kircheis felt her heart ache more over the sight and stood up. She pushed past Wilson, much to his surprise and entered the aisle. Others followed her lead, but by the time she made it to the front, Henda had stood up and embraced Leone tightly.

Within the warmth of the embrace, Leone sobbed openly before everyone. Kircheis stopped in her tracks and without realizing it, she felt the tears fall from her eyes. Henda turned her head and gestured for them to hold off for now.

Her distance reduced to only a couple of meters, now, she could now hear Admiral Krystine Leone telling Ariel's mother, "I'm never going to get to see her again and tell her how much I love her."

"I heard you had a hell of a mission in the Badlands," said Wilson Nieves as he sipped a glass of champagne. Kircheis, along with the rest of the mourners from the service, had migrated to the reception held within the recreation facility at Lake Armstrong, where Ariel was said to have spent her teenaged years competing in swim meets.

Kircheis grimaced slightly. "Yeah, you could say that."

"And how's that little ship of yours handling?"

She smiled. "Extremely well. She's light, fast, and has enough firepower to leave you changed after you taste her rage."

Wilson took another sip and noted, "Most of those Defiants are overpowered, but I heard they really came through for us during the war. Did you see any action?"

"Uh yeah, I was on-" She was interrupted by another touch on the shoulder, this time from Captain Diego Herrera. "Captain," she said with a smile.

The larger Hispanic man pointed with the hand holding his glass. "Is this young man bothering you, C. J.? I'll be happy to sort him out, straight away."

Wilson chuckled, "Good to see you, sir." He shook hands with the man. "You look good for a chair-warmer."

Herrera suddenly clutched his chest with a pained expression. "Oh, you wound me, sir. Wound me right to the core, with your slanderous.. ah, shit, I can't keep that up for long," He let loose with a chortle. "Actually, the desk hasn't seen me in some time. They have me on a consulting job over at the Utopia facility giving some advice to this really hotshit lieutenant commander who's determined to push through this new class, and-

"And that class is something you shouldn't be talking about, is it, Captain?" said a stern voice.

All three officers straightened their posture around Fleet Admiral Alynna Nechayev. "Admiral," said Kircheis with a nod.

"Commanders, Captain," Nechayev said with a succinct nod. "In the interest of changing the topic of discussion, I presume that all of you are aware that the family has asked for *Farragut* alumni to return with them to the house tonight for dinner and dessert?"

The mood sobered up at the mention of the family's wishes. Kircheis nodded her understanding. "Yes, sir, I received the invitation."

"Then I shall see you all there." Nechayev turned just in time to see Rear Admiral Leone and two Vulcanoid officers approaching. "Krys," she greeted warmly. Her hand reached out to touch her forearm gently. She added to the trailing officers, "Commander, Lieutenant."

"Aunt Alynna," replied Leone with a weak smile. After pleasantries were exchanged, the fleet admiral moved toward the other guests and Leone joined Kircheis' group. "Gentlemen, lady, I believe you remember these two."

Kircheis grinned widely. "Ariennye and Teelis," she said. Inwardly, she held her exuberance in check at seeing the two Romulans wearing Starfleet uniforms. She had met them over seven years ago when they sought refuge aboard *Farragut*. Ariel was the officer who "rescued" them from the Empire. Since then, Ariennye served as a medical officer attached to a marine division, while Teelis was only eight months out of Starfleet Academy. "How are the jarheads treating you, Doctor?"

"When I received the posting, I had been told that the Marines were quite vigorous," Ariennye replied, her mouth curling slightly in mirth. "I haven't found them to be that taxing, though."

Wilson offered a thin smile and gestured with his glass toward Teelis. "Congratulations on your commission, Lieutenant. You must be dazzling the engineers at Utopia."

"Naturally," Ariennye answered on behalf of her younger sister, turning to give her a beaming smile. "I'd expect nothing less of a valedictorian with her scores." Her gaze flashed back to Wilson, adding, "S'Harien just entered the Academy and we expect him to follow the trail Teelis has blazed for him."

Herrera flashed a toothy smile toward Ariennye as she spoke of their younger brother. "High expectations that I'm sure he'll live up to, though, I hope that he brings satisfaction to himself before others."

Ariennye merely raised a brow, a deft mimicry of the expression of so many Vulcan officers. "If he does it right, he'll be more than satisfied, Captain," she assured him.

Teelis glanced quickly at her older sister, and once the commander gave her a subtle nod, she interjected. "He will do very well, I am sure, Captain. Our mother, by the way, does send her regrets. She had hoped to be able to come to the memorial service with Llair and Freddy, but they couldn't arrange transport in time. S'Harien too. Unfortunately, he's in the middle of first year training exercises. They had wanted to see you all again, sirs."

Kircheis couldn't help but smile again. In contrast to typically abrasive older sister, Teelis remained the polite young woman she remembered. "Are you enjoying your assignment on Utopia?" she asked.

"Freddy?" Wilson questioned.

"Oh, I am, sir. I'm learning quite a bit from my superiors," Teelis replied before answering the other commander's question. "Freddy is the nickname my brother, Friedhlov, earned shortly after we arrived in New Athens."

"They couldn't pronounce Friedhlov correctly," Ariennye noted dryly.

"Your family is still on New Athens?" Wilson wondered.

"Yes, sir. Mother is an integral part of the environmental science division. We all enjoy it there," Teelis quickly explained.

Herrera's eyes focused on something behind Teelis and Ariennye. "Oh, my God." He nodded his head toward someone. "Was he here the entire time?"

All heads turned to look at the subject of his query, and Commander Jesse Kincaid in dress uniform, flanked on either side by two members of Starfleet Security, stood at the entrance to the recreation center. His hands appeared to be free, which was not the manner in which Kircheis had left him when he transported over to the courier vessel that took him into custody.

"I didn't see him during the memorial," Kircheis said, her voice strained at the sight of him. She scoffed and turned her head away from the man. "I'm surprised they allowed him to appear, given everything that happened."

Wilson and Herrera shot Kircheis an admonishing look. Wilson said, "He served with us, surely he's welcome to mourn Ariel as much as the rest of us."

Kircheis opened her mouth to fire off a retort, but closed her mouth without saying a word. Given their sympathies toward their former executive officer, it was not politic to speak against their ideals in that setting, she figured. Instead, she fumed silently as she watched Kincaid moved toward the table where the non-alcoholic drinks were served. Abbie greeted him warmly, but had to keep her distance as the guards moved to prevent her from making physical contact.

He shouldn't even be here, she wanted to scream aloud. She wanted to walk up and tell him that he was responsible for the memorial in the first place, that if he hadn't decided to go rogue, Ariel might still be alive.

Leone broke the mood with a simple question, "Captain Kircheis, might I have a word in private?" She gestured toward the outside area through the double-doors as her intended destination.

Kircheis nodded once. "Of course, sir."

"If you'll all excuse us?" Leone asked, but did not wait for a response as she moved off to lead the way.

Once outside and away from the multiple conversations within the center, Kircheis immediately asked, "Are you all right, Admiral? Is there anything I can do for you?"

Leone tilted her head. "I'm fine. Why do you ask?"

"Earlier, when you were speaking..."

"Oh." Leone blushed as she relived the memory. "That. I'm fine," she repeated. "I wanted to speak to you about your next assignment."

Here!? Kircheis thought to herself. "Yes, sir?"

"I'd like to see you in my office tomorrow morning at oh-nine-hundred. I'd very much appreciate it if you would also dispatch your final mission reports, logs, ship status, et cetera."

"Already done, sir. I signed off on the last one just before I beamed down."

Leone smiled. "I should've known. Thank you."

"Anything else?"

"No, that'll be all."

An awkward moment passed as Kircheis and Leone stared at one another, the commander waiting for her friend to continue onto the more

personal matters of the day. It took her half a minute to realize that wasn't going to happen. "Oh, well, uh. Yes, sir," she confirmed awkwardly. As she walked back into the reception, she shook her head. There wasn't anything she could do if her friend wouldn't let her.

When she stepped back inside, the tip of her boot caught the bit of stripping along the carpeted floor and her loss of balance caused her to stumble across the threshold. A pair of strong arms reached out to steady her before she fell too far forward to recover. Her brief view of the floor suddenly ended when she pulled her head up and met the concerned gaze of Lieutenant Commander Pava Lar'ragos. He had commanded the Special Missions Team assigned to Task Force Indemnity and was in the same firefight that resulted in Ariel's death.

"You all right, Captain?" he asked after helping her stand upright.

Chagrined, Kircheis composed herself and straightened out her dress uniform. "Thank you, yes." She glanced down to confirm her presentability, then looked at him. "Are *you* all right?" she asked with genuine curiosity.

Pava's eyes moved away from Kircheis' briefly; they focused on the large image of Ariel on the far wall of the center. In a soft tone and a lost expression, he answered, "I don't know... I really just don't know."

As he stalked off into the crowd, Kircheis felt uneasy about the tone of his voice. She wondered if Pava would ever be all right.

Chapter Two

Chapter Two

Starfleet Headquarters
San Francisco, Earth
Office of the Deputy Chief of Starfleet Intelligence
Stardate 54573.63 (29 July 2377)

The last time Kircheis sat upon the couch waiting for admission to Admiral Leone's inner office, she had been "requested and required" to assume command of *Gallant*. The same sounds of people working within the office brought back the memory of her anxiously waiting for the admiral to finish up her previous appointment. That had been nearly a year and a half ago, barely a month after the end of the Dominion War.

She remembered how sweaty her palms got in the minutes leading up to the door opening. She smirked at the thought that had run through her head; they could change their minds and choose someone else for the position. Maybe they made a mistake and selected a different officer.

"Something funny, sir?" asked the admiral's flag lieutenant, Lieutenant (jg) Charity Szostak.

Kircheis looked up, broken out of her reverie. "What?" She paused briefly. "Oh, no. Sorry, just reliving some memories, is all."

Charity's attention remained on her as she expected more of an explanation.

She continued, "I was sitting right here when-

The door to the inner office opened and Admiral Leone stepped through. Charity and Kircheis got to their feet automatically as the admiral approached her desk.

Leone stepped in close to her desk and waved off the lieutenant, allowing her to retake her seat. She chuckled a thumb back toward her door and said, "Give them a few minutes to get reacquainted and then make sure they're on their way after that."

"Aye, sir," replied Charity. She activated her desktop terminal and set a reminder for herself.

The admiral added quietly. "Do it gently, please."

"Of course, sir."

Without waiting a moment, the admiral asked, "Do you have the mission profile for Vanguard?"

Charity looked through a couple of PADDs before selecting the proper one. "Right here, sir."

She accepted the PADD and scrolled through the lines of information. "They're still looking for a captain to join," Leone noted aloud to herself.

"Yes, sir."

Leone applied some information to the PADD's data and then handed it back to Charity. "Inform Starfleet Command that I'm recommending Captain Donald Sandhurst."

Charity looked down at the small screen before she returned her gaze to Leone. "Uh, sir, you're adding him to-

"Yes, I am. Make sure the Corps of Engineers is aware, right away. I made a promise to him and I intend to keep it," Leone said as she pulled away from Charity's desk and exited her outer office. Apparently, her eyeline never crossed paths with Kircheis, and she rose from her seat to follow.

"Admiral," called Kircheis.

Leone stopped, then turned around to face her. "Captain, I'm sorry. I was tending to the matter of Commander Kincaid and following up on the final report from *Indemnity*. . . We're set up in the conference room down the corridor, if you'd like to join us."

"Of course, sir." When they progressed down the corridor, she asked, "I heard you talking about Captain Sandhurst?" Kircheis wondered if the admiral would indulge her question or not.

"You remember that task force that Admiral Jellico is building for Delta Quadrant ops?" Off of Kircheis' nod, Leone continued, "He's looking for captains and crews for a few of the intercept groups and I'm sending him one of the best we've got."

"No arguments on that, sir."

Leone chuckled. "I read your report. You were very taken with his leadership."

"With good reason, Admiral."

They both turned into the proper conference room and there were a couple of people already waiting for them. Both of them wore the support services gold turtlenecks. The man was a captain and the other was Lieutenant (jg) Teelis Tei.

"May I present Captain Theodore Lo, of the special projects group at Utopia?" began Leone, with an outstretched hand toward the male

captain. "And you already know Lieutenant Tei, of course." She took her seat and said, "This is Lieutenant Commander Carolyn Kircheis, the commanding officer of USS *Gallant*. *Gallant* will be the test vehicle for this mission."

Lo gave a curt nod toward Kircheis, while Teelis stood for a moment and acknowledged both senior officers.

"Why don't we begin with an overview of the project, Captain," Leone said once everyone was seated, "with particular emphasis on *Gallant*'s role."

The captain touched the small panel on the conference table to activate the viewscreen. "Aye, sir. Utopia Special Projects has been developing a new kind of stealth system for smaller vessels such as runabouts and shuttles over the course of the past few years. The project was actually born just before the beginning of the Dominion War and didn't produce a working prototype until six months after the Treaty of Bajor was signed on DS-9."

The viewscreen showed the technical specification as the captain spoke. He lifted himself out of his seat and walked toward it to point out some of the details. "We're using a different approach with this idea. The Romulans use a cloaking generator to obscure and mask their emissions from sensors. What we're trying to do is use those emissions, but present them in a different light, like the warp core signature of a different class or another ship altogether in order to fool the enemy into thinking that it is not a threat vessel."

Kircheis furrowed her brow. "Forgive me, and I'm sure this has been discussed in another room with much higher ranking officers than I, but how is this not a violation of our treaty with the Rihannsu?" She glanced at Teelis, noting the lieutenant's small smile at her use of the proper name for her race.

"The Treaty of Algeron forbids the Federation from researching, investigating or developing a device which cloaks or masks the emissions of a ship, resulting in the sensors of another ship being unable to detect its presence. It does not forbid the Federation from developing a system to emit false sensor readings, which is what the new systems are designed to do, sir," Teelis explained.

Before Kircheis could voice her objections, Leone ordered, "Let's move on. Suffice to say that this project was vetted by the aforementioned higher-ranking officers. Please continue, Captain, Lieutenant."

"Yes, Admiral." Lo touched the panel once more and a Danube-class runabout appeared. "As Lieutenant Tei indicated, we're not pursuing a method employed by the Romulans. Instead, this device will use holography and shadows to achieve the same effect. We outfitted the prototype device to the runabout *Cuyahoga* within the auxiliary craft laboratory at Utopia."

The scene played out on the viewscreen; the runabout appeared to have small dots which Kircheis assumed were holodiodes similar to those seen within a holodeck. The dots lit up all at once and the runabout now appeared as a Ferengi scout vessel. Lo paused the playback at that point and turned to view the reactions from the non-engineers in the room.

Kircheis did nothing to hide her astonishment at the success. "That's incredible. Is the device limited only to projections of comparable size? Does it actually show up on sensors as the projected vessel?"

Lo replied, "The emissions from the runabout are modulated through a filter to approximate the Ferengi-type emissions. This smaller prototype had a margin of error, of course. But that's why Lieutenant Tei was brought onto the project and why we need *Gallant* for the third phase of testing." He looked at Teelis, expectantly, yielding the floor and the viewscreen to her.

"The margin of error has been reduced significantly since that particular test. Now, we estimate that only a master engineer who had been working with a particular vessel for many years would be able to detect the errors after careful scrutiny. We need to test the device on larger ships in transit. Naturally, we can only do limited testing within the Utopia yards. The *Gallant*, being a Defiant-class vessel, meets the requirements of a light, fast ship for the next phase of testing." Teelis glanced at Captain Lo once more, who gave her another nod, before continuing. "That phase of testing also requires us to move from the protected yards to open space."

Kircheis grinned. "We're happy to help out." She glanced back at Leone. "And that's the extent of the mission, sir? You made it sound like it was a more dire situation than testing a prototype."

Leone did not reply to Kircheis' words, instead touching the panel once more to show an overview of the Neutral Zone shared with the Rihannsu Star Empire. "Approximately three weeks ago, a message was received from within the Empire from a Galae officer named Nuhir t'Aimne. She holds the rank equivalent to a lieutenant commander. This officer had served aboard a Starfleet vessel just under a year prior as part of an exchange program, and sent the message to the captain who had commanded that vessel. He passed her message to Intelligence, and we found a couple of encrypted messages layered onto the original."

The viewscreen began to playback the original message, and as it did, lines of decrypted text began to appear overlaid on top of t'Aimne's speaking image.

The coded message read: "Captain James - Two of my family members are in great danger from the Tal Priax. I am asking for your assistance in getting the boys, their mother and myself out of the Empire. We will be at the following coordinates on Stardate 54701. I hope you will be able to help us. In order to ensure the cooperation of your superiors, I have classified information regarding the size, movements and operations of the Galae, which I will provide to you once we are safely within Federation territory. My family needs a new life, one free of the Empire."

When the playback completed, leaving the text on the screen, Kircheis swiveled her head in both directions. "I don't understand. Who or what is the Tal Priax?"

Leone's lips turned downward into a frown; it was clear she had knowledge of the group. "Ah, that's right. You weren't cleared for that information back then." She turned her head toward Teelis and gestured to Kircheis as she spoke, "Lieutenant Tei, if you wouldn't mind explaining to Captain Kircheis...?"

Teelis responded at first with a quick nod. In a quiet voice, she explained, "The Tal Priax are a military order whose sworn duty is to protect the Imperial family. More than just an Imperial Guard, the Tal Priax also functions as a home guard for ch'Rihan. They are to protect the homeworld at all costs, the final line of defense for the Rihanssu people. They are driven by certain dictates, upholding within their ranks the highest standards for racial purity, excellence, religious devotion and physical beauty. All members of the Tal Priax are conscripted at the age of fifteen, after children have successfully completed their Rite of Passage. Conscription is compulsory, as is breeding with another member of the Tal Priax. Almost all children of the Tal Priax become Tal Priax. The rest usually commit ritual suicide after they have failed to gain entrance."

"I'm no expert on Rihanssu culture, but how is it that this isn't common knowledge?" Kircheis wondered. "It sounds utterly barbaric, almost... *Klingon*."

"The Federation first became aware of the Tal Priax approximately eight years ago. Among the common Rihanssu, it is an honor to be selected, to have a child whose life will be one of great honor and status. Among the noble Rihanssu, it is also an honor, an affirmation that their bloodlines are pure. Most consider the Tal Priax to be an honor guard, and a line of defense that will never be used, thanks to the strength of the Galae. As a result, they are not discussed with outsiders, lest an attacker take into account their size and strength."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute..." Kircheis raised her hand briefly, as she thought back through her limited recall of Rihanssu history. "Haven't there been a number of Imperial assassinations? If they're that good, how could they have allowed their charges to die so easily?"

"The Tal Priax are defenders of the integrity of the Imperial bloodline. It is widely believed that no assassination has occurred without their permission and even assistance," Teelis replied bluntly. "As I recall from my study of human history, the Praetorian Guard of the Roman Emperors was suspected in several of their assassinations as well."

Kircheis leaned back in her seat. "Those were the good ol' days, I guess." She shot Teelis a look as though she had an epiphany. "Eight years ago? That's around the same time as when you showed up on *Farragut*. Unless I'm missing something, that can't just be a coincidence."

Teelis looked down at the table underneath her hands. "I am a refugee from Tal Priax conscription, sir."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know," Kircheis replied softly. The details and motivation behind the Tei family's sudden appearance in Federation space had been classified, but she was merely an ensign and obviously too low on the food chain to have that information. Her eyes focused on the conference room table and she took in a deep breath as she thought aloud, "It makes sense, though. If they were looking for paragons of Rihanssu excellence and beauty, I mean."

To Kircheis's surprise, Teelis actually seemed to blush. Teelis Tei might be the first modest Rihannha she had ever heard of, much less seen in the flesh.

Leone cleared her throat. "Yes, well. The importance of this mission with the possibility of gaining invaluable intelligence on the Galae warrants the use of the stealth prototype to secure a route for *Gallant* to proceed beyond the Neutral Zone."

Captain Lo added, "And we'll be assigning an engineer from Lieutenant Tei's team to assist in the operation of the device. *Gallant* will need to proceed to Utopia Planitia for installation of the system."

"I'm sorry, an engineer from her team?" Kircheis asked pointedly. She stood up and walked to the viewscreen to peer at the tactical map, then folded her arms and levied a gaze directly at Leone. "Admiral, if I may be so bold, I would rather have Teelis with me. Not only is her technical prowess an asset, but she has insight into Rihanssu society that would be equal to our task, here."

Lo was quick to object. "Admiral, with all due respect, I need the lieutenant to remain on Utopia for the project. I don't believe it is necessary to risk her life and experience in the field."

Leone listened to both officers without comment. Her eyes drifted toward Teelis, who remained stone-faced through the discussion. The admiral tapped the index and middle fingers of her right hand on the table once, then decided, "I agree with Captain Kircheis. Lieutenant Tei will report to *Gallant* for the duration of the mission."

"Admiral," Lo's worry lines appeared on his face at the news. "Her presence on my team is irreplaceable!"

"I'm afraid that the lieutenant's expertise in Rihanssu culture is the deciding factor in my decision, Captain. You will have to make do without her for a while."

Lo's worry turned to anger. "Admiral, I insist that you reconsider!"

Leone rose from her seat and drilled into him with an intense gaze from her narrowed eyes. "You forget your place, Captain. I realize that this will alter your delivery timetable on other projects, but the admiralty has decided that this mission is paramount to the security of the Federation. You will carry out your orders and detach Lieutenant Tei from your command. I want those orders on my desk by the end of the day."

"Sir," Teelis began, addressing Captain Lo. "You needn't worry about me. If I was captured, I would not be killed. I will also update all my files today to ensure you have the most up to date specifications on the projects to which I am assigned."

Lo looked between the three women within the room and suddenly placed his hands in front of him in surrender. "I understand, Admiral. I will make sure you have those orders as you've directed. By your leave, sir?"

Leone gave him a brief nod in reply. Lo, on his way out of the conference, stopped by Teelis' seat and said, "Thank you, Lieutenant."

"Of course, sir."

Once Lo left the room, Leone continued with the mission briefing to outline the further details to Kircheis and Teelis.

"I feel like I haven't seen you in over a day," Kircheis said as she saw Merrit Kelley waiting for her in *Gallant*'s transport bay. She stepped down from the small pad and walked toward the exit.

Kelley kept pace with her as they headed for the mess hall on deck two. "Actually, sir, it has been over a day. You got in very late last night and you left for your meeting on Earth before I reported for duty this morning."

Kircheis turned into a hatch that led to the service stairwell on the port side of the ship. Her uniform boots clattered against the metallic surface as they made their way down to the second deck. It was her preferred method of traveling, if it was only one deck down or up. "Time flies when you're having fun, I guess," she noted as they descended. "Are they all ready?"

"Yes, sir. They're all waiting in the mess hall for you," replied Kelley.

Because *Gallant* was a four-deck corvette with a little over fifty in total crew, it did not warrant a great many luxuries found on larger ships. It had no holodecks and no conference rooms. That meant for meetings with teams or the senior staff, they commandeered the mess hall. The senior staff for *Gallant* consisted of seven or eight individuals depending on the circumstances and assigned crew.

When Kircheis and Kelley entered the mess, all of the officers got to their feet. Not out of habit of respecting the commanding officer, but out of concern.

Lieutenant Hiroko Yamamoto, *Gallant*'s chief of operations, was the first to step forward. "Sir, are you holding up okay?" The others looked on, interested in what Kircheis had to say.

"I'm doing as well as can be expected, thanks. I got to see a lot of very old friends that I'd not seen in years, but the reason for the event..." their captain trailed off. She forced a smile on her lips and nodded. "I think Ariel would've approved, to be honest."

The sight of their captain in better spirits had the appropriate effect. They smiled in response and then returned to their seats. Kelley remained standing behind Kircheis, holding her PADD out so she could read it.

Kircheis noticed that there was an unfamiliar face in the group, belonging to a tall and thin officer with the single gold pip of an ensign on the collar of his gold turtleneck. She pointed toward him while looking at Kelley. "W-Who is this?"

The owner of the new face pointed at himself, in an attempt to confirm that he was the subject of her question. When Kircheis nodded, he smiled confidently and introduced himself. "Ensign Frederick Schweinfurt, sir, come aboard to join. It's an honor to be here."

"*Schweinfurt*?" asked Kircheis. "Who are you?" She turned to Kelley for an explanation.

"Replacement officer, sir," Kelley said immediately. "Back-filling Lieutenant al-Adel's spot on the roster. Communications officer."

"Right. Okay." Kircheis faced the ensign and dropped her pointing finger to wave at him, instead. "Hello, there. Welcome aboard." She turned back to Kelley, "*Schwein* furt?"

Schweinfurt helpfully noted, "Sir, your pronunciation is correct. *Schwein* means 'pig' in German. I was even called 'Piggy' at the Academy and most of my classmates know me by that name." Far from being embarrassed, he seemed pleased that he was so well known.

Yamamoto remarked, "Took the midshipman all of two seconds at the Academy to come up with that one."

"Yeah, I'm not a midshipman at the Academy, so I'll stick with 'Ensign Schweinfurt,'" Kircheis noted, unable to hide her displeasure with the suggested appellation. "In the meantime, I assume you'll be reporting to Lieutenant Yamamoto."

Piggy nodded. "Yes, sir. And we already know each other, since we went to the Academy together."

"I was in my fourth year when he was a plebe," said Yamamoto quickly, gazing around the table to accentuate her point that she did not know him particularly well.

Kircheis closed her eyes as though she were pained by the exchange and shook her head as the conversation between the officers grew. She snapped her fingers a couple of times and ordered, "All right, let's get started."

Once everyone was settled in again, the captain began, "We've been tasked for another intelligence mission by the admiral. This time, we're really going to be pushing the limits of our training, because our destination is deep within Rihannsu space." She stopped to let that sink in, and when she saw very little reaction, she continued with the briefing and described the impetus and the goals.

"This will mean that we'll be taking on some additional personnel, a few will be temporary for the duration and others will be permanent additions to the crew," explained Kircheis. "One person of note is Lieutenant Teelis Tei. She is the project lead over at Utopia Planitia special projects, and will be assisting engineering." The captain paused for dramatic effect, and then informed them, "She is a recent graduate of Starfleet Academy. And she is also a Rihannsu."

That got their attention, especially Kelley's. For reasons passing understanding, Schweinfurt held a grin larger than before at the news, while Yamamoto had a brief look of consternation. Kircheis heard her executive officer shuffle closer and say softly, "Sir, is that true?" The others followed suit with various questions of their own with the exception of the two junior officers and the chief engineer, the Andorian Senior Chief Karis Amdal. He sat only with his antennae twitching, possibly at the sudden commotion.

With outstretched arms to quiet them down, the captain told them, "I've known Lieutenant Tei for seven years. She is an outstanding and brilliant woman, and she worked hard to earn her rank. Whatever issues you might have with having a Rihannsu serve on our crew, stow it

someplace where it won't show. Admiral Leone's orders. As a further note, she prefers and I expect that you will call her people by their proper name, the Rihansu."

On that, everyone quieted down, including Kelley.

"In addition, we'll be taking on a new tactical officer, Warrant Officer Ephraim Grey. He's coming out of the Third Special Missions Team. Questions?" she said, opening the floor.

"Will Mister Grey's team be joining him?" asked Kelly.

The captain shook her head. "No, we're only receiving Mister Grey. And one more point on that subject: he is a permanent assignee to the crew."

"Captain," said Chief Donald Hogan, the ship's master-at-arms and *de facto* head of security. "Are there to be any special security arrangements for the lieutenant while she's on board?"

Kircheis folded her arms. "I don't understand. Why would we need them?"

"Sir, allowing a Rom... I mean, a *Rihansu* access to an unsecured system might be hazardous," he clarified.

"Lieutenant Tei has a security clearance above yours, Chief," Kircheis explained tersely. "She will require access to key systems in order to bring the stealth system online. Therefore, I don't accept the premise of your question. Who's next?"

Yamamoto asked, "Do we know approximately how long we have for testing before we make the rendezvous point?"

"Thirty days for installation and programming, I believe. Lieutenant Tei can probably answer your questions in more detail after she arrives later today," replied Kircheis. "I'm sure that your division will be critical in helping her and the Engineering team in the next four weeks."

"We'll be ready, sir," Yamamoto promised with a quick nod.

Piggy raised a hand. "Captain?"

"Yes?"

"Can I be the one to greet her when she comes on board?"

Kircheis rolled her eyes and sighed loudly. "Anyone else have a question? No? Dismissed."

Warrant Officer Ephraim Grey stood in Transporter Room Four at Utopia Planitia, his duffel at his feet. He had arrived five minutes prior to the appointed time for his beam-up to the *Gallant* and was currently waiting for Lieutenant Tei to arrive. While doing so, he coolly evaluated the curious look he was getting from the Terran transporter chief.

Such an appraisal was nothing new for him. Seven generations of Terran-Vulcan interbreeding had left him looking more or less Vulcan except for his heterochromatic eyes. Vulcans did not have such a trait. His green eye and his blue eye definitively marked him as someone who was not exactly Vulcan. After a minute, he took pity on the man and noted, "I am of mixed human and Vulcan descent," and noted with satisfaction that the chief visibly relaxed.

The distinctive whoosh of the doors opening announced the arrival of the lieutenant. Grey turned with interest, eager to get his first look at one of the Romulans serving within Starfleet. He knew each of them by name, but had yet to serve with any of them. Despite knowing her history, he was taken aback by his first sight of the lieutenant. Not one person who had spoken to him about this mission had indicated she was exceptionally beautiful.

"Mister Grey, I presume?" Lieutenant Tei inquired after a look at his uniform. She was carrying a duffel of her own.

"Indeed, sir," he replied with a slight nod.

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mister Grey. I look forward to working with you on this mission," she returned.

"Likewise, sir." And privately congratulated himself on correctly predicting her surprised reaction. "My family follows a slightly different interpretation of Surak, sir. I have been known to smile and even crack a joke," he explained.

The lieutenant took a moment to absorb that information and her smile blossomed anew. "It will be nice not to be the only Vulcanoid aboard who smiles, Mister Grey. Shall we?" she invited, gesturing to the transporter pad.

He nodded his agreement, finding himself rather liking this new officer. "Yes, sir," he replied as he hefted his duffel and stepped onto the pad. When they were both ready, the lieutenant turned her attention to the chief. "Chief Berensen, if you will?"

Within moments, they were materializing in one of the transporter rooms onboard the *Gallant*. When his vision cleared, Grey saw that a gold-uniformed ensign was waiting for them. The man was somewhat taller than normal for a Terran, with red-gold hair and light eyes which were completely attentive to the lieutenant.

"Lieutenant Tei," the ensign greeted her enthusiastically. "Welcome aboard *Gallant*. I'm Ensign Frederick Schweinfurt, but you can call me Piggy. I don't know if you remember me, but we had Comparative Religions and Quantum Mechanics together at the Academy." Eagerness to be recognized infused the young man's tone.

Grey heard Tei's intake of breath as soon as the ensign began talking. He had no doubt she recalled the young man and her next words confirmed it. "Yes, Ensign. We also had Command Ethics together," she acknowledged, her tone calm and polite. This recollection caused the young man to grin. Before he could further press the lieutenant, Grey spoke up.

"I am Warrant Officer Ephraim Grey," he introduced, stepping off the pad and extending a hand to the ensign. "Could you direct us to our quarters?" he inquired, trying to remind him of his task.

Piggy seemed surprised that Grey was also in the room. "Of course, Mister Grey. I was just going to get the lieutenant settled first."

"I only need to be directed to my assigned quarters," Tei replied hastily. "I am very familiar with the layout of Defiant-class vessels."

"Whereas I would need a tour," Grey added.

That seemed to deflate the ensign somewhat. His shoulders slumped but he nodded. "Yes, sir, Mister Grey."

As the lieutenant disembarked from the pad, she shot the warrant officer a grateful look. Grey understood then he would probably be spending more than a little time running interference for the Romulan. The ensign clearly had a long-standing infatuation with the woman.

Well, at least it would provide some entertainment on the cruise.

Chapter Three

Chapter Three

NCC-74229 (USS *Gallant*)

Docked at Special Projects Dock Bravo, Utopia Planitia Fleet Yards, Mars.

Engineering Compartment

Stardate 54661.3 (30 August 2377)

Part of the white noise of any engineering compartment aboard a ship with a warp core included the rhythmic thrum from the matter and antimatter injectors as they fed the dilithium reaction chamber. To *Gallant*'s chief engineering officer, Senior Chief Petty Officer Karis Amdal, it was the heartbeat of the ship. *Gallant* was small enough that he could feel the vibration when he placed his hands flat on the bulkhead near his bunk in the aft section on deck three.

During periods of refit or maintenance, however, an offline core meant silence within the compartment. To Karis, it felt wrong to have the ship be that silent, and though he would not admit it to anyone, it annoyed him. He missed the gentle purr of his warp core and bustled through the stealth system installation steps in order to bring the core back online as soon as possible. Karis worked alongside the Romulan for the three and a half weeks the ship had spent at Utopia Planitia. He spent every waking minute installing, adjusting, testing, and starting the cycle all over again in the hopes of getting the warp core back online sooner.

The Rihannsu certainly did not make his task any easier. Each day was a clone of the one before. She would announce the day's tasks in the refit and they would begin. Then he had to make it all work.

"There," said the senior chief in a tight tenor tone. "The new waveguides are showing a positive connection and assuming they don't blow out the main energizer, should feed power to the holographic system." He leaned to the side and shouted to a nearby petty officer third class, "Send two to deck four to lock down that damned secondary, now!"

As the petty officer slapped his commbadge to pass the order, Teelis raised her eyebrow. "Is there a problem, Senior?"

Karis slapped the side of the console. "The Defiant-class are overpowered and overgunned little ships. The secondaries are used to route excess plasma to the other systems."

She understood immediately and finished the thought aloud. "As a result, the system must overload regularly. You must go through a lot of parts."

"You might be a bit too young to recall during the Dominion War, the Defiant-class would churn through phaser power cells," he replied while he waited for a report from the maintenance team on deck four. "Normally, you would see a burned out cell once every six to eight months. With the cannons firing non-stop, those cells were burning out once every week. That's a result of that excess energy being fed to the systems."

Teelis listened, but her eyes were focused on the status display. "You have an unusual talent for handling this class, Senior."

"I was assigned to the class prototype at Utopia Planitia," he admitted. "I served aboard *Defiant* as a petty officer before the war began and had the good fortune of working with Captain Sisko while he was a Commander at Utopia and under Senior Chief O'Brien when the ship was attached to Deep Space Nine. I've been aboard Defiants ever since."

"This is the first one I've stepped aboard, although I studied the design previously."

"There we go," he said on the heels of her words. "Secondaries are locked down on deck four and we can proceed with a power test to the new node."

Teelis' hands quickly moved over her console. "Standby status confirmed and the EPS power taps are ready to feed."

Karis tapped his commbadge. "Engineering to bridge."

The voice of the ship's executive officer replied over the comm system, "Bridge. This is Kelley. Go ahead."

"XO, Lieutenant Tei and I are ready to perform the first power test. You wished to be notified," he reminded her.

At the mention of Teelis' presence, a noticeable tension entered the exec's tone. "Very well," she said, clipping her words slightly. "I will notify the captain. Kelley, out."

Karis allowed himself a quiet smirk. The only good thing about this refit was that the presence of the Romulan had sparked something in the personality of the XO. "As I was saying, I've served on Defiants for years. On *Gallant*, just over a year and a half. I've served with Lieutenant Kelley for most of that and this is the first time I've ever seen her act like that around anyone. Didn't know she had it in her."

Teelis said nothing in response, as if totally engrossed in the task before her.

"Did you and her serve someplace before or something?"

"The lieutenant and I have never met prior to my arrival aboard this vessel nor am I aware of her having served with my elder sister."

Karis' antennae twitched slightly. "I see. So, she's irritated on spec?"

"I am not familiar with that idiom, Chief."

A long pause followed as he considered her irritatingly Vulcan-like response. The engineer folded his arms and tried another tack; "Maybe she doesn't like Romulans?"

"Who doesn't like Rihannsu?" said Kircheis pointedly as she took the final step to stand behind them at the master situation monitor.

Before Karis could frame a reply, Teelis turned to face her friend and temporary commanding officer. "Idle conversation, Captain. Would you like to be updated on the status of the project, sir?"

Kircheis appeared to hold the pair of them with a curious expression before she nodded toward the display. "Where are we?" In tandem, both engineers brought her to the most recent accomplishment, to which Kircheis gave an understanding nod. "And once we pass this power test, we're cleared to move on to the next phase?"

"The emitter test, yes, sir," replied Karis. "We can then move to the automatics testing and so on and so forth."

The captain gave a quick nod. "Let's proceed toward the final test with all due speed. People are waiting on us."

Teelis gave him a look and he responded to the captain for them both. "Yes, sir."

The mess hall was busy during this time of the evening, with the first shift getting dinner and the third beginning to show up for breakfast. Despite that, there were a few tables where no one asked to join those already there. The first was the Captain's table, where Kircheis was already seated. The second was occupied by both Vulcanoids on board and they were speaking in low tones.

Grey passed a PADD back to Teelis with his inputs on the display. "Would I use this conjugation with that context?" he asked softly. His eyes drifted over toward the Captain's table a couple of times as he did so, out of habit.

"No. That would be more appropriate for a high-ranking person addressing another person of similar social status," Teelis clarified after looking over the words. "You will be mimicking a common member of the House and as such, you would not have need for this conjugation." She seemed to have no interest in the activities of others in the mess hall.

He pressed his lips together and flared his nostrils as he exhaled. "The learning curve is a bit steep with this language. It has a passing relationship with some of the older dialects of Vulcan, but I think that I may use a form incorrectly and betray the fact that I am not a native speaker."

"Think of it as a more structured form of Vulcan. That is what my sister believes occurred during the passage from Vulcan to ch'Rihan; the settlers formalized the language and tenses. When I see ancient Vulcan, it is like viewing my own language through a cloudy lens. It looks familiar, but nothing more." As she spoke, Teelis made a few changes to the PADD. "I have erased all the tenses you need not bother to learn at this juncture. Hopefully, this will enable you to streamline your learning." She smiled encouragingly as she looked up again.

Grey accepted the PADD and his eyes glanced over the contents. "This is less overwhelming, to be sure," he said, his fingers tapping the display downward. "And I would say that modern Vulcan is far more logical a language. No need to couch our verbs in formal or informal forms; we simply prefer clarity over all else."

"Our culture prizes knowledge but not necessarily the transmission of knowledge far and wide," Teelis admitted. "There is a lot of deliberate ambiguity in our language, as well as many indicators of status. It does complicate the language but when you are born into it, it seems quite natural."

"Never use one word where ten will suffice?,' I suppose," Piggy interjected. The ensign had made his way into the hall and picked up a tray without the lieutenant having noticed. Only she expressed some surprise when he spoke.

"I suppose," Teelis allowed slowly, glancing at the warrant officer as if asking for his assistance.

Grey chose to misunderstand her look. "A twist on an old Terran saying. It's supposed to be 'never use ten where one will suffice.' The ensign is attempting levity."

Nearly over Teelis' murmured, "I see," Piggy asked eagerly, "Mind a third for dinner, sir, Mister Grey?" He did not exactly wait for a response to his query, already having set down his tray before Teelis could nod slightly, resigned.

"More language lessons?" Piggy plowed on in the conversation he was having with the other officer.

"The installation schedule does not permit me much time to tutor the warrant officer on language and cultural norms except over meals at this juncture," Teelis noted succinctly. Grey noticed that her back had straightened and her tone had become more formal. He doubted that Piggy noticed. Or cared.

"I've always been fascinated by the Rihannsu culture," Piggy eagerly noted. "Like the naming conventions, with the honoring of your ancestors and the use of geographical locations as middle names."

"Apparently," Grey affirmed.

"I do not think that is terribly different from Terran naming norms," Teelis answered, carefully cutting into her clam pancake.

"Definitely not. My last name, Schweinfurt, is actually a city in Germany. When my ancestors moved from that region to the Americas, their name was inadvertently recorded as their hometown. But they used it anyway because it was easier for non-German speakers to pronounce."

Despite his instinct to remain silent, Grey asked curiously, "What was the original surname of your family?"

"Pflueger. It's a strange consentant sound in English," Piggy answered the man, giving him only a brief glance.

Despite her own obvious reluctance, Teelis seemed drawn into the conversation. She admitted, "When my family immigrated to the Federation, we also changed our surname. We were t'Khnialmnae, which means the 'House of Khnialmnae.' When we arrived, we chose the name Tei, which is the name of the House in which my mother was born. We dropped the possessive since we are not of that House, merely genetically related to it."

"Why didn't you just keep Khnialmnae?" Piggy wondered.

"We felt it was inappropriate to keep the name of the House that would execute us if we were ever caught."

Grey looked from one officer to the other before pronouncing, "Her story is better."

Within the same mess hall, the table nearest to the replicator bank on the portside was informally known as "the captain's table." *Gallant*'s size precluded a captain's mess, as larger starships often carried. In lieu of that, Kircheis often chose to sit at a particular table out of habit and over time the rest of the crew simply accepted it as an unspoken norm. Of course, Merrit Kelley often dined with the captain, as she did that evening. Ship's business was sometimes conducted over meals, so long as it was not sensitive information.

When the executive officer arrived, Kircheis noticed the sudden change in her demeanor, but could not ascertain what caused it. "Something wrong, Merrit?"

Kelley took her seat, with a mug already in her hand and set it upon the metallic table. Her tone briefly distracted, she replied, "Uh, no, sir. Nothing's wrong."

The captain decided to take her at face value, and changed the subject. She kept her tone low as she intimated, "I spoke with Captain Tersh'on this morning. He mentioned that he's looking for an officer to command *Audacious*."

"The new construction?" Kelley said. "I'm sure you're an excellent choice, sir."

Kircheis chuckled. "Well, thank you. However, the officer I recommended was you."

Kelley sat quietly for what seemed to be a long time. "I don't know what to say."

"How about, 'thank you?'"

"Thank you, sir," came her quick reply. "I'm not sure that I have enough seniority."

Kircheis picked up her mug and brought it to her lips. Before she took a sip, she mentioned, "You will in six months. The timing is perfect, because she won't be ready until then. They have a series of modifications in mind for her. Probably if our mission goes well, this new holodevice will be one of them."

"Even so, sir, I'm sure there are more senior lieutenants in the fleet who're fighting for command."

"Actually," Kircheis showed off her teeth as she smiled, "you're among the group at the top of the list in seniority. At least, of those serving within the squadron." She paused to consider the sudden lack of confidence. "Do you not want command? I can go back to the captain and let him know to look at someone else."

Kelley shook her head. "No, sir. I'm very gratified by your confidence in me. I would be honored to assume command, it's just that I was taken aback by the news. I assumed that at the end of the year, I would simply put in for another tour aboard *Gallant*."

"Really?"

"Yes, sir."

Kircheis put her left elbow on the table and leaned in to stress the sincerity of her words. "I would have thought to see a little more excitement from you on this. Or are you more suited to just being my XO?"

Kelley swallowed before responding in an earnest tone. "Sir, I've been privileged to serve under your command. The last year and half, we've seen more action than the typical Defiant-class ship, given our attachment to Admiral Leone's flag."

"All right."

"I guess it never occurred to me that command would come this early in my career. I saw myself being transferred to a larger ship, taking a staff position aboard and so on and so forth."

"It works a little differently when you're working on the smaller ships, of course. But, I see what you're saying. You thought you would be moving out of the squadron and onto a light or heavy cruiser?"

Kelley nodded slowly. "When I sought my appointment to the Academy, I had visions in my head of standing on the bridge in command of a Galaxy-class starship on the edge of known space." Off her captain's amused expression, she shrugged. "At least, that's what the recruitment propaganda always seems to show."

"Seen those, yeah."

As Piggy walked by with his tray to join Teelis and Grey, Kelley continued, "Like I said, it was a surprise."

"A pleasant one, I hope."

"Absolutely, sir. Thank you for your recommendation."

"You more than deserve it," Kircheis turned back to her mug. "And for what it's worth, I wouldn't mind keeping you aboard as my XO for another tour of duty, but as your captain, I also have to do what's right for your career. Staying aboard *Gallant* might seem like the safer option, but Starfleet needs good, experienced officers to lead in the field. You are one of those people, Merrit."

Kircheis could not help but smile at how the compliment caused her exec to flush under her scrutiny. Kelley's eyes stared down at the table, but lifted up her gaze to meet Kircheis'. "I won't let you down, sir."

Chapter Four

Chapter Four

NCC-74229 (USS *Gallant*)
Stationkeeping near Special Projects Dock Bravo, Utopia Planitia Fleet Yards, Mars
Main Bridge
Stardate 54663.7 (31 August 2377)

Warrant Officer Grey entered the bridge a few minutes before the beginning of his shift at the tactical station. He took a moment to appraise the area as others came onto the bridge to relieve their counterparts from the overnight shift. The fire control specialist who held the night shift gave him a fatigued smile as he stood from his seat.

"Active night?" Grey asked.

The petty officer shook his head. "Very uneventful," he admitted. "Mostly preliminary tests from the engineering section and we conducted a level four diagnostic of the weapon systems. We're pretty much sitting a shore watch, but it gave us something to do."

Grey raised a brow, not caring much for the color commentary. "And the result of the diagnostic?" he asked pointedly.

"Oh, all green, Mister Grey," the petty officer replied quickly, his posture stiffening slightly under the sudden scrutiny from his division officer.

"I hope, for your sake, that the diagnostic was not simply an exercise in staving off boredom," Grey intoned. "I will be going through the final report later today. I relieve you."

"I stand relieved, sir." Without another word, the petty officer retreated from the bridge as Grey turned his attention to the console immediately.

Lieutenant Hiroko Yamamoto, seated at the operations console nearby, remarked, "A little harsh, Mister Grey."

"With all due respect, sir, work for the sake of keeping someone busy often has the opposite effect upon readiness," Grey did not turn his head as he spoke.

Hiroko gave Grey her full attention. "This isn't the SMT."

"It makes little difference. I expect my people to execute with precision." With that, Grey met her gaze. "I would hope that we all strive for that, especially aboard this ship."

"I don't understand. Why would this ship be different from any other?"

"*Gallant* is an intelligence asset, Lieutenant. I shouldn't have to remind you of that."

"No, of course, not. Sorry, I thought you meant something else," she replied, her tone and posture cowed. "Maybe we could do with a little more of that mindset around here."

"I agree," said Kelley from behind them. "More of that is never bad," she said, gesturing with the coffee mug in her hand. "Are we ready for the live test?"

Both Grey and Hiroko indicated in the positive. As did most of the other sections, except engineering. The young-looking chief seated there turned her head and admitted, "Sorry, XO. Senior's making some last-minute checks on the power grid."

Kelley could not help her small smile. "As usual. We go when he says, 'go.'"

"Aye, sir."

The bridge comm system erupted with a short three-tone chime, then Teelis' voice called out, "Engineering to bridge. The senior chief is ready to proceed with the probe deployment."

Hiroko replied, "Probe is loaded with the Rihannsu sensor package, as requested, XO. It's in the forward tube, ready to launch at a distance of five hundred meters to the port side and hold position."

"Understood." The exec opened her side of the channel. "Engineering, this is Kelley. Probe is on deck. We're deploying now." She nodded to Hiroko. "At your convenience, Lieutenant."

"Aye, sir. Firing now." The main viewscreen blinked once to show the interior of the massive secure dock at Utopia Planitia. A small flash from the bottom of the screen showed, then a probe with its small engine firing sped out to a short distance from the ship and counter-thrusted to hold at the pre-programmed range. "Probe is now in position."

Grey announced, "We're receiving telemetry."

"On screen," ordered Kelley. She tapped her commbadge, "Bridge to captain, we're ready for the live test."

"On my way," said Kircheis, before she closed the channel. Within moments, she stepped onto the bridge and took her seat in the center.

Kelley took up her customary standing position on the captain's right side. Gone was the coffee mug from before, replaced by her PADD.

"Engineering, this is Kircheis," she spoke to the audio pickups. "Ready whenever you are."

Karis' voice was strained. "Skipper, we're good to go down here. I'm satisfied that we won't blow out the power grid... too much."

Kircheis smirked. "Glad to hear it." She addressed Grey, "Black alert. Engage stealth mode, program one."

"Program one engaging, aye, sir," replied Grey. "Black alert, confirmed." The bridge lights dimmed to indicate that the tactical experiment was now engaged. On the viewscreen, *Gallant*'s image shimmered somewhat, taking on the hazy form of a Merchantman-class light freighter. "Program one online."

"Emissions translation matrix *appears* to be online, sir," reported Hiroko. "I'm showing proper translation of all outboard emissions, including some leaked intercom signals. The probe is... uh, not sure what's happening."

Grey brought up the probe telemetry on his main display and noted, "The matrix program isn't fooling the probe quite yet, sir. I don't think the overlay signal is powerful enough to mask our normal running mode."

Kircheis ran her hand over her console quickly. "Can we boost the signal?"

Over the comms, Karis could be heard deferring to Teelis. "Lieutenant?"

"Not without overloading the new power nodes," Teelis answered. "With the Captain's permission, I would like to proceed with the signal boost in order to ascertain the overload parameters."

Kelley indicated with her PADD toward the captain. "Sir, it should be within the margin."

Kircheis glanced over briefly, then ordered, "Proceed with the boost, Teelis. We'll continue to monitor."

"Yes, sir," Teelis replied over the comm. She could be overheard directing the engineering crew to boost the signal. "Increasing signal strength by 20 percent."

Grey reported, "Seeing some sensor resolution problems with the probe, now. At this power level, they probably won't be too sure that it is a freighter, but at least it's confused enough that our true identity is obscured."

"Not good enough," Kircheis determined. "How much more of a signal increase can the power grid take, Senior?"

Karis sighed. "Twenty-four... twenty-five, if we're lucky. I'd like to try a one percent increase at a time, and let the system catch-up on the back-end. I can't promise that the probe will pick up 100% sensor resolution."

"As you say, then." She spoke loud enough for the bridge to hear her, "Proceed at the senior chief's direction."

Teelis answered, "Aye, sir. Increasing power to twenty-one percent."

"We have a power spike, but it's within tolerances," said Karis.

Grey watched the probe continue to report its findings. "No change in the probe's readings, Captain. Still unable to make a clear determination on identification due to the overlapping signals."

"Twenty-two percent above normal," Teelis said.

"The freighter image is starting to take over a little more," Grey indicated with a finger toward the upper bank of displays above his console. "Visual image resolution is compensating for the lean toward our facade."

The image of *Gallant* appeared to solidify, though portions of the "freighter" were still artifacting as though being shoved through a tight compression field. The compression artifacts were lessening under the increased power.

"Let's continue. I'd like to get as close to perfect as possible," Kircheis said.

Kelley remarked with a sound that was close to a scoff, "I'm concerned with jumping to warp, if we can't maintain a strong enough signal standing still. A warp signature's going to be quite the chore if these are the current circumstances."

Kircheis furrowed her brow. "One thing at a time, XO."

Teelis continued the increase in signal strength. "Twenty-three percent."

Hiroko's alarmed voice called out, "Sir, I show an overload in the tactical subsystems. We're going to lose power to the torpedo tubes."

"I'm shutting down the torpedo control subsystem to compensate," Grey said as his hands moved to back up his words. "A freighter wouldn't necessarily have them, anyway."

Kircheis snapped her fingers. "That's it! Mister Grey, would you be so kind as to shut down all offensive systems?"

"Powering down all weapons, aye, sir," Grey said. Within seconds, he reported that the task was complete. "And the probe is now showing a ninety-seven percent image resolution at the current power levels." The viewscreen showed a near-perfect image of the freighter that *Gallant* pretended to be, complete with registry and running lights.

Teelis noted, "Our original plan was to make weapons available, Captain. I apologize that we were unable to perform the mission parameters."

Kircheis replied quickly, "It's a viable workaround, Teelis. Nothing to apologize for; you've exceeded expectations. Let's regroup a little up here, and see what we can come up with now that we have a better understanding of the problem. Bridge, out." She closed the channel and nodded to Kelley. "XO, secure from black alert and take us back into dock."

"Are we sure she didn't intentionally design the system to prevent us from using the weapons?"

The question caused Kircheis to stop her coffee mug from reaching her lips as intended. She had retired with her exec to her ready room while the engineers finished reviewing the initial testing data. "I beg your pardon?"

"Sir," Kelley began, "I know you have a previous relationship with the 'lieutenant,' but this mission sees us operating within Romulan space. How do we know that she's not aiming to hamstring us for the purpose of making her return easier?"

"Merrit, I can assure you that she has no intention of returning to ch'Rihan," Kircheis completed the route to her lips and took in a quick sip of the mug. "I was there when she defected. It was not like slipping in and out of the shower. Her family did not undertake that decision lightly."

If she heard Kircheis, Kelley made no indication. She stood before the desk, her gaze toward the corner of the room, her tone filled with thinly-held anger and contempt. "I read the technical specifications of the stealth system and it mentioned nothing about having to leave us without the ability to fight in order to use it. I find it highly suspect that all of a sudden, we're faced with going alone into Romulan space without those means at our disposal."

Kircheis set her mug atop the desk and regarded her executive officer carefully. "Merrit, she's been a friend to me for nearly a decade."

"I know it's not politic-"

"You're accusing her of sabotaging her own system!" Kircheis allowed her frustration to color her tone and volume.

"Captain, I know how these people operate. They're all smiles and warmth as they try to manipulate you and their surroundings... but they're constantly plotting to gain the upper hand for some surreptitious goal." Kelley's blue eyes made contact with Kircheis'. "They're all like that. Even her."

The captain felt her ire rise within her briefly, but it cooled under the fury burning behind Kelley's expression. With a gesture of her left hand, Kircheis ordered, "Take a seat, and tell me what this is really about."

Kelley took a deep breath and let it out slowly, as though she might be counting to herself. Finally, she took the seat and placed both of her palms atop her knees. "I was posted aboard *Tereshkova* at the Second Battle of Chin'toka."

Kircheis nodded. "I remember you telling me about that, but what has that got to do with Teelis? She was finishing up her junior year at the Academy when that battle occurred."

"Our ship was assigned to liaise with the Romulan battle group that was on patrol in that system. When the Breen attacked, most of our defensive systems were useless against their weaponry," her exec began.

"Yeah."

"The Romulan D'Deridex-class warbirds were among the first to get hit, and since we were assigned as an escort, our captain ordered our ship into position to shield one of the badly hit warbirds, to give them time to escape. He thought that Federation-built deflector shields would hold against their weapons."

Kircheis' eyes widened. She could see in her mind how that would have played out but she said nothing, hoping to encourage the lieutenant to continue.

"He was the first one to die; it happened right in front of me. Our shields did nothing. They struck the bridge and I remember it being a complete mess. We had to evacuate to auxiliary control with the exec screaming at us to hurry up. The Breen just kept attacking."

"By the time we made it down there, it was too late. We'd sustained too much damage to be anything more than a living shield between us and the Romulan ships we were protecting. Because the gravity systems got cross-connected and the fields were pulling everyone to the portside, we were going to have to slide down the service shafts. We were moving that way when the bulkhead exploded..." Kelley's eyes watered and she looked away, fighting to retain her composure.

Kircheis waited until her exec's breathing slowed and then prompted, "And something else happened?"

"We took a bad hit when we were running down the corridor. The bulkhead just behind me just..exploded and the containment field went up and...my closest friend, he was on the other side." She stopped to swallow, pausing again. When she resumed explaining, her voice was tight and her words were clipped. "I watched him get sucked into the vacuum."

"I'm... I'm so sorry, Merrit. But what does this have to do with.."

"Those Romulan bastards!" Kelley interrupted, vehemently. "They had a shuttle from one of the warbirds picking up pods, but they left the Starfleet pods to fend for themselves! And then, seven days later, after I and the rest of the few of us managed to survive, we found out there was another warbird who joined the fight and they just helped their own, left us to take the Breen fire and die!"

"I'm sorry, Merrit."

"You're sorry and they aren't, and that's the damned problem, Captain. That's their culture. We don't matter, only Romulans matter. You can't tell me she doesn't think that too."

"Yes, I *can* tell you that," Kircheis replied with an icy edge to her tone. "When I say I know this woman, it's not because I met her once or twice. I was there when she defected and I've seen her family more than a few times over the eight years she's been a Federation citizen." Kircheis turned in her seat, reaching to the table behind her to pick up a particular PADD. She found the file she was looking for and handed the device over.

There was a picture of four Vulcanoids on display. A woman in early middle-age and two teenage boys, one on the cusp of manhood, and a girl who was firmly in that nebulous 'tween' category. "That's a picture of Teelis' family right before that older boy there, S'Harien, left for the Academy. The one making the face is Freddy, which is the nickname everyone calls him, even his family. The little one is Llaiir who was all of two the first time I saw her. Their mother sent this to me, and I'm not exaggerating when I say I talk to Ael'Raha more than I do with my own mother. Teelis is not one of the Rihannsu you described and neither is her family. There is no way she would ever do anything to jeopardize this mission."

Kelley looked over the picture but her flinty expression did not change. After a moment, she placed the PADD on the captain's desk. "Yes, sir."

Kircheis sat back in her chair. Assessing her exec with new eyes, she asked bluntly, "Merrit, I have to ask... are you going to be a problem?"

"No, sir," replied Kelley without hesitation.

"Because there are ways for me to seek another berth for you that would have no impact on your eventual command," Kircheis promised, as though she did not hear Kelley's assertion. "All I'd have to do is call Admiral Leone and Hiroko can be elevated to your position easily."

"Captain!" Kelley's tone rose at the idea. She cleared her throat when Kircheis leveled a silencing gaze toward her. "Sir, I mean to say, that won't be necessary."

The corners of Kircheis' lips turned downward and she rose from her seat as she spoke. "This mission is too important to let pride get in the way, Lieutenant Kelley," the captain leaned against the front of her desk in front of her quarry. "Until now, I've never had a reason to question your attention to duty, but I will admit that the last few weeks, you've not been the same stalwart XO that this ship needs, especially now. So, I'm going to ask you one more time, and I want the truth-

"Sir, you can always count my candidness."

"Do you wish to be transferred to the temporary pool for the duration?"

"Absolutely not, sir."

Kircheis paused as she stared into the convicting eyes of Kelley. Satisfied, Kircheis folded her arms across her midsection, and ordered, "Very well. You will then do your damndest to keep a tight hold on your prejudices."

"Aye, sir."

"I'm serious, Merrit!" The captain raised her right index finger. "Teelis is a Starfleet officer. She's wearing the same uniform as we. I will not have you disrespecting her whilst under my command, and if I sense that you've crossed the line, I'll relieve you on the spot and confine you to quarters."

Kelley nodded with her head turned away from Kircheis' gaze. "Yes, sir."

"Good."

Kelley rose from her seat as though she had been dismissed and made for the exit to the corridor. Before she reached the door sensor to open, Kircheis called for her. Kelley turned around fully, to listen.

"We have forty-eight hours before we have to get underway. I'd like for you to go see the counselor at Utopia, one hour today and one hour tomorrow," Kircheis said as she settled back in behind her desk. She tapped on the desktop monitor to activate it and focused her attention there, instead.

Kelley turned around once more, but Kircheis' words stopped her.

"To be clear, that wasn't a suggestion. I will be following up to make sure you did spend some time."

Kelley blushed, with her head hanging slightly. "Aye, sir." Her eyes lifted up, but her head did not. With a demure shrug, she asked, "By your leave, Captain?"

Kircheis waved her off with a dismissive left hand. "Go away."

"Six more months, I'm telling you," Karis said as he wiped the perspiration from his brow. He held a plasma torch in his hand and focused the business end on a new power connection. "Six more months and I'm due for rotation. I could've pushed for a new assignment this time around, but I knew the captain would need me for this one. This one's going to be rather interesting."

Teelis handed the patch to Karis and listened to him speak. When he paused, she asked, "Are you unhappy with your position on *Gallant*?"

"Not at all, Lieutenant." He stopped talking long enough to weld the patch to hold the new route into place, then stepped back with a loud

sigh. "No, I'm aiming to transfer from the Intelligence squadron and to the Border Patrol."

"The Border Patrol?" Teelis' tone betrayed her confusion.

Karis lifted the face guard and fixed an icy stare toward Teelis. "Something wrong with the Border Patrol?"

"I didn't mean to imply that there was, I simply was expressing surprise at the desire. You have been serving in Intelligence for some time. Why the change?"

Karis turned back to the panel and tilted his head as he fixed it back in place. "I have a fairly large family, even by Andorian standards. My four parents divorced when I was very young and they each remarried into new groups. I have sixteen parents. I have twenty-seven siblings. And I can't speak to any of them about what I do." His tone was full of annoyance. "I've had to lie to all of them about what I do and I want that to end."

Teelis took the torch back and placed it in its proper place in the kit. "I can understand that," she remarked softly. "I have five siblings and I can really only speak to one about anything I do and even then, in a very circumspect way."

"Five? Isn't that a lot for a green-skin?" Karis asked bluntly. Only after a heartbeat did he seem to realize what he said, his eyes going wide. "Lieutenant, I meant no disrespect," he hastily added, his antennae twitching anxiously.

The lieutenant had an astonished look on her face and then, to Karis' surprise, she began to laugh. "I do not know if that was originally meant to be a pejorative for Vulcans, but I just find it....a little accurate?" she suggested. "But no, for Rihannsu at least, it is not uncommon to have large families. Certainly not in the House in which I was born. It is one of the most populous Houses on ch'Rihan."

Karis relaxed and gave her a smile in return. "What number are you?" he asked as he walked over to another console to begin a diagnostic on the new relay.

"Three," Teelis replied, having no trouble following him. She went to another terminal and tapped in a few commands. "When the diagnostic comes back clear, I want to run an initial test on this new bypass system, Senior, before we go to the Captain with it."

"I'm two," he noted. "Looks like the connections are good, Lieutenant."

"Weapons systems are online," Teelis confirmed. "And at sixty-percent power. Better than expected. You were right, Senior."

"It was your idea, Lieutenant. I just told you what she could handle."

"I'm sure it's been done before."

"Not while the warp core was functional."

The smile the Rihannha gave him was mild. "Even so." That said, she tapped her communicator. "Lieutenant Tei to Captain Kircheis."

A few seconds later, the captain's voice responded. "Kircheis, here."

"Sir, Senior Chief Amdal and I have figured out a way to keep more of our weapons online while providing enough power to the holosystem. We have set the warp core to power it while letting the fusion reactors power the weapons system."

Karis chimed in. "It won't give you full power, sir, but you'll be able to bloody someone's nose before running away in a crisis."

"We are at sixty-eight percent power in weapons now, sir," Teelis clarified. "But the Senior Chief and I should be able to tweak that, given another day or two."

"Good job," replied the captain. "Will we eventually have one hundred percent availability?"

"Doubtful, Captain. The fusion reactors do not have enough power for that but they will be available even as *Gallant* is projecting an entirely different signal," Teelis explained.

"If that's the best we can do, then we'll take it," Kircheis said quickly. "Especially since we were faced with the prospect of no weapons. I can give you forty-eight hours, but no more. We must get underway day after tomorrow. I'll check in with Admiral Leone shortly, but I don't think she will have a problem with a minor delay, considering the gravity of the mission."

"Thank you, sir," Teelis answered. "The Senior Chief and I will get to work immediately to facilitate an earlier departure if possible."

Kircheis said, "I look forward to your next report. Again, good job and my compliments to your engineering staff, Senior Chief."

After the comm connection closed, Teelis noted, "Senior Chief, if you are interested in a more stable posting, perhaps you might enjoy working at Utopia Planitia. You are clearly an expert in the Defiant-class and, since they are going to be a significant part of the Fleet for years to come, there are a number of projects that could use your input. You would not be able to speak about the particulars of your job with your family, but they would know where you are and you could speak about your co-workers, at the very least."

"I never really thought about that," Karis replied, his tone thoughtful.

"If you are interested, after the mission I could put in a good word with my superior. He is always looking for effective engineers to push projects to completion," Teelis noted wryly. "I am sure he would appreciate your expertise in the class."

"I'll think about it," Karis returned, his antennae quivering as he considered the possibility.

Teelis nodded then turned back to the display. "Let us see if we can add a bit more power to the weapons. I would like to aim for seventy-three percent power."

Karis grinned in response. "See? Now you think she can do it. I told you, Lieutenant."

"You did indeed, Senior Chief."

Chapter Five

Chapter Five

NCC-74229 (USS *Gallant*)

Federation-Rihannsu Neutral Zone, approaching Rihannsu territory at warp 7.5.

Captain's Ready Room

Stardate 54703.93 (14 September 2377)

*Captain's Log
Supplemental*

With the new hologram-based stealth system online and projecting an image of an unarmed Rihannsu freighter, Gallant is approaching the border at a speed that is consistent with our projection. Thus far, the outward appearance of the ship coupled with the overlaid signals and readings seems to be successful, though Lieutenant Tei continues to keep close watch over the system.

Starfleet Intelligence has transmitted several updates while we're in transit, and we are now diverting our course to rendezvous with our contact at Rator III. Our approach toward Rihannsu-held territory has some of the crew nervous, but this is hardly our first time operating behind the lines on behalf of the Federation.

Piggy was already waiting for the turbolift to make his way to the bridge when Teelis approached. "Lieutenant," he greeted her happily. "On your way to the bridge as well, I take it?"

"Yes, Ensign," she confirmed.

He had become accustomed to her reserved manner over the weeks they had been together on *Gallant* , but her response now was downright subdued. Naturally, it begged the question. "Are you all right, Lieutenant?"

"I am fine, Ensign," she replied.

"You have nothing to worry about, you know. The system works perfectly. You and the Senior Chief really got it fine-tuned."

Teelis gave him a faint smile. "Thank you, Ensign. I could not have done it without his expertise."

"You're not worried about the holosystem, are you, sir?" he asked. After an awkward pause between them, he decided, "No, it's something else, isn't it. It's-

"Going back into Rihannsu space, yes," she interrupted his line of inquiry with a raised tone. Her voice quieted some as she continued, "I never expected to return, however briefly." Teelis' gaze settled upon the closed doors to the lift.

"Not even if the Rihannsu government changed over, became more progressive?" Piggy wondered as he followed her into the turbolift.

Amusement replaced Teelis' normally cool demeanor briefly as she turned a genuine smile upon him. "You are quite mistaken if you think the Imperial government will change by any other method beyond complete annihilation by an invading force. Even Rihannsu progressives must hide their true leanings or else they will be eliminated."

"It's that bad, huh?"

"Most true progressives only plot to escape."

"Like your family."

"Even so," Teelis confirmed as the doors opened to reveal the bridge.

"Now crossing into Rihannsu territory, Captain," announced the petty officer third class seated at the helm.

Captain Kircheis stood next to the tactical and engineering stations, with her arm resting on the back of Karis Amdal's seat. "Thank you." She turned her head toward the senior chief. "How are we looking?"

Karis acknowledged Teelis briefly before responding. "Status of our projection is normal, no fluctuations in our overlay signal. We should appear to be nothing interesting to any cloaked warbirds out there."

Merrit Kelley called from her standing position on the starboard side of the bridge, holding her PADD in both hands. "Confirmed, captain."

Both Kircheis and Karis turned to look at the executive officer, but Kelley's attention remained on her PADD. Kircheis cleared her throat and only said, "Okay. Thank you, XO."

Piggy headed over to the ops position, logging into the terminal and beginning to scan for Rihannsu frequencies. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched as Teelis manned the auxiliary station near the Senior Chief.

"New contact, Captain," reported Grey from the tactical console. "I hold an unknown contact on an intercept course just inside sensor range. Their speed is warp seven-point-five, same as ours."

Kircheis moved back to the center seat and began manipulating the command console. "Can you determine the point of origin from their flight path, Ops?"

Hiroko held the primary ops console just forward of Piggy and her fingers tapped out commands quickly. "Captain, I think they're coming from Rator Three, if they've not altered course prior to our tracking them on sensors."

"Understood. Helm, maintain present course and speed," replied the captain. "Pi-, erm, Ensign, uh... Schw-?"

"Schweinfurt, sir," Piggy noted helpfully.

"Right. Schweinfurt, anything on the communications channels, yet? Is that ship out there making any calls about us?"

"Yes, sir. Incoming transmission now, just as you asked," he reported cheerfully. His gaze immediately slid to Teelis.

His sudden answer caused Kircheis to blink a couple of times. "Say that *again*?"

"As you asked the question, sir, we picked up an incoming transmission from the contact Lieutenant Yamamoto noted," Piggy clarified, deliberately slowing his speech a touch to make himself more understandable.

"Incoming... to *us*?"

"Yes, sir."

Kircheis snapped her head over to Teelis' seat. "As we discussed, then, Teelis?"

The engineer nodded and tapped on her console, opening the audio comm only while deactivating the universal translator. The voice of a young woman immediately could be heard, her voice using the same cadence as anyone would when identifying their own ship and business.

Teelis responded smoothly, giving the name of their fake freighter. Piggy couldn't be completely sure, but he thought she was modulating her words to mimic the other woman's accent. She hadn't sounded exactly that way when she had been tutoring Grey. He was concentrating so hard on what the lieutenant sounded like that it took him a few moments to realize that the conversation seemed to be going on for much longer than would a typical ship to ship greeting. Looking around the bridge, he noted the growing concern on people's faces, particularly the XO's.

Kelley's expression moved from stoic to troubled. She leaned forward to speak to the captain, but Kircheis' right hand lifted upward to cut her off before the XO could utter a syllable.

Teelis continued to talk and, unlike everyone else on the bridge, she did not appear to be tense in the slightest. She continued to speak with the other Rihannha for a few more minutes, then abruptly laughed. Piggy thought her laugh was rather nice. After a few more words were exchanged, she cut the signal with a recognizable goodbye. When she looked up from her console, she appeared to be surprised at the intensity of everyone's attention on her.

"I apologize, Captain," Teelis hastily explained. "The young woman who hailed us is working on her family's freighter. When she heard my voice - we sound of an age - she asked me if I had any copies of a particular entertainment program, which is a drama about the courtship of a high-born Rihannha. I told her that my father did not permit me to watch such things so I did not, then she wanted to know what was the last of it I did see. Then she spent some time catching me up to what she had seen of the program." She paused, then added, "It seemed like something I should be interested in, sir."

Kelley opened her mouth, but Kircheis shot her a glare. The captain replied, "Very well. Thank you, Teelis. XO, I'm sure that you have other duties to attend to. I have things well in hand up here."

Everyone abruptly found their consoles to be very interesting, except for Piggy, who wanted to see how the XO would react to being dismissed from the bridge. He had heard the scuttlebutt that she did not support the mission, or the Rihannha officer, and it seemed like the Captain was no longer interested in listening to her doubts.

The executive officer stood ramrod straight, as though she had been called to the position of attention on the parade grounds at the Academy. "Of... course, sir," she said, haltingly. "By your leave, sir?"

Kircheis did nothing more than wave a hand in her direction, choosing to stay silent as Kelley turned on her heels and departed the bridge.

Piggy watched as the atmosphere on the bridge slowly returned to normal, making sure to keep his eyes on the transmission traffic. Unlike some, he was entirely confident in Starfleet's ability to vet its own officers, especially those as skilled as Teelis.

The mission had proceeded smoothly through Romulan territory and *Gallant* was now in orbit of Rator Three. Between the projection and Teelis' manning of the comms, the Federation ship hadn't attracted any unwanted attention. Despite that, Grey knew that just because a mission that started well did not mean it would end well.

He took one more look in the mirror in his quarters, examining the changes they had made to ensure he could pass as one of the Rihannsu. His eyes had been modified by contact lenses so that each was now a dark brown. His hair was black and reshaped into a haircut typical of the Empire. He supposed he was fortunate in that his Vulcan genes were particularly expressed, obviating the need to modify his facial structure or his ears. In the end, he still looked like himself. He smiled at his own reflection, hefted his small bag and left the compartment.

Teelis was approaching in the corridor when he got outside. "I thought I would escort you to the transporter, Mister Grey," she noted.

"Very well," Grey responded with a nod and fell into place beside her.

"We finished the modification of the transporters so that they will have a Rihannsu signature." Off his look, she added quickly, "Fortunately, copying their transporter technology was not barred by the Treaty of Algeron."

He replied with a quick nod.

"I trust you have your beacon as well," she continued.

"I do, Lieutenant," Grey confirmed as he paused in front of the turbolift doors.

Without warning, Teelis reached out to adjust the lie of his tunic. Surprised that she had overcome her typical racial reticence for touching another, he said nothing. By the time the doors opened, she had fixed his clothing. She didn't say a word until they were both in the turbolift and it had begun to move.

"If they catch you before your rendezvous with t'Aimne, be as loud as possible to make a diplomatic incident. The Federation and the Empire are technical allies at this juncture." Teelis repeated the instructions he had gone over with the Captain. Then she added something new. "If you are captured after the rendezvous, listen to see if any of the Galae or Tal Shiar are s'Tei. The House leads the progressive faction in the Empire and if anyone could make this into a diplomatic incident, or a way in which you could be ransomed, they will."

"You think a Tal Shiar operative would assist me in any way?" Grey asked incredulously.

"Think of them as double agents, whose loyalty to their own House has not been subverted," Teelis corrected. "You aren't cleared for that particular piece of information, so don't tell anyone I mentioned it."

Stunned, Grey lagged behind when the doors opened and the lieutenant strode into the corridor.

When he caught up to her, she continued speaking as if she hadn't just broken several regulations. "I have been thinking on it and you need to speak as if you were of one of the lowest classes. Get the least expensive room available, stay only one night. Be particularly courteous to the staff. They will think you're a trader who will later brag to his rivals that he is doing well enough to holiday there. It happens often enough in such places. When you speak to t'Aimne in public, speak to her as if she was your patron. Then she will take the lead and you should follow it."

"Yes, sir," Grey replied, impressed by this more nuanced approach. They stepped into the transporter room together but only he ascended to the pad.

"This approach has the added advantage of making you below suspicion, as it were. Rihannsu don't think of lower class folk as being able to spy or be duplicitous. And, should you mispronounce something, it will just fall into their own prejudices. Good luck, Mister Grey," Teelis intoned.

"Thank you, sir."

Teelis turned towards the petty officer at the controls. "If you will."

The last thing Grey saw as he dematerialized was Teelis's hopeful smile.

Chapter Six

Chapter Six

Rator III

Resort Transport Lobby

Stardate 54705.8 (15 September, 2377, mid-afternoon)

The interior of the resort's dedicated transport lobby appeared before Warrant Officer Grey as *Gallant*'s transporter completed the cycle. His eyes darted around the immediate area as his training took over. His contact had chosen an upscale resort for their meeting and even the transport lobby was made with the finest of materials, including what appeared to be marble from Andoria with inlaid latinum geometric designs. Unlike resorts which catered to other races, particularly humans, there was nothing to blunt the exaggerated privilege. He did not see a single plant or tapestry to infuse the area with life.

No one noticed his arrival, and if they did, it did not result in any alarms. Once he stepped from the elevated platform, he was greeted by one of the employees of the resort in their native tongue.

"Welcome," the well-dressed Rihannha behind the counter said. "Are you checking in as our guest today?"

Grey opened his mouth to speak, but hesitated only briefly. He changed the conjugation of his words in his mind to make sure that he approached the hotelier as an equal rather than as someone of higher station. "I would, but I'm afraid I don't have a reservation. Will that be a problem?"

The man's posture relaxed considerably as Grey spoke, and his eyes inspected Grey's clothing a little closer. "I... see. I believe we can accommodate you." Gone was the respectful tone and inferior verb forms; he accepted Grey as a fellow member of the working class. "I'm sure we can find something that will suit your needs."

Grey inclined his head in deference to him. "Thank you, kindly." He turned his head to view the outside scene; snow fell from the overcast skies, draping the entryway and the pedestrian paths leading into the main building in a stark white color. "May I inquire as to the participation in the resort's winter activities?"

The man turned his head briefly to regard the wintery view from his registration desk and then returned his attention to the screen. "Our guests staying in the middle building may make use of our facilities, but only during certain times. I have a vacancy in that wing of the resort that may meet your expectations." He twisted the display around for Grey to read. "Is this acceptable to you?"

Grey smiled and spoke with relief in his tone. "More than. I thank you for your efforts."

"Think nothing of it," came his reply. "If you would place your palm against the reader for room access...?"

Once Grey's palm was accepted by the input, the man entered in a few more commands. "I am happy to report that this completes our transaction. Will you require assistance in finding your room, or perhaps to convey your luggage?"

"No, to both questions."

"Then, I hope that you will enjoy your stay with us."

"Oh, I know I will," Grey replied warmly.

The wide terrace had a stunning view of the mountain range, as well as the closest skiing runs. It was a bit too cold to be sitting in an open air restaurant despite the afternoon sun but Rihannsu always prided themselves on their strength, especially when compared to their coddled Vulcan cousins. *Of course, the large braziers set near every large table threw off enough heat to keep even a Vulcan warm.* Lately, she couldn't go an hour without spotting another Rihannsu hypocrisy.

Nuhir t'Aimne sipped at the mulled ale in her cup, watching the twins try to convince their mother to permit them to go on a more challenging run tomorrow. It gave her something to do while waiting for the Starfleet contact to show. Taev was particularly eloquent but then Merik was far more likely to evaluate their mother's mood before requesting anything.

"We are more than agile enough for the course. You saw how we performed when that man fell in front of us today," he noted pointedly.

"I do not doubt your competence, only my strength to keep up. You are not yet old enough to be on the mountain without a chaperone," Ael'Ekkhae replied mildly, cutting into his argument. When he would continue, she merely held up a hand to forestall further argument. "I have decided."

Neither of the twins was happy about this pronouncement, but it was Merik who glanced at Nuhir. She was of higher rank than their mother; she could overrule the decision. Instead, she allowed her amusement at his silent request to show and he soon turned back to his meal.

"I wonder whether I will feel so old when I have children nearly of the age of adulthood," Nuhir remarked to her cousin, smiling to soften the remark.

"You will, especially if you have two of them the same age," Ael'Ekkhae confirmed, eyeing her sons and their sullen silence.

Nuhir and Ael'Ekkhae had chosen two very different paths in their lives. Whereas Nuhir had performed her mandatory service, selected for the

Phi'lasasam, and begun her military career in earnest, Ael'Ekkhae had married immediately afterward, returned to one of the family estates and had children. She had been absurdly young to do such a thing but she had been vindicated when she had given birth to twins. Clearly, she had been meant to be a mother.

At the time, Nuhir hadn't understood the decision. Now, she knew that Ael'Ekkhae had fallen in love with Galan and they had purposefully had children early to mollify their House. That the twins were even twins would have been enough; that they were handsome, clever, and excellent athletes had only enhanced both Ael'Ekkhae and Galan's reputations. Right before Galan's deployment during the Dominion War, they had agreed to have more children upon his return.

When he did not return, Ael'Ekkhae had carried on but it had been clear to those closest to her that something was gone. The twins, born to appease the family into accepting her early marriage, were now the only tethers she had to continue to live. The family had already begun to prepare for their inevitable selection to the Tal Priax, including trying to select a new mate for Ael'Ekkhae. She was simply far too young and far too valuable a mother to never have any other children.

Nuhir didn't know what it was like to love someone so deeply. But neither would the twins if this Starfleet agent did not show up. She briefly wondered if they had been delayed, or worse, spotted, when Merik interrupted her thoughts.

"What about trying the new sleds on the higher runs, Mother? Those are used under the supervision of the resort's staff."

"Who would not dare to gainsay a tr'Aimne of your rank, Merik. No."

"I would never suggest any dangerous course to a servant."

"You have made my point for me. You name them servants and thus, they will not challenge you."

"I think..."

Nuhir stopped listening and focused on the man who now entered the terrace. It was one of the more expensive dining options at the resort and so it was surprising to see a man of his obviously lesser rank in the establishment. His gaze passed over the tables and fastened on Nuhir herself. Without even thinking, she began to stand. Her Federation contact was going to draw unnecessary attention to them all.

He quickly made his way over and bowed, a client's greeting to his patron. The discussion at her table quieted as the man spoke in the socially-submissive form of the language.

"My apologies for interrupting your respite. I wish only to convey the greetings of my family to your own," the man began with a small smile. His accent was clearly that of the lower class but without regional distinction. It was a very standard opening when one was being approached with a request. Whoever had coached this Vulcan had done it well.

Impressed despite her initial misgivings, Nuhir returned to her seat and responded to his greeting with a formal nod. "Thank you. I trust all is well with your family?" she replied, motioning to her family that they were to continue with their own conversation. The man's station was not high enough for them to pay attention.

Merik, naturally, continued to pay attention regardless. She had noticed that he was the keener of the twins but also the one most apt to make a joke.

"Their health maintains, but I hope to better their future."

"Of course. We all aspire to better the futures of our families." Nuhir noted with amusement that Merik seemed to enjoy that remark, which deflected a request for assistance rather than inviting one.

Nonetheless, the man was not deterred. "Then I am following only the best of my instincts when I seek the advice of s'Aimne." And the money, which went without saying. Once again, she admired his training. It had been quite thorough.

Before she could 'reluctantly' invite him to join their table, there was another stir among the diners at the restaurant. Another man had entered, but unlike their own shabbily dressed client, this man was dressed in the sharp, tailored uniform of the Tal Shiar. He was a few years older than her, in the prime of life, and had already attained the rank of Entallan. He was handsome and moved with the confidence befitting a man of his rank.

Nuhir knew him.

He wasted little time in striding over to her table. "Nuhir! How wonderful to run into you. Ah, please, remain seated. There is no need for such formality when you are on holiday," he noted, as they moved to stand. His gaze paused on the other man, noting his attire. "A shame that it is being so rudely interrupted."

Nuhir smoothly interceded. "This is no interruption, merely the pleasant greeting of an old friend of my father." Turning to her contract, she introduced the Tal Shiar agent, "This is Entallan Courig tr'Khnialmnae. We served together briefly."

"And memorably," Courig continued for her, watching with noticeable pleasure as the other man bowed.

Due to his low status, the Federation agent introduced himself. "Vrih tr'Aimne."

Rather than risk a further conversation between two agents, Nuhir smiled and dismissed the contact with a quick word. "I will seek you out before you leave so you can inform me of your plans for your family." When he inclined his head in acknowledgement and left, she returned her attention to Courig.

The Tal Shiar agent had already invited himself to a seat at the table and was ordering one of the chef's specialties for them all. "You must try

this. I always indulge when I come here," he bragged.

"Do you come often?" Nuhir inquired, glancing at her cousin and shaking her head slightly. Ael'Ekkhae had gone pale.

"Only when I can. I so rarely get time away these days," Courig answered, his voice full of self-importance as he looked over at the boys who were looking back at him with unabashed curiosity. "Look at these two young men. Tal Priax material, if I am not mistaken. If not, they will no doubt have their pick of service."

The boys, like so many males of their age, preened under this praise. "And this must be their lovely mother. You must be quite proud."

"Oh yes," Ael'Ekkhae replied, her voice soft. She reached for her drink to forestall further comment.

"How are you all enjoying the slopes?" Courig wondered, glancing only briefly as his own drink was brought by a server.

"They are pleasant, if not particularly challenging," Merik immediately seized upon this opportunity. "But then we have only been on the courses with medium difficulty." He looked meaningfully at his mother.

"Then you must try the more challenging courses." Courig gave Ael'Ekkhae a wide smile. "I know mothers - and fathers - can be quite protective, but I am sure that with myself as a guide, given my experience, I can allay your fears."

Nuhir tried to mask the growing panic in Ael'Ekkhae's expression. "No one doubts your expertise, but to watch two young boys while navigating a difficult course is surely not what you intended to do on your holiday, Entallan."

The Tal Shiar agent waved a hand and smiled benevolently at the twins. "They are hardly young boys. They are nearly men and should be entertained and challenged accordingly." He turned towards Ael'Ekkhae. "You have nothing to fear. I have overseen my own siblings on the slopes before and no one could be more protective than myself."

Nuhir rather doubted that and tried again. "Entallan..."

"Courig, please. We have served together, Nuhir, and when on holiday, there is really no use for titles," he interrupted, spearing a piece of meat.

"We will be fine," Merik also chose this moment to comment, grasping the opportunity. "We will of course follow the Entallan's directions."

"But we would very much like to try something more difficult than the courses we tried today," Taev finished.

"There you have it!" Courig declared. "They would like to go, I would like to take them, and am I sure you two would enjoy some of the other delights this place has to offer two lovely women such as yourselves that would be lost on these young men." He smiled smugly, sure he had solved all their problems.

Nuhir and Ael'Ekkhae exchanged another look and finally, the mother consented with a brief nod. "But not longer than three hours," she cautioned. "I did not come to this place with my children to not enjoy their company. After all, as you said, they will be men soon and beyond my mothering."

Relieved that Ael'Ekkhae thought to put a boundary on the excursion, Nuhir finally smiled herself. "Very well. There were a few interesting shops I had wanted to visit," she admitted.

"Wonderful. Now that this is settled," Courig began. "Let me show you some of the other specialties of this chef. Server!" he called, waving over one of the waitstaff who was currently speaking to another customer. "We will need some wine, some of the '89.."

Nuhir settled in for what appeared to be a long dinner. She reached for her tablet, looking up the guests in the directory while Courig waxed on about his culinary knowledge. She found the name the Vulcan had given and sent him a short message, setting up a meeting time later. After another minute, she revised the time for even later. Courig hadn't yet stopped talking.

Chapter Seven

Chapter Seven

NCC-74229 (USS *Gallant*)

In standard orbit of Rator III, relative to Warrant Officer Grey's present position.

Main Bridge

Stardate 54706 (15 September 2377, mid-afternoon)

Piggy turned from the communications substation with his hand to his ear, to keep the earpiece in place. "Lieutenant, incoming transmission from the surface. The scrambler code belongs to Mister Grey.."

Hiroko Yamamoto's posture straightened as she resided in the center seat as the officer of the deck. "Challenge and response, Ensign," she ordered.

"Encoding, now, sir," Piggy turned back around. "Sending the pre-recorded challenge from Lieutenant Tei." Over the speakers, Teelis' voice called out, and within seconds, Grey's responded in kind.

On Piggy's confirming nod, Hiroko spoke up. "*Gallant* -Three, here. Go ahead."

"Checking in, sir," said Grey. "I've made successful contact with the client."

Hiroko touched the command console with her outstretched finger. Somewhere on the ship, the computer paged the captain to report to the bridge. "Understood. I've summoned *Gallant* -One. Please stand by."

Kircheis and Teelis appeared on the bridge within seconds of the call, and Kelley followed only moments after. Hiroko rose to surrender her seat before returning to the operations console. The captain called out, "You have some news?"

After Grey repeated himself, Kircheis told him, "Excellent work. Is all going well, then?"

Grey's voice changed timbre slightly. "Unfortunately, there is a complication."

Kelley muttered, "Of course there is."

Kircheis cleared her throat and shot a glance toward her executive officer. "Explain, please."

"Not long after I made contact with our client and her family, an agent of the Tal Shiar made his presence known. By his insignia, he is an Entallan. t'Aimne introduced him as Courig tr'Khnialmnae. Do we have any intelligence on this man?"

"Teelis?" Kircheis turned her head toward her. "I know the intelligence update included some Tal Shiar agent dossiers, but the name doesn't ring any bells."

"What are you asking her for, sir?" Kelley spoke up before Teelis could respond. "In all likelihood, *she* alerted them to our presence and they're going to try and catch us in the act. I strongly recommend that we issue recall orders and depart Romulan space."

There was a brief look of surprise on Teelis' face before her expression hardened. When she spoke, her voice was chilly.

"If I was the Rihannha you think I am, Lieutenant, I could kill you where you stand for that insult to my honor. If I was the Rihannha you think I am, I could use my contacts to ruin your career and everyone even marginally related to you. But I am a Starfleet officer and so I will reply as one; go fuck yourself, Lieutenant."

Silence hung on the bridge until a dry cough sounded over the speakers. "Uh, I'm going to close the channel for now. Would you please call me when we have more information?" asked Grey.

Kircheis' eyes looked up as she addressed him, "Roger, that. *Gallant*, out." The computer's chirp only barely preceded her angry words, "XO, Lieutenant Tei, I'd like to see you in my ready room. Now."

The three officers departed the bridge as quickly as they arrived, leaving Hiroko in command once more. Hiroko did not move from the operations console, with Piggy seated to her immediate right.

Piggy leaned over to her and said, "I didn't even think she knew that word."

Kircheis' strides moved her quickly toward the ready room hatch, which only had seconds to move out of the captain's path. Without waiting for either of them to speak, she began, "We seem to be moving around in circles, and I'm having a difficult time understanding why that is. So, until we come to a mutual understanding and agree to conduct ourselves as Starfleet officers, you will remain here. Because I will not put up with another display like that on my bridge."

"Captain," began Kelley. "I apologize for being a disruption, but you have to admit that this is all very suspicious."

"My apologies, Captain," Teelis replied, speaking simultaneously with Kelley. "But I cannot stand any more bigoted attacks."

As they realized they were speaking over one another, both officers' voices rose until they shouted the final words of their statements.

The captain's rage manifested itself in a single action; her right fist balled up tightly and then she slammed it down onto the surface of her desk hard enough to cause the desktop terminal to fall upon its back. "That's *enough* ! We're in the middle of an operation that requires the crew to operate at peak efficiency, and I have two key members of the team bickering with one another. I won't have it. I'll start confining people to quarters for the duration, if I have to." She settled back into the seat, leaving her terminal laying askew on her desk. "I require a solution to the problem that is satisfactory, or else you will be counting bulkheads in your cabins."

"Sir, I have done nothing to the XO but her remarks and suspicions have dogged my every step on this ship. The Andorian had less suspicion. Beyond my recent outburst, I have done nothing in return but perform my duties. The fact that Mister Grey has run into a member of the House Khnialmnae is fairly predictable, as they are the largest House in the Empire. To cast aspersions on my character and worse, to scuttle the mission because of them, is only to show that the XO hasn't properly prepared for the mission and is actively working against its success because it would mean four more Rihannsu in Federation space. If anyone is to be removed, it is the XO," Teelis answered vehemently.

Kelley's flushed cheeks and gritted teeth showed as Teelis spoke. When it was her turn to speak, she did not keep the edge from her tone. "Captain, it's pretty clear that from the moment she arrived, certain 'problems' have appeared. The issue with the stealth device, for example, leaving us without any means to defend ourselves while it's in use. Her willingness to return to Romulan space, and now all of a sudden we have a Tal Shiar agent marking Mister Grey's every move. I cannot possibly accept all of these circumstances as coincidence, and neither can you, sir."

"We have weapons, just not all of them. And there is nothing willful about my return to Rihannsu space. It was necessary and I followed orders. In the event of capture, no one would face worse treatment than myself. Torture, interrogation, and eventual forced procreation to insure the continuity of my pure bloodline waits for me in Rihannsu space. All of this will be handled 'off-the-record', because the Empire does not recognize me as a Federation citizen or a Starfleet officer. I am a kidnapped child, brainwashed by my captors.

When Kelley would have interrupted, Teelis gave her a glare and continued. "The Federation and Starfleet can and will do nothing to help me because of that status. You think I would come 'home' as a hero; instead, I will be broken and locked away, to produce children at the whim of 'my' House. That is the worst of my people. But I like to think that my service in Starfleet will help one day ensure the best of my people will be allowed to rule. And you could have known all of this if you had just taken a moment to speak with me. "

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Kircheis said after letting Teelis' words hang in the air briefly. "I believe that I will have a word in private with the XO, now. Please return to your station."

Once they were alone, Kircheis ordered, "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't relieve you of duty."

Kelley turned her head toward the captain, after staring at the now empty spot where Teelis once stood. "Sir, with respect-

"Spare me the dramatics, Merrit," Kircheis replied sharply. "We cannot function like this. I get that you have a chip on your shoulder left over from the war, but like I said earlier, we have a mission to complete. You stood there and told me that you were fine."

"Permission to speak freely?"

Kircheis opened her mouth to remind her executive officer that within the privacy of her ready room, she practically ordered candid speech from Kelley. She closed it and merely nodded her head once.

"When we spoke on this before, I honestly felt that I had a handle on the situation. But, whenever something goes wrong, it's difficult for me to regard Lieutenant Tei as anything more than a Romulan."

Kircheis frowned. "We can't keep going around in circles like this. I need an XO who's willing to get the job done, regardless of her personal feelings. We're supposed to be professionals. I need a professional exec." She rose from her seat. "I'm sorry, but I don't see any other way around this, Merrit."

Kelley stiffened to the position of attention before the captain. "Aye, sir."

"I'm ordering you to eat all your meals with Lieutenant Tei. Further, I'm ordering you to talk to her. As a person. If I hear back from her that she feels offended by you again, as soon as we return to port, I'm going to make sure you never see a command so long as you're in Starfleet."

Unable to keep her confusion and shock from her expression or tone, Kelley sputtered, "S-Sir, I thought you were going to relieve me of duty?"

Kircheis cleared her throat. "I'm sorry that you're disappointed, but I cannot afford to lose Lieutenant Yamamoto at Operations for this mission. One way or another, Merrit, you're going to get over this issue you have with her. As much as you hate it, and as much as she's going to be annoyed, as well... this is something that I need you both to do as members of this team. Too much is at stake for me to play babysitter.

"You've been a good XO otherwise and I'm giving you this last chance to prove to me that my initial thought of recommending you to a command of your own is a good one. But if you can't deal with Rihannsu, you're going to have a problem in this new fleet. Lieutenant Tei is an exceptional officer and she's going to climb the ranks with speed. Her older sister is a consummate politician and I have no doubt she's got her eyes set on high rank. I think that she'll be an admiral, easily. And they're not the only Rihannsu in the Fleet, not to mention all those with Rihannsu descent. I can't in good conscience recommend anyone for command who makes judgements about people because of their race. Show me that you're the person I hope you are, Merrit."

Kelley's eyes widened. "Sir, do you really think that Romulans would hold high rank within Starfleet? I mean... do you really think that Starfleet Command would allow that to happen?"

"Flag-level politics would be a simple task for her, given how well she navigated the politics of her house in order to get her family to Federation space," Kircheis replied evenly, letting her fingers drum the surface of the desk as she spoke. "This doesn't leave this room, but

Ariennye once told me that they were fully scanned by Betazoids when they first came to Federation space. They consented to that freely. I wouldn't be surprised if she has higher clearance than I do right now. Who knows what kind of secrets she brought over? But I know they were valuable, because she was naturalized and commissioned as an officer within a few months."

"I... see." Crestfallen, Kelley's attention lowered from her captain's apparent nonchalance to the desk. "I didn't realize that, sir. Might I interpret your words to mean that I'm limiting my career options by upsetting a member of a future admiral's family?"

"If... that's how you want to interpret it, then go right ahead," Kircheis raised a hand and waved it from side to side. "I don't think that was my point, but it seems that you're not really listening to what I'm saying. But since you seem to be understanding the political aspect of this, maybe it would be beneficial for you to know that a current admiral's son is very interested in Lieutenant Tei. I wouldn't be surprised if there was a half-Rihannsu child some years from now with a remarkable Starfleet pedigree, thanks to Admiral Leone's side of the family. Who, by the way, is very protective already about the Tei family.

"Point taken, sir."

"I don't know that it is, since I'm more concerned about your racism than your potential to upset the Admiralty, but if that's what it takes for you to do something about it, so be it. Your career is in her hands right now. I wouldn't have given her that power if I didn't believe completely in her ability to use it with integrity. Dismissed."

"We have no information about a Courig tr'Khnialmnae of the Tal Shiar in the database and I have no personal knowledge about such a person. The fact that he is already an Entallan indicates he has some rank within the House, but that he has chosen a career in the Tal Shiar instead of the Galae tells me he was not of a particularly high status. If his best chances for advancement were in the Tal Shiar, as opposed to the Galae which House Khnialmnae practically controls in certain branches, he was not someone for whom the House would do any favors. Other than these limited insights, I recommend we follow t'Aimne's lead in how to deal with him. She clearly knows this man and will best know how to deflect any curiosity."

Kircheis and Kelley entered the bridge as Teelis was addressing the bridge. "Sounds reasonable. Wouldn't you agree, XO?"

Kelley merely nodded, but said nothing.

"Do we still have Mister Grey's signal from the surface?"

"Yes, sir," Hiroko said. "Ensign Schweinfurt, open the encrypted channel."

Piggy responded with a quick nod and a flick of the wrist to tap in a single command. "Channel open, sir."

"This is *Gallant* -One," called Kircheis. "Are you there?"

Grey's voice responded over the bridge speakers, "Here, sir. Go ahead."

"We're going to proceed on t'Aimne's intelligence at this time. I urge you to follow her lead, given that we have very little to go on from Starfleet. Do you acknowledge?"

"Copy. I will update you as soon as I've met with her and confirmed some details. I expect to be in touch within three hours from now."

"Understood. *Gallant*, out."

Chapter Eight

Chapter Eight

Rator III

Resort Transient Residence

Stardate 54706.5 (15 September, 2377, evening)

Grey sat down at the small table within his guest room and eyed the confection he had ordered surreptitiously on his way out of the restaurant. Dinner had been quite tasty, if a little plain, but he knew that Rihansu of his supposed station often indulged in treats in the privacy of their own quarters. He certainly did not want to do anything out of the ordinary, and if that required eating something far more delicious and sweet, he would not balk at his duty.

Just as he picked up his utensil, the door chime sounded. He glanced at the small screen near the door, which displayed a view of his potential visitor. He quickly set down the fork and moved the door, bowing slightly as it opened. "t'Aimne. You honor me with your visit."

Her expression was not one of pleasure at visiting the lesser building at the resort. "You mentioned your family," she began, gaze sweeping the room as the door closed behind her. Once it was shut, she glanced at the screen to confirm no one had followed her.

"I take it you have swept the area for listening devices?" Nuhir asked him plainly.

"Yes. The room and surrounds are clear," Grey replied, switching from a submissive form to an equal one.

Nuhir raised an eyebrow at this, her mouth quirked in amusement. "You are well-trained," she remarked. "But I see you are not immune to temptation." She gestured to the dessert.

"I noticed most of my neighbors here order such things and thought it appropriate to do so myself."

"How logical. You won't mind if I eat it then?" Nuhir asked.

Grey hesitated, head tilting. "I will agree to share it."

Nuhir shook her head. "That is not a Rihansu impulse. I was only teasing anyway. Courig ordered this for us already. I've had my fill of sweets." She grimaced before seating herself at the table.

"Is that typical, a Tal Shiar agent ordering food for others?"

"What? No." Nuhir appeared taken aback and gave him a curious look. "How do Vulcan males signal interest in women? Because that's what Courig is doing. He's trying to impress me."

Grey inclined his head. "Are you sure that is the nature of his interest? Could he have discerned the plan or perhaps suspect something?"

Nuhir looked briefly disgusted. "I know when a man is interested in me. He's not hiding his emotions. He made some overtures when we served together and he's simply continuing them now. I heard from my mother that he inquired after me."

"You are quite certain he is not feigning interest in order to more closely observe you?"

"Courig? He is not so cunning. He serves as a political officer; a visible monitor over others. He's never had a covert assignment and never will. He's petty, vain, and only mildly intelligent. He won't advance much further in the Tal Shiar and certainly not into their covert operations. His family name is responsible for most of his career."

"Would that not be the perfect cover?"

"Most undercover agents do not approach their targets. They certainly do not tell them their room codes or stroke their thighs. I know his intentions, Vulcan. He's trying to show me how good he is with children, not uncovering some plot."

"If you are sure," Grey acknowledged as he joined her at the table.

"I am. No man wants to spend his holiday entertaining two children unless he is trying to prove something. Specifically, his fitness to be a father." She made another face. "He's involved my mother in this as well. She's inclined to favor the match."

"Rihansu matches must move very quickly."

"They do not. He has my family's approval to proceed with courtship, not marriage. Even if I were to pursue the match, a marriage between someone of my rank and his would not be approved for some years. Perhaps four. To ensure our compatibility, as much as to provide an advantageous alliance for our Houses."

"Vulcans have not pursued such alliances for many centuries."

"But they marry off children," Nuhir retorted. "I'm not here to engage in cultural debates. Courig is an accidental threat. He does not suspect or intend to disrupt anything but may do so if we are not careful."

"Indeed. The original plan had called for my accompanying you and your family on one of the walking trails and beaming away when we reached a hidden point."

"Canceled. Courig has rearranged our schedule for tomorrow. I am to shop with my cousin in the morning, while the twins and Courig ski. We are all to have lunch together, with a special menu. Then he has arranged for a viewing of some art works at a nearby gallery, and then a seventeen course dinner."

"Are you sure it is wise to allow the twins to be alone with him on ski trails?"

Nuhir shook her head, standing and stalking to the window agitatedly. "I am not in favor of it, but I cannot disallow it. I have a much higher standing within my own House than he in his, but his House is significantly more powerful. He would not dare hurt them, given their rank and the interest of the Tal Priax. It should be enough to protect them even if I am wrong. But I am not wrong. He will only show them a good time, so they think highly of him."

"If you are sure." Grey considered and continued. "My orders are to follow your instructions in the handling of the Tal Shiar agent."

She turned back to face him. "I know you don't understand our ways, Vulcan. But his moves are very standard in the beginning of a courtship. The alliance does make sense and we are both of an age. He is only interested in the twins because they are here with me."

"He would hardly be the first man who tried to curry favor with a woman by spoiling the children related to her. A universal among the races."

"I am sure there is a word for it in some language or another, then." Nuhir looked him over. "We need to find a way to get the twins away from him. How long is our window for their extraction?"

"The window for extraction is open, but as we are impersonating a freighter, we are scheduled to depart for our next 'delivery' in less than twenty-three hours. We could extract now, but if he is expecting the twins in the morning, he will notice their departure before we could leave Rihansu space."

"How long will it take to reach the border?" Nuhir asked.

"Approximately fourteen hours, if we travel at a rate of speed so as not to attract attention."

"You're right. We don't have fourteen hours, even if we left right now." Nuhir spun around to stare out the window.

"Do you think it is his intention to follow you for the rest of your holiday?"

"Yes."

Grey nodded, a gesture she could only see through the reflection in the glass. "I could provide a distraction. If there was an incident, would not he be required as a Tal Shiar agent to investigate?"

"You can't provoke an incident when he knows you as a member of my House. That would only lead back to my family."

"Perhaps we could evacuate you individually, as the opportunity arises."

"That would be difficult to coordinate. Based on the schedule Courig has arranged, it would be nearly impossible to do so without someone's absence being noted."

"Even so, I think it could be coordinated..."

"No." Nuhir's voice hardened. She did not turn around. "The risk in such a plan is too great. The primary objective - the only objective - is to remove the twins from the threat of the Tal Priax. That's what we will focus upon."

"Then what is your suggestion?"

Nuhir moved back towards the table. "Here's what we will do."

The chill of the morning air stung Grey's exposed skin as he moved toward the spaceport with his meager belongings in tow. His first move after leaving the guest room was to check out and send his compliments to the staff for indulging his impromptu vacation. The walking path coming out of the lobby was uncovered; intended to be used by those of lesser station such as the cover identity he held while on Rator III. What made it inferior was an advantage to him, since an enclosed corridor would not allow him to leave the path.

He quickly consulted a miniature tricorder to ensure that his movements went unobserved, then vaulted effortlessly over the safety railing to the snowpack below the raised path. Freshly-fallen snow clung to the surface of his winter coat as he rolled in and underneath the bridge, and in one smooth motion, he moved the small case he brought with him to his chest. Grey's eyes searched his new environment for any onlookers, but found none.

The two transport beacons Grey brought with him fell out of the open end of the case and onto his lap, along with the other pieces of equipment he needed to carry out his mission. The beacons went into the utility pockets of his now-reversed business attire. He smoothed out the winter-colored lines of the top portion of his outfit before collapsing the case.

He moved back along the footpath on the lower-elevation side of the resort from the staff entrance to the spaceport. The color of his outfit blended in with theirs easily, and his face was partially obscured by the hood of his coat. With his hands tucked into his coat pockets, he shuffled along back toward the resort's staff access doors near the rear of the main building. Grey scanned his immediate surroundings and then diverted to a smaller, less-used path toward the recreation area that he visited the previous day. Grey did not want to come within range of the door scanners or the other security devices the resort used for access to the building, lest he be discovered or they sent local security out to investigate his presence there.

An older utility structure used by the resort to hold equipment and repair tools existed roughly half the distance between the two points. The front access door seemed to be perpetually open to allow ground vehicles to move freely in and out of the main bay. Workers loaded the vehicles with the proper tools, then drove them to the outdoor areas of the resort. Due to the size of the resort, workers filed in and out throughout the day while the slopes were open. He gained entry easily by mimicking their purposeful stride but did not join any of the groups he saw collecting equipment. Instead, he wound his way towards the back, where the older equipment was stored to scout a place where he might hide until it was time to make the rendezvous.

Once the shadows started to grow long in the afternoon, Grey made his way out to the path after a large number of workers departed, presumably for a shift change. The path was clear of any staff all the way to the recreation facility that led to the ski lifts, but provided an easy way to transition to the guest path used by the more respectable and wealthier members of Rihannsu society. Because of this, the path meandered through a beautiful winter garden with foliage that led to blind corners and densely-packed bushes that allowed him to hide from view easily.

He spent nearly thirty minutes hidden behind a large flowering tree before he heard the recognizable voice of one of the twins. "I thought we were supposed to go with tr'Khnialmnae and view the new gallery pieces," he whined.

"We have been outside all morning," the other twin pointed out.

"*Entallan* tr'Khnialmnae," their mother stressed the man's rank. "Has been most accommodating, but even he understands that a mother does enjoy time with her children without having to entertain high-ranking guests."

"He doesn't care about formalities, Mother. He's very nice!"

Grey supposed that the derisive sound Ael'Ekkhae made was another universal constant, this time one reserved for mothers.

Once they had rounded the corner and were out of view of anyone else who might be on the path, Grey stepped out from behind the tree. "I had been looking for you," he said formally to Ael'Ekkhae. He then motioned for her to step off the path and towards the tree.

While Ael'Ekkhae noticeably relaxed when he made his appearance, both of the twins appeared confused. One asked, "Mother, isn't he tr'Aimne? Why is he dressed as a servant?"

"Merik, Taec, come along," Ael'Ekkhae ordered decisively. "I'll explain everything in a moment."

The boys glanced at each other but followed after her. Once they turned the corner, Grey drew the three of them close and activated the beacon. A barely-audible chirp sounded before the shimmering light of blue and white began to dance within their vision. The effect of the transporter beam cleared shortly after, and the interior of *Gallant*'s transport bay appeared, along with two officers clad in Starfleet uniforms.

Teelis stepped forward and smiled. "Welcome aboard the Federation starship *Gallant*."

Grey did not hesitate. He moved to the nearby commpanel and activated it, "Bridge, this is Grey. We're all aboard."

The immediate response came in the voice of the ship's XO, "Acknowledged. Bridge, out."

Both of the boys had begun to struggle when Grey had taken a hold of their shoulders, but now that they were on the ship, they had gone quite still. The confusion on their faces had melted away when they were greeted by the female officer; one of them actually gaped. The other asked, "Are you Rihannsu?"

"I am. I am Lieutenant Teelis Tei," she introduced herself. She turned towards their mother. "You must be Ael'Ekkhae. If you and your children would follow me, I can show you to your quarters."

Ael'Ekkhae nodded and looked at her children. "We're defecting," she told them in a tone that did not encourage dissent. "Merik, Taec...this is the only way you won't be forced into the Tal Priax. This is the only way I can give you a choice about your lives." With that, she took the hands of the twins in her own and led them from the transporter pad.

One of the boys - Merik, Grey thought - looked rather relieved at the news. "Thank you," is all he said. The other couldn't stop staring at Teelis; a shine of wonder alit in both pupils.

"Once you are settled, we can explain everything in detail and answer any questions you might have," Teelis noted as she walked towards the doors.

Ael'Ekkhae nodded. "Thank you," she added as she passed through the doors with her children.

With *Gallant* speeding back toward the Neutral Zone at their facade's cruising velocity, Captain Kircheis called for a debriefing within her ready room, along with Lieutenants Kelley and Tei. Four officers put a premium on the available space as Grey took the seat while the lieutenants opted to stand behind him.

Grey provided a concise report on the events leading up to the transport, which left Kircheis with the obvious question: "Why didn't t'Aimne accompany her family? I was left with the impression that the plan involved extracting all of them, not just the mother and the children."

"The khre'Arrain informed me that the true motivation for her actions lay with the security of her family, not necessarily her own personal safety or demise. She gave the intelligence information she promised to her cousin, who will give us the information once we are in Federation space," he replied.

"The true motivation for this mission, as it was understood by Starfleet Intelligence, was to convey her to..." Kircheis stopped, allowing a sigh to escape her lips as she exhibited frustration. She took a moment to compose herself before continuing, "Of course, I'm pleased that the

children and their mother are safe. However, Admiral Leone made it clear that our objective was to secure t'Aimne herself. I am highly concerned with what might happen to her should her subterfuge be discovered."

"If t'Aimne's read of the Tal Shiar agent is correct, she is not necessarily going to be discovered. When the investigation is launched tomorrow, it will find she was with the Tal Shiar agent. She was supposed to be with the family, but it is his sudden appearance which distracted her. In fact, given Ael'Ekkhae's unorthodox past behavior, it would not be unlikely that she took the opportunity of her cousin's distraction to hide with the boys," Teelis explained.

"Captain, I agree with the lieutenant," Grey added. "t'Aimne herself said that she intended to distract tr'Khnialmnae in order to provide us with a window. In the time it took for them to walk from the lifts back to the resort's noble residence, and by the time they figure out that they're three people short..."

Kircheis raised her hand in surrender to their words. "I get it. I'm merely trying to figure out in my head how I'm going to explain it to the admiral." She sighed deeply, once more. Her fingers interlaced themselves upon her desk, as though she were attempting to find her center. "I'll deal with that when the time comes. XO, how much longer until we reach the Neutral Zone?"

Kelley checked her PADD. "Eleven hours, sir."

"For the next eleven hours, then, we have to continue the guise of being a freighter heading for Galorndan Core." Kircheis turned her attention to Teelis, "The imaging system will hold for that long, I'm sure."

"The system is functioning within parameters, sir. I do not anticipate a problem, but either the Senior Chief or myself will be monitoring the system until it is no longer needed," Teelis confirmed.

Kircheis accepted that with a succinct nod. "Very well. All of you are dismissed, except Lieutenant Tei. Would you mind staying behind, please?"

"Of course, sir," Teelis replied.

Kelley and Grey moved to depart, but Kelley held back a moment to ask Teelis, "I'll see you in the mess hall, later?"

Teelis nodded, her expression growing flat. "Yes, sir."

Now alone within the ready room, Kircheis offered Teelis a wan smile. "I have to apologize for that. I'm trying to find a way to get over her irrational biases towards Rihannsu. You helped me understand your culture and I'm hoping you can do the same for her. She's a good officer and she'll make a great captain."

"As you say, sir," Teelis answered noncommittally.

That drew a throat-clearing from Kircheis. "The reason I asked you to stay behind is because once we're done with this mission, we're going to be transferred to Task Force Vanguard. The Senior Chief has made it clear that he's looking to transfer off to another ship, and I was thinking that maybe I could entice you to stay on with us."

Teelis appeared surprised by the offer, from her blinking response. After a moment, she looked down and to the right. "Thank you, sir, but I am afraid that my tour at Utopia Planitia will not be over for another sixteen months."

"Don't let that prevent you, Teelis. You know as well as I that an order from Admiral Leone would put to rest any such obligations," Kircheis replied, unable to help her grin.

"I understand that sir, but it was Admiral Leone's influence which secured my current posting. I also believe that Captain Lo would block any attempt to remove me from his team. You saw how reluctant he was to see me away for these few weeks. He is not without influence of his own, especially within the Corps of Engineers."

The captain leaned back in her chair. "We keep talking about how this would affect others, but what would *you* like to do? This mission's success would allow you to have some capital to spend within Starfleet. In spite of your tour, a transfer wouldn't be out of the question. What do you want to do?"

Before Teelis could respond, the red alert klaxon sounded. "Captain Kircheis to the bridge!" called Piggy's voice over the ship's public address system. "We have a Rihannsu military vessel decloaking ordering us to heave to."

Chapter Nine

Chapter Nine

NCC-74229 (USS *Gallant*)

Rihannsu-held space, travelling toward the Federation-Rihannsu Neutral Zone at warp 7.5

Main Bridge

Stardate 54706.95 (16 September 2377, just after midnight)

"Report," said Kircheis without preamble. She stepped onto the bridge with Teelis following on her heels. The viewscreen held the image of a D'Talla-class light cruiser approaching them at warp.

Lieutenant Yamamoto surrendered the center seat as soon as Kircheis' tone sounded within the compartment. She replied, "Captain, we're being hailed by the Rihannsu."

Grey reported, "I think they're either performing a standard check, or they're asking me out on a date." He turned his head in time to see Lieutenant Kelley arrive on the bridge, "Lieutenant Tei?"

"A standard check of a ship about to cross the border," Teelis confirmed from her position behind Kircheis. "You are too low-class to ask out on a date, Mister Grey," she added dryly.

Piggy did not hide his smirk. "Mister Grey, they're hailing again. Different voice, this time."

Grey nodded. "I hear him. I suppose after the second try a higher ranked officer is getting involved." He looked up at Teelis. "I'd say superior tense, by the word choice."

"Status of our stealth device?" asked Kircheis.

Teelis approached one of the consoles and made a quick check. "Operating within normal parameters. Sir, I suggest Mister Grey answer the call soon before they lock weapons in suspicion."

Kelley stepped forward and spoke for the first time, "Could we get a translation on the main viewer, please?"

"Agreed. Mister Grey?"

Grey cleared his throat and activated the on-screen translation so the bridge crew could follow along. He cut into the latter half of a sentence, "-knowledge your signal. We were having communication difficulties and apologize for the delay. How can we be of assistance?"

"Declare your route, compliment and cargo," responded the voice without further identifying itself.

Without hesitation, Grey replied, "Galorndan Core, twelve in crew. We're running empty at this time, sir."

"What cargo are you on route to procure?" came the reply.

"Raw minerals, specifically gallicite ore to take to the refineries at ch'Havran."

There was a pause at the other end which lengthened into a three minute delay. Finally, the voice continued, "We inform you that gallicite ore is among the materials subject to the new higher tax rate upon your return. Make provisions accordingly to pay the 25% duty."

"Thank you for the reminder, sir. Can we be of further assistance to the Galae?"

"No, proceed." The comm link closed shortly thereafter.

Grey tapped the console to close their end of the channel before speaking. "Glad I didn't say anything too gauche for my station in life," he said as he spun around in his seat to face the rest of the bridge. "I guess we didn't have to let them board us."

"Such a maneuver is fairly unusual. We're reading as a freighter with twelve crew and no cargo, as you stated. They are required to question nearly every ship in the area. They do not have time to board each one," Teelis noted. "Especially since incursion in this area is highly unlikely, since the Federation does not have cloaking devices."

Yamamoto reported from the operations console, "The Rihannsu vessel is moving off at a higher speed; approaching warp eight-point-two-five, sir."

Kircheis tapped her fingers on the console to clear the sensor report on the Romulan vessel. "Well done, all. I'd like all the passive readings archived for transmission to Intelligence, per SOP." She pushed herself up out of the chair and walked over to Teelis. Although she spoke to her, her eyes were on her executive officer, "I think you're late for dinner, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir," Teelis answered.

Kircheis added, "We'll continue our conversation after. Drop by when you're done."

Teelis' expression turned resigned. "Yes, sir."

Though the table seated four people, the aura surrounding the seated pair of Teelis and Kelley provided enough of a buffer in a normally crowded mess hall. The typical noise level of the mess hall often made it difficult to speak or be heard, but the lateness of the hour and the recent red alert interrupted the usual pattern of the crew's eating habits so that they ate in a nearly empty compartment.

Kelley had ridden down in the turbolift and ordered a meal from the replicators with Teelis, but they had not exchanged more than ten words in that time. Even now, they were sitting in silence, each of them eating their own meal with quiet diligence. The Romulan had ordered calamari with a sweet dipping sauce and a red-beet and goat cheese salad. It was one of the more unusual orders Kelley had seen in some time. She decided to use this as an opening.

"Is that meal something you typically order, Lieutenant?" she asked.

Teelis looked up, surprised that the other woman had spoken. "No. I have no usual order. I eat whatever I feel like at the time, sir," she answered. "I am told that I tend to eat consistently salty foods, compared to humans."

"I used to think it was all the preservatives on the food stores that they carried on Romulan ships," Kelley admitted as she looked down at her plate. "When I served as a liaison officer during the war, I could only eat from the selected replicated patterns; never from the officers' table."

"My sister once said that the Rihannsu palate tended towards salt, sweet and subtle flavors. Salty miso soup is a particular family favorite," Teelis replied.

"Nothing subtle about the flavor," Kelley said vehemently. "Maybe our taste buds are more sensitive than Romulans. Some of the food I sampled was almost like eating a salt lick or swallowing sugar cubes."

"Oh." Teelis looked toward the upper bulkhead. "Sir, I think perhaps you were sampling some of the... less desirable packs of food, during your stay," she revealed carefully. "Were many on your ship of the House Khnialmnae?"

"The Commander's name was tr'Tal and his executive officer was tr'Khnialmnae. I remember that much because the former's name was easy, and the latter's was difficult," Kelley paused long enough to bring the fork to her lips. "It was by the grace of repetition that I didn't mangle his name and offend him."

"Both Houses are in the conservative block of the political spectrum and were not in favor of the exchange program, sir. My sister once told me that those who didn't agree with having non-Rihannsu onboard would try to make their guests uncomfortable, including giving them the meal packs that were incorrectly manufactured. There is a five percent rate of mistake in the packs."

Kelley raised her eyebrows. "Well, imagine my surprise. I gathered they didn't want me around when they went to great lengths to exclude me from the meals that all officers seemed to attend as though they were ordered to. It took about a week of worrying about my blood pressure before one of the engineers offered me access to the replicator that had the limited pattern selection. It was better than bringing on hypertension."

"Do you recall the name of the engineer?" Teelis wondered as she speared another piece of salad with her own fork. "I am willing to bet he or she was of the progressive faction. We are not all the same, any more than all humans are the same."

"Her name was t'Khev. She was the ship's lead maintenance engineer, if I recall correctly," Kelley replied after taking a moment to search her memory. "She smelled like coolant most of the time; it seemed to follow wherever she went. I couldn't tell at times if it was her moving through the ship, or we had a serious problem with a coolant leak. I think she bathed in it."

"She was of the progressive faction and she was likely avoiding the other officers, due to that status. She probably spent as much time as she did near the coolant tanks to avoid them, sir," Teelis responded, her tone growing flat.

"Most of my time was spent in the communications center... I wasn't really allowed in the command areas. Because I held some of the cryptographic information needed for the sign/countersign protocols from the flagship, they wanted to limit my access to only those areas I needed access to and no more," explained Kelley. "In fact, the only reason why she and I even met was because we happened to be in the mess hall well after the senior staff had retired. She rigged my access for me, so I have her to thank for that." With a bit of wistfulness in her tone, she continued, "I never saw her again, after I left to return to my ship. I never got to thank her."

"How long were you on the ship, sir?" Teelis asked.

"Five weeks. Standard rotation at the request of the Romulan admiralty."

"And you did not learn Rihannsu in that time?"

Kelley shook her head and gestured to her commbadge. "I had this on me. Never any need."

"Except on this mission, where such knowledge would have been handy. You think of the Rihannsu as your enemy and did not think to learn their language when they were forced to bring you aboard?" Teelis asked again, somewhat incredulous.

Kelley felt the hairs on the back of her neck rise as she flushed. "They weren't my enemy during the war. And five weeks of hearing Standard did not provide me with enough exposure. It was inefficient to turn off the translator in order to get my job done." She scoffed, "You make it sound like they were lining up to tutor me or something."

"You never asked anyone. You didn't even tell anyone that the food was unpalatable. The Rihannsu aren't telepathic, sir, but clearly there was at least one officer who reached out to you. I am sure she would have been happy to give you a Rihannsu primer program. There are a number, since the Empire requires all foreign workers to speak Rihannsu."

"I don't think that would have been a good idea... the fact that she only spoke to me briefly and then hid it from the others told me that I was

obviously an unwelcome visitor there," Kelley put her fork down and folded her arms across her midsection. "It was a miserable five weeks, and even after she gave me access, she and I didn't meet for meals or anything. To be honest, this is the longest conversation I've ever had with one of you."

"Noted, sir," Teelis replied, turning her gaze to her food once more.

Kelley leaned in, dropping her tone slightly, "I don't like this any more than you do. I'm sure you'd rather be off someplace else than having to share a meal with me. And I get it.. just like I did aboard that ship." With her left hand, she waved toward nothing as she spoke further, "I'm just a human... I'm not as important as a Romulan. When push comes to shove, it's all about racism."

"One of the central tenets of most Rihanssu religions is that the gods created Vulcan as a test to our people, so that only the strongest would thrive. Then, there was a second great test, that only the best chose to leave. And of them, only the best survived to find ch'Rihan and build a great Empire. Of course, many of us believe that's ridiculous, just as your people no longer believe women are the weaker and more hysterical sex not worthy of having the vote. Some of your people still believe that men are superior to women, I believe. You have your separatist movements and your conservative elements that hold xenophobic views in the highest regard."

"Motivated purely by fear of that which they don't understand. Yes, they exist, but they're few and far between. Removed from service in Starfleet, as that would go contrary to their beliefs," Kelley took up her fork again and continued to eat. "Those prejudices we had in abundance during the formation of the Federation are hard to find in this day and age."

"Except here, in this mess hall, eating dinner with me. Sir." Teelis set down her fork and looked over at the other officer. "I don't know why the Commander wants me to recommend you as being above petty prejudices, sir. My sister is the political one; I just want to play with the latest technology and help my people, all people, in doing so. But if this is what our meals are going to be like for the next several weeks, then I suggest we eat them in silence."

Kelley narrowed her eyes as she regarded Teelis, feeling the bitter taste in her mouth at being referred to as a racist. "I don't think you get to close the argument after levying a charge like that. I'm not a xenophobic maniac who goes around blowing up embassies, nor am I out there hunting down non-humans for sport. I wear the same uniform as you."

"You are to be commended for wearing that uniform, but you suspect me for wearing it. You don't have to have murder in your heart to be a racist, Lieutenant. There are casual forms of hatred and vicious forms and everything in between."

"Teelis!" came the call of the Senior Chief at that moment. Both women turned at the sound, watching as the Andorian bore down on them with a tray in hand. "Mind if I join you? I want you to try that dish I was talking about," he continued, already sliding into a seat at the table.

"Of course, Senior Chief," Teelis replied, a smile coming to her face as if she hadn't just been in a serious discussion. "Which one is it?" she asked, eyeing his tray doubtfully.

He took a small dish of a red gelatinous substance and placed it before the Romulan. "Try it," he directed.

Kelley watched as Teelis picked up her fork and cut into the dish. Rather than take just a small taste, she took a full bite of the squishy substance. Her expression slowly changed as she seemed to chew for a time, then swallowed. "I am sorry," she told the engineer apologetically. "I do not like it."

"Eh," Karis responded, waving a hand at her. "My mother's is better. Replicated, it's not the best. You'll try my mother's recipe and I'm sure you'll like it. Always made me feel better when I was sick."

Teelis inclined her head toward him. "I will. And I hope I do. If my sister is around when you make it, I know she'd be interested. She's always trying new foods and experimenting with the ones she knows."

"The older one, right? The doctor?" Karis asked as he tucked into his own meal. Kelley continued to sit quietly, fuming but unwilling to say anything in front of the Andorian.

"Yes. Though Llair too, she's always adjusting the replicator at home. It bothers my brother Freddy. They argue about it quite a bit," Teelis replies. "I often get a recounting of both sides of their arguments in their messages," she continued amusedly.

"Happens to me too. I don't have as few siblings as you, so I get lots of messages, with three or four or five sides to arguments. Tiring, really. It's why I like engineering. There's only one right way to do something. Usually."

While listening to the senior chief and Teelis converse as though she were not sitting a few feet away from them, Kelley felt the ire raised by Teelis' words rise and fall. She reached for that last bit of composure to prevent her from calling attention to the fact that she was furious with the unmitigated gall of the Romulan officer. Putting on a thin smile, Kelley decided to ask, "You have a brother named 'Freddy?'"

Teelis and Karis both turned to look at the human, as if surprised she would interrupt. "Ah, yes," the Romulan answered. "His name in Rihanssu was very hard for the children at school to pronounce. He was just five when we settled in the Federation. So they dubbed him Freddy instead, and we all call him that now. Except for my older sister, who refuses to use that name. She likes that the humans accepted him so quickly, but she thinks now that they're teenagers, they could learn the correct pronunciation. She has not insisted though and Freddy never would. Our mother doesn't mind. Ariennye sometimes says that he and Llair are more human than anything else, because they were so young when we defected. But that is a joke. They can be exactly who they are without having to watch what they say, or worry that they might offend someone of higher rank over some trivial thing. Living that way almost all of their lives makes them more open with others than the rest of us."

"The captain mentioned that your family faced something similar to t'Aimne's family," Kelley said, more for herself than either Karis or Teelis. "I wonder how many other families would take the opportunity to cross the border if they could."

"It was more difficult for us to get away, due to our rank. Ariennye deserves the credit for getting us out of the family estate and to the border. But many families now can and do cross the border, only to return. Life in the Empire is predictable. We know what the Empire will do for us, what is expected of us. That is a great comfort to many people," Teelis replied. "But there are still others who would like to leave. However, one cannot renounce citizenship in the Empire, if one does leave."

"You'd think they would be less crazy about that. You Rihannsu breed more than Vulcans. There are plenty of you," Karis chimed in.

"Size does not remain an advantage if you do not keep your total population," Teelis explained. "Or so the thinking goes."

"What I meant to say was that if the cost of service to the Empire is too high, it seems that the only option is to flee the Empire." Kelley's right hand gestured toward the bulkhead, "As with our current guests, and apparently as with your family, Lieutenant. If Federation service agrees more with like-minded Romulans, is it purely out of that deeply indoctrinated ideology that prevents them from leaving peacefully? You make it sound so easy, and yet we went through all this subterfuge to smuggle them out of Romulan space."

"Rihannsu of rank are particularly hard to smuggle out, as you say. And populations are monitored, so that large numbers cannot leave at one time. But the Federation is home to a growing number of Rihannsu, most of whom come from the common class." Teelis smiled wistfully. "As for myself, I can honestly say that I would have been happy to remain in the Empire but for the Tal Priax. It was my intention to perform my mandatory service, which we regard as a religious duty, and then join the priesthood. Even now, there are days when I wish that had been my life. There is a purity of purpose to that way of life, for all walks of Rihannsu. It's more than indoctrination; it is a devotion, one that helps us control our worst impulses."

Kelley pressed on, "The Tal Priax notwithstanding, we wouldn't be having this conversation. It seems that many of the other non-Federation governments seem to employ this faction of 'true believers.' The Romulans have the Tal Priax, the Klingon's have the Hand of Kahless, and the Cardassians have the True Way... all of them are purists that operate with the sanction of the people, it seems."

"A feature of racially homogenous political organizations, then. Humans, Andorians, Vulcans... most of the races of the Federation went through similar times when there was a call for racial purity. They moved past it, with varying success, and the Rihannsu will as well," Teelis responded with certainty.

"Is it 'Romulan' or 'Rihannsu?'" asked Kelley genuinely. "I've heard the names used interchangeably."

"The Rihannsu is our name for our people. Romulan is what you call us, due to the dual nature of our home planet with ch'Havran."

"Also known as Remus?"

"To you. Never to us. The Federation ship which arrived at our home planet and blithely renamed it, its companion and our people for figures out of its own mythological past is partially why the Tal Priax is as strong as it is today. It was a violation of the Rihannsu sovereignty, and still the Federation continues to use its own name for an entire race."

"The green-skin has a point," Karis noted with a knowing nod, one antennae twitching. "It's pretty rude, sir."

Kelley opened her mouth to point out the obvious irony in an Andorian using 'green-skin' in one breath and then judging the colloquialism of another race in the next, but decided against it. "I could explain it as being the by-product of the stars being named in our language well before first contact was made with your people, Lieutenant, but then we often change our usage for other races as it becomes necessary. Maybe it was the Federation-Romu... er, Rihannsu war that brought it into a more solidified use?"

"I agree, but the change became necessary after that first contact and has yet to be made, sir," Teelis pointed out. "When will the Federation decide it is 'necessary?'"

Kelley resumed eating rather than respond. With a shrug, she noted, "I have no idea. Other than making the change personally, there's not a whole lot of power I wield in that department."

"Then make the change personally. What's hard about that?" Karis asked. "Enough people do it and the usage changes."

"What's hard about that, indeed..." Kelley wondered aloud. "I've already tried to be conscious of it, but old habits die hard, as they say."

The doors leading into the mess hall parted to allow Piggy to enter as Kelley finished her sentence. He requested a steaming mug from the replicator and joined the officers as though he naturally belonged there. "Good morning, everyone."

"Good morning, Ensign," Kelley replied, her demeanor changing. She could not put her finger on it, but Piggy's cheeriness irritated her more than she wanted to admit. Biting back a few choice words of rebuke for inviting himself to the table, Kelley decided to let it go. "I take it you've completed your work for the night?"

Piggy blew over the top of his mug and smiled. "Yes, sir. I finished the encryption work and handed it off to the petty officer taking over for the first shift."

Karis noted, "First shift began over forty minutes ago."

"It took awhile to pass down all the work," replied Piggy. He sipped from the mug gingerly, testing the temperature. "Can't just dump and run, right?" Pleased with his self-assessment, he asked, "What are we all talking about?"

Kelley briefly glanced at Teelis, then peered at her. The Rihannha officer became much more interested in her plate suddenly and made no move to respond or even acknowledge the ensign's presence at the table. "Uh, we were discussing the use of the name 'Romulan' as a pejorative. The correct name is—"

"-Rihannsu," Piggy said quickly. "I know. They went over that at the Academy, sir. It was actually one of my favorite courses, learning

about their culture and language."

Teelis took another bite of her salad, still offering no comment. Kelley noticed that Karis had grown a wide grin on his face. Piggy meanwhile continued without a pause.

"I was really fascinated by the intricacies of the social ranking system within the Empire, one that was affected by military rank, past deeds, familial connections, lineages...very complex. Were you very highly ranked, Lieutenant?" he asked the Rihannha directly.

Teelis swallowed, then took a sip of her drink before answering with some hesitancy. "Yes, I was," she acknowledged finally.

"In what way? Were you a princess of your House?" Piggy pressed.

"No. That title really only exists, to a degree, with the Imperial family. We have a Head of House, and then rank usually proceeds as a degree of consanguinity and ability from whomever currently holds that position."

"So what were you then, exactly?"

"I was...within the top ranked three thousand members of my House, which consists of millions of individuals. I was born on the main family estate, I was raised there, I went to school there. Technically, I was eligible to possibly become Head of the House myself, but I would never have done so. If anyone in my immediate family had that ability, it would be Ariennye."

"So...basically, you were a princess, but without the official title. That's incredible."

Kelley smiled. "Careful, Ensign. Lieutenant Tei is already spoken for by our Admiral's son."

Teelis turned a shade that could only be called apple green. "What?" she asked, flabbergasted.

Even Karis seemed surprised by the comment. "That's disgusting. She's way too young for that." He reached out a hand to pat Teelis' forearm. "Humans. They mate very early and think everyone else does too. Don't let it bother you."

"The captain already told me about Dominic Leone," Kelley said, ignoring Karis. "I guess it's not mutual. How many guys are falling all over themselves for you?" The previous anger she felt had been replaced by her playfulness. "Some girls get all the luck."

"Wait, you're not with Leone?" was Piggy's eager question.

Teelis seemed to regain some of her ability to speak, but she was still clearly unsettled. "Lieutenant Leone is my oldest friend here in the Federation, the first one I met when we defected. He and I, our families, we are close, we have a strong bond of friendship and patronage, but...I, no," she finally stated.

"You asked him to three Sadie Hawkins dances though," Piggy pointed out. "That's a courtship ritual for us," he tried to explain.

"It is not. It can't be. Why would the Academy sanction courtship rituals among its cadets?" Teelis denied, shaking her head. "No. I asked him because he explained that my attendance was expected and he knew I would be uncomfortable if I was to go with someone else."

"Wow, three Sadie Hawkins is just one away from marriage for us," Kelley mentioned with a sly grin. "Three is an engagement, right?"

"Leave her alone, Lieutenant," Karis frowned at the XO. "You're literally teasing a near-child about her love life." Apparently, there were some lines the Andorian would not cross.

"What are you talking about, Senior Chief?" Piggy asked, bewildered at both his and Teelis reaction to the questions.

The Rihannha was clearly not going to answer any further questions, but Karis stepped in to explain. "She's twenty-two. That's not considered mature enough for romantic or sexual relationships for Vulcanoids. They do that stuff in their forties, I think. And you don't see Vulcans in the Academy before they are thirty, at a minimum, because of that. She's...I don't know, the age you were before you went to the Academy."

"Seventeen?" Piggy hazarded a guess. "Oh." He looked uncomfortable for perhaps the first time in his life. "I'm...sorry, Lieutenant. You are just, for a human, you know. Very attractive. I didn't know. No one did."

Teelis did not reply. She did, however, look like she was going to be sick.

"They missed that little detail in that course you took, Ensign?" asked Kelley, deadpan.

"They said not much was known about Rihannsu mating customs. It took the Federation almost a hundred years to find out about Pon Farr," Piggy defended himself. Or his professors.

Teelis finally spoke. Only to say, "I will not discuss this with you. If you will excuse me, I must check on our guests." She did not wait for a reply and stood, taking her tray back to the replicators and then walked out of the mess hall.

Kelley decided to let the officer walk off with the remains of her dignity before glancing at Karis and Piggy. "I will say that this has been one of the more fascinating meals I've had in the mess hall."

"One thing all the green-skins have in common is that they don't like to be teased," Karis opined. He picked up the extra serving of the gelatinous substance Teelis had rejected and placed it in front of the Ensign. "Why don't you try this? I think you'll like it."

Chapter Ten

Chapter Ten

Starfleet Headquarters
San Francisco, Earth
Starfleet Intelligence, Conference Room Baker
Stardate 54751.68 (2 October 2377, morning)

The long conference table within the room held three admirals at one end and Kircheis at the other. After completing her mission report with the help of the facility's computer system and the uplink to *Gallant*, she stood before Fleet Admiral Alynna Nechayev, Vice Admiral Bruce Coburn, and Rear Admiral Leone with an expectant expression on her face.

Coburn's presence at the debriefing she knew was not by invitation; the admiral listened in his capacity as an observer on behalf of an oversight committee for the Federation. From the moment he entered the conference room, he expressed his obvious disdain for Leone and Kircheis not just with his tone of voice, but also by his facial expression. It seemed as though he constantly detected the odor of manure everywhere he went.

"So, I understand," Coburn began, "that *Gallant* and her crew did not complete the primary mission objective. This is a failure, through and through." Though he did not look at her directly, the statement cast a wide enough net to infer the failure of the three female officers.

Leone said nothing, instead opting to trade a knowing look with Nechayev as they were seated opposite one another. The higher-ranking admiral chose to respond, "Admiral Coburn, your fatalism is always entertaining, but the primary objective was to secure the information being offered by the Rihansu officer. That was completed successfully."

"Be that as it may, the value in the mission as I interpreted it was to secure the officer as well as the information. If she had wanted to provide raw data, as you suggest, Admiral Nechayev, she could've transmitted it." Coburn gestured with his right index finger in a wagging motion. "Why else would we have gone to such great lengths in sending a highly valuable asset into our current ally's territory and risk a military confrontation?"

Nechayev turned her head toward Leone, Kircheis saw. "Admiral Leone?"

Leone lifted herself from her seat and approached the large viewscreen behind Kircheis. She placed her hands behind her back and read the words of the final report as they appeared there. "I don't know that I agree that it was the primary objective, Admiral," she said smoothly. "While I would say that conveying khre'Arrain t'Aimne to Federation space would have been a major intelligence victory, the information provided by her is what we were ultimately after. As Admiral Nechayev said, that much was accomplished. But, I would rather point out that the khre'Arrain was offering the information in return for the safety of her family. We had to send that asset in order to acquire the information."

Coburn harrumphed. "You always have an answer for everything, Admiral Leone."

"Sir, the answers are always there if you look at the facts," she replied in a respectful tone.

Kircheis used all of her restraint to prevent a chortle from escaping her lips at Leone's reply. Subtly informing a vice admiral that he has his head up his ass was not something she bore witness to every day. Instead, she cleared her throat and leaned forward with a murmured apology for interrupting.

"And I presume that the defectors are going through the proper interrogation process?" Coburn asked openly. "Someone at Intelligence is sitting with each of them and asking the questions that need to be asked before we welcome them with open arms?"

Leone answered, "They're being processed by the Ministry of State, actually. The civilian intelligence agencies are overseeing the process as regulations require, as this is no longer a Starfleet matter."

Coburn said, "Then they will be sent to some colony world?"

"I believe that will be up to the family to decide. I'm sure that they will present them with some options with respect to their permanent residence," Leone replied. "I'm sure they're handling this with the same care that they've had in the past, sir."

Nechayev picked up her PADD that had laid on the top of the conference room table. "Unless there's anything further, I have another conference room to be in. I think we've covered all of the details, yes?"

Coburn stood up as Nechayev did. "For now, yes. You can expect a formal query from my office before the end of the day, sir."

"Of course, Admiral," the fleet admiral replied mirthfully. "Thank you, Captain Kircheis. You and your crew are to be commended."

Already on her feet, Kircheis inclined her head slightly. "We're at your service, sir."

Once Nechayev departed, Coburn did not linger. Leone and Kircheis were left alone within the conference room.

"He's always a bundle of joy," Kircheis remarked.

Leone smirked. "He's a vice admiral who deserves your respect, Captain. Even if he can be a horse's ass, sometimes. He's a good officer." She walked toward the door leading back toward her office. "Let's grab some coffee and we can talk about the future."

By the time they returned to the admiral's office, Charity had prepared a pot of coffee for the pair. She withdrew from the office to leave Kircheis and Leone to talk alone.

Leone poured into the mugs and offered Kircheis the first one. "Help yourself," she said, indicating the accouterments on the tray. "I heard you recommended your exec for command."

"You mean read, I'm assuming, from the letter I wrote?" Kircheis grinned before sipping at her mug. "Damn, that's good."

"It's from the shop around the corner," Leone explained. "You're going to have to find yourself another XO, then. Commander Kelley's getting her marching orders today. She's to command *Audacious*."

"I had a feeling she would get that ship, sir. She'll make a fine captain for you."

"You have any nominations to fill the void left by the appointment?"

Kircheis nodded. "Lieutenant Hiroko Yamamoto, my current Operations Officer, is more than ready to step into the role. I just need to find myself someone at Ops."

Leone tapped the desktop terminal twice. "I'll make sure to send over some names for you. Also, Captain Lo requested your current chief engineer and I'm granting the transfer."

"What?" Kircheis' immediate response left before she had a chance to think about it. "Sir, I need the senior chief. He's the primary reason we were as successful as we were."

"I'm sorry, but your next assignment is going to be too much of a hardship to ask him to go through and he's earned some desk duty. He was going to be rotating off in another three months, anyway." Leone turned the terminal around to face Kircheis.

"Task Force Vanguard," Kircheis read aloud, then peered at Leone. "Sir, you're sending us to the Delta Quadrant?"

Leone turned the display around once more. "Effective as soon as you select your replacement crew. I need you to report to Admiral Jellico on USS *Galaxy* no later than the end of next week. He'll have mission parameters and some engineering tasks for you and your crew to perform before the task force departs."

"In order to do that, sir, I'll need a top-flight chief engineer. I'd like to request that Teelis' assignment be made permanent."

"No."

"Sir, I must insist."

Leone smiled. "Now you sound like Captain Lo." Off Kircheis' blush, she continued, "I'm sorry. Teelis will return to Utopia to complete her projects that are as vital to the Federation as this mission."

Kircheis opened her mouth to try once more, but Leone cut her off by talking over her. "When she graduated from the Academy, I had to pull a lot of strings to get her into that research department despite the fact that she was clearly qualified. I sold her as the next coming of a genius engineer and she's living up to the billing. And even if I did agree with you, Captain Lo would spend some of his considerable political capital with the admiralty to keep her. I might have put her there originally, but there's no way the Corps of Engineers would allow me to place her on a front line mission for extended duty."

After seeking solace in the half-full mug of coffee, Kircheis sighed loudly. "I understand, but I still don't like it."

"No one said you had to like it, but that's the way it goes." Leone used the pot to bring her mug back to full. "So, you will need to petition the local pool for qualified officers in multiple sections. Just be ready by the end of next week."

"I'm assuming that we'll be giving the rest of the crew the option to transfer, in light of our orders?"

"That would be the right thing to do, yes."

"So, I might be looking for replacements for more than just those two, then."

Leone did not reply, instead flavoring the coffee within the mug.

"I'll manage, sir. Don't worry."

"Oh, I won't," came the quick reply. Leone leaned back in her chair to regard Kircheis with minor amusement in her eyes.

"But, speaking of worry," Kircheis took her seat. "How are you doing?"

Leone hesitated. "I'm... better. There were a couple of days when I didn't want to get out of bed, let alone come into the office."

"Understandable," Kircheis said softly. She set her mug down to give Leone her full attention. "Dealing with Jesse Kincaid had to be tough, as well."

"Compared to the memorial service, he was a cake walk. And he's been formally reinstated as a full Commander."

"Pending his court-martial?"

"No. The charges were dropped."

Kircheis nearly sputtered in response, "I beg your pardon, sir?"

Leone explained, "Officially, the file was lost during a maintenance cycle at the Bureau of Personnel, but unofficially... given that he is the reason we'll have an ally in the former demilitarized zone... it was difficult for me to see through the prosecution."

"Sir, you don't have to see it through. That's why we have the JAG Corps."

"That's not what I meant and you know it. I also know why you're angry about it."

"He betrayed us. If Ariel were here right now, she'd be furious!"

Leone turned her head away at the mention of Ariel's fury. "You're right. She would be furious about it, but I think even she would come to see reason. We have to move forward and start healing those old wounds. Otherwise, what are we left with?"

She set her own mug down on the desk and turned her chair to the side, facing the large bay window within her office. "That mission I sent her on was fueled by that rage, and I knew it. I knew that she would be willing to do whatever it took to bring Jesse in. Like you, she was there when he left for the Maquis and she helped me through those dark days after when my career was on the line. She never forgave him and I used her hatred for him to serve our purposes."

Kircheis frowned. She peered at her hands. "She told me that she was on her last chance with you. That if she failed, she was done."

"That's true."

"She said that she was happy that you had placed your trust in her for that mission. You'd given her another opportunity to prove herself. She told me that she could not let you down again."

Leone visibly swallowed. "I owed her that. In spite of what people thought of her, she was one of the best I served with." She looked at Kircheis with a smile. "As were you, C. J."

"Admiral, I've always been proud of my service under your command. At the risk of sounding insincere, I strive to perform as you did on *Farragut*," Kircheis felt her emotions swell as she spoke. The admiral's eyes began to show the effect of their discussion, so Kircheis changed the subject quickly. "Is Commander Kincaid going to return to starship duty, then?"

"I don't know. He's still got three weeks left on his leave," replied Leone. "It is my hope that he'll accept a position under Captain Atherton's command."

"That's a good idea. Keep it within the family. Especially with Abbie; they go way back."

"That was my thinking. Right now, he's spending quality time with Isira. I'm certain that his next move is the furthest thing from his mind, presently." Leone added, "Along with re-learning how to wear a uniform with three solid pips on the collar."

Kircheis nodded. "Agreed, sir. Reintegration after a long absence isn't always successful."

Leone rose from her seat and pulled from one of her desk drawers a small white box before approaching Kircheis. "Oh, I'm sure he'll be fine. But he isn't the only one who'll have to get used to assuming rank."

"Sir?"

Leone grinned. "You made the number three spot on the selection list for Commander, C. J. Congratulations. I'm very proud of you."

With surprise evident on her face, Kircheis blinked a couple of times before responding. "Th-Thank you, sir!"

"Of course, you'll have to wait for the official order to come down when your number is called to wear your new rank," Leone said as she opened the box to present Kircheis with new pips. "These were mine from the old days, and I'd like for you to wear them when the time comes. It's likely going to happen while you're off in the Delta Quadrant, so I'm breaking tradition and giving them to you now."

Kircheis accepted the box with both hands and smiled wide. "Thank you very much, sir. This means a lot to me... to have this. I always assumed you would be giving your insignias to Dominic."

Leone chuckled. "I'm sure that his commanding officer will take care of that. In this case, there's the added bonus of our past service together. I think it's very fitting for me to be in this position with you."

"Absolutely." Kircheis paused in her celebration to ask, "If I am selected, then I'll be too senior for *Gallant*."

"Unfortunately, yes. But that will be Admiral Jellico's dilemma to solve," Leone replied somberly. "I'm sure that he will have a position for you to take on in your new rank."

"Of course, sir."

"Well... I'm sure you want to get to selecting your replacements before the deadline," said Leone. "I don't want to keep you here too long."

Kircheis got the hint. "Yes, sir." She placed the box inside her uniform jacket and turned to leave. Before she activated the door, she stopped to turn back around. "Sir, I was wondering..."

"Yes, Captain?"

"I invited Teelis to dinner tonight in what I had hoped would be a celebratory transfer dinner, but would you like to join us?"

"That's very kind of you. I, uh... I don't want to intrude."

"You wouldn't be intruding, sir. Not at all." Kircheis added, "You're family."

Leone broke eye contact momentarily as she let out a sigh. "I... yes. Thank you. I'd like that."

With a smile, Kircheis moved close enough to the door that it automatically slid open. She placed her palm on the frame and told the admiral, "I'll return at nineteen thirty, sir. By your leave?"

"I look forward to it, C. J. You're dismissed."

Epilogue

Epilogue

*Captain's Log
Stardate 55341.45*

The scouting mission proceeds uneventfully. Gallant has covered approximately twenty percent of the designated scouting grid; fourteen sections completed, with another sixty-six left. We've already transmitted our latest progress report to the task force flagship, USS Galaxy. Admiral Jellico's response is forthcoming.

Lieutenant Commander Carolyn Kircheis, commanding.

Kircheis closed the log entry with a loud sigh. Scouting in advance of a task force had been a major change of pace since working nearly two years in the intelligence section. The excitement of special operations vanished in the Delta Quadrant upon arrival. Admiral Jellico's command took some getting used to, as well. That he proceeded from a very specific plan and would not listen to any discussion otherwise was frustrating even to those who were trained to obey commands.

"Captain, we're coming up on the shift change," Lieutenant Yamamoto whispered from Kircheis' right side. "You wanted to be reminded?"

With no hesitation, Kircheis practically launched herself from the center seat on the bridge and gestured back to it with her open hand. "You have the conn, XO. I'll be in the mess."

Hiroko slid into the chair and gave her a nod. "I have the conn, aye, sir."

Kircheis already closed the hatch behind her, heading for the service stairwell to the second deck. The shift change always tied up the turbolift with everyone moving about the ship, but the stairs were mostly clear of her crew. The din of the mess hall could be heard from beyond the closed hatch and sharply rose when it opened. Officers and enlisted waited patiently in short lines for access to the replicator, conversing as they stood.

On that night, she decided not to be patient. Although she tended to wait with everyone else, Kircheis opted to exploit her position to jump the line and access the replicator ahead of those who arrived before her. She made her order quick and then departed with the tray in hand to her ready room.

Quiet meals alone within her ready room became the norm shortly after the mission began while Hiroko often took alternating shifts to provide adequate command coverage. With Jellico's standing order that a command officer be at the conn at all times, she has lost the close working relationship with her own XO. There were no chats over meals or rundown meetings in her ready room, only the quick shift reports before command change. Added to the seemingly fruitless patrol duty, Kircheis had fallen into a rut that ran all the way down to her monotonous meal choices.

With a sneer at her tray, she pushed away her half-eaten meal and slumped back in her chair. If she was allowing this to affect her morale, she could just imagine what the crew was facing. As she began to think of ways to combat this growing problem, the ship's communications system alerted her to an incoming message from the bridge.

Kircheis stabbed the channel open with a quick point of her finger. "Kircheis here, go ahead."

"Captain," Piggy's voice sounded over the speakers, "we have a data packet from *Galaxy*, marked for your eyes' only."

Trying to keep the relief at the monotony being broken, she replied, "Send it through. Kircheis out."

The use of a data packet was unusual; Jellico typically sent brief text acknowledgments to her reports. Kircheis' mind swam through the sea of possibilities including reassignment to another, better mission. When the packet completed downloading, she opened the file with her voiceprint and the screen flickered briefly.

Admiral Jellico's stern expression greeted her. "Captain, this is more than a simple acknowledgement of your progress report."

Kircheis breathed, "No kidding."

Jellico's image continued, "We've received an encrypted message from Starfleet Intelligence, dated a little under five months ago. Per Admiral Nechayev's orders, I have not been made privy to its contents." His last sentence did little to hide his annoyance with that circumstance.

Although the order came from Nechayev, she knew it originated from Leone. Leone did not outrank Jellico, however. "Leave it to her to annoy admirals even from the other side of the galaxy," Kircheis said aloud, allowing herself a little smirk as she did so.

The attachment required additional security, including a question-and-answer challenge based on a very private matter that only Leone knew about. She satisfied the requirement and her screen lit up with the contents. A message from t'Aimne appeared:

Captain, during my service with your ship, you once told me to think of you as a friend as much as an ally. As a friend, I wish to ask for your assistance. Three of my family members have gone missing. I fear they have been taken against their will. If you are able to find any information as to the whereabouts of my cousin, Ael'Ekkhae t'Aimne and her sons, Merik tr'Aimne and Taec tr'Aimne, please contact me. I am enclosing their biometric scans, genetic profiles and images to aid in their identification. Although my family may not want the assistance of outsiders, I know that humans value their families greatly as we do and would not use an unfortunate situation to their benefit when children are involved.

Clearly, the message had been intended for her former commanding officer, Captain Richard James. As before, Kircheis looked for the hidden message within the formal one. A second attachment overlaid the first, as it did within the conference room nearly a year ago. As she read the message, she began to smile, relieved to see t'Aimne was just as unscathed as she appeared to be in the first message.

I am not a suspect in the disappearance of my cousin and her children according to local authorities and I have been cleared of suspicion by a secret Tal Shiar inquest. s'Khnialmnae has acknowledged some responsibility in their disappearance and our House ties have strengthened as a result. Both Houses have encouraged my association with Courig with the intention of future union. Such alliance will be valuable to all.

Kircheis mused aloud, "I wonder how Admiral Coburn feels about the primary mission's success now that we have an operative well placed to give us Tal Shiar secrets," and allowed herself a chortle afterward. She continued to read the enclosed messages, smiling as she read that Ael'Ekkhae and her children had gained Federation citizenship. She was surprised to find they had settled on Betazed, but she supposed that would be the last place any Rihannsu would look for another.

A fourth and final attachment awaited her. It was a short message and coordinates from Admiral Leone relaying some intel. Among the information t'Aimne had liberated from the Tal Shiar database was the position of a semi-stable wormhole within the deepest part of Rihannsu territory. Apparently, the Galae sent a number of small scouts through the aperture to explore the other side.

"What the-?" Kircheis whispered. The coordinates reported by the Galae ships on the other side had to be a mistake. She transferred the numbers to her PADD and then plotted the position on her desktop terminal.

The Galae ships were coming through to the Delta Quadrant. Within a few days' warp from the task force's position.

She immediately opened a channel to the bridge. "Ensign Schweinfurt, put me in contact with Admiral Jellico, right now!"

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