

Conduct Unbecoming

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Conduct Unbecoming

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Summary

The Reykjavik is called to the Federation/Gorn border to investigate the report of a Federation starship launching an unprovoked attack against the infamous reptilian species. Taking aboard a JAG officer who formerly served with the supposedly rogue ship's captain, Commodore Trujillo seeks to find the truth behind an event that may have sparked a war, while trying to placate a predator species the Federation still does not fully understand.

Chapter 1

June 11, 2322. Starbase 177, Planet Pacifica, Pacifica System

The setting of the beachfront estate surrounded by sundancer palms and xenoferns was very nearly idyllic.

It was only the presence of armed and armored Starfleet security personnel patrolling the beach and grounds, an irregular sight in such an environment, that disturbed the illusion of paradise.

Commodore Nandi Trujillo sat on the veranda, clad in a diaphanous Tholian silk shift over a single-piece swimsuit. Her five-foot-eight-inch frame was toned, hinting at a physical discipline that matched her emotional reserve. Her lustrous black hair had begun to gray in streaks in her late twenties, a matrilineal trait passed down through multiple generations of her family. Now in her mid-forties, she'd decided to surrender to genetics and had ceased dying the gray out. Her face was broad and deceptively soft, with a prominent jawline and wide, expressive brown eyes.

She had just returned from a late morning swim under the watchful gaze of their security detail. Now she sat, cup of coffee in hand, watching the palms fronds sway gently in the breeze.

She and her crew aboard the starship *Reykjavík* had just been granted short leave following their most recent mission. While the crew frolicked on the ocean planet below, their ship and its squadron-mates underwent repairs within dry-dock gantries in orbit.

Their mission had ostensibly been a secretive reconnaissance into the depths of the Molari Badlands in search of any hidden weapons of mass destruction left by the Sphere Builders. Those enigmatic aliens, responsible for the creation of the Delphic Expanse in the 22nd century, had made three known attempts to attack the Federation by proxy in the past one-hundred seventy years.

Their latest plot, involving drawing the Tholians across the Federation border some six months earlier, had nearly started a war between the two governments, spurring a classified operation to scour Federation space for further hidden caches of Sphere Builder technology. As such, Trujillo and her small task force occasionally engaged in the exploration of stellar phenomena which might conceal such devices in hopes of preempting the next such assault.

Trujillo's squadron had instead stumbled quite by accident onto the primary base of operations for a particularly pernicious Orion pirate ring, a major hub of the Syndicate responsible for criminal activity across several adjoining sectors. That chance discovery had led to a week-long running battle within the Molari Badlands, a region known for its plasma storms, gravimetric shear, and thermobaric clouds that had sundered hundreds of spacecraft in the past two centuries.

Within this cloud of horrors, *Reykjavík* and her escorts, *Gol* and *Zelenskyy*, had played a lethal game of cat-and-mouse, with ambush and counter-ambush, minefields and neck-or-nothing pursuits through asteroid fields until the last of the marauders had been captured or destroyed.

All three of their ships had suffered damage to varying degrees in those frantic battles, though thankfully they had taken few casualties.

Now, as they relaxed under the rays of Pacifica's G-type star, Starfleet security protected their vacationing crews from Syndicate reprisals.

Her husband had slept late and finally wandered out onto the veranda with his own cup of tea, stooping down to plant a kiss on her cheek before taking a seat on a nearby lounge.

"Good morning," the darkly handsome Gael Jarrod offered with a smile. He was tall, lean, and muscular, nearly a decade her junior and almost scandalously, a former subordinate. His neatly trimmed goatee added to his rakish good looks, and he possessed a slightly nasal Oxonian-English accent that his wife cherished.

"Good morning," she replied in kind, favoring him with a satisfied expression. "I still can't understand how Demora could sign on for a five-year exploration mission and leave this place behind?"

He grunted in assent, sipping experimentally at his tea, then offered, "She has it to come back to. Meanwhile, we get to enjoy her hospitality."

Trujillo inclined her head towards a security specialist standing in the surf up to his knees, watching the breakers roll in. "The late *Ahmet-sur* Gilva is out of business, but it won't be long until someone's replaced him. I can't imagine the people fighting to supplant a warlord of his stature are sparing any thought to revenge on us."

"Perhaps not, but we still wounded the Syndicate, and that's bad for business. Killing even a few of us would send a statement and help them to save a little face. Thankfully, the local security detachment is well versed in patrolling this particular property."

"They are at that," she allowed with a smirk. The sprawling house with its six hectares of grounds had once belonged to Demora Sulu's father, the former Commander-in-Chief of Starfleet.

Trujillo emitted a long, relaxed sigh and sank deeper into her chair.

"I'm going to have to head topside today," Jarrod said.

"I thought your second officer had the duty?" she remarked.

"She's interviewing for a possible posting to the *Carthage*, so I'll need to stand port-watch for her."

Trujillo sat up, casting a concerned expression on him. "You're losing another senior officer?"

“Potentially,” he conceded. “We see a lot of action, hence our officers gain considerable experience, which makes them excellent acquisitions for other commands. It’s actually a compliment when you think about it.”

“I suppose so,” she said, sounding unconvinced.

Jarrold was the executive officer aboard the Akyazi-class perimeter action ship USS *Gol*, commanded by Trujillo’s former first officer, the irascible Tellarite Commander Glal.

Gol was one of one of *Reykjavik*’s two permanently assigned escorts, the trio of ships representing the commodore’s mobile flag force. As part of Admiral Saavik’s quick-reaction group, Trujillo’s squadron was frequently sent to hot spots on the periphery of Federation space to quell disturbances, thwart incursions, and combat organized piracy.

Trujillo started to the sound of a guttural roar from somewhere below, sitting up in time to see a coconut arcing through the air towards the security specialist standing in the surf. The husked fruit just missed the young man’s helmeted head by a hands-width, causing him to turn suddenly and stumble as a breaking wave caught him from behind that sent him flailing backwards into the surf.

The compact form of Commander Glal strode out from the lower porch below Trujillo’s veranda and onto the beach, clad in an incongruous tank-top t-shirt and Bermuda shorts. “You might have seen that coming if you were paying the *slightest* bit of attention to your assignment!” Glal shouted angrily.

The stout Tellarite waded into the surf to assist the water-logged specialist who was struggling to rise while trying to recover his phaser rifle from the clutches of the outgoing tide.

“It appears Glal’s awake and in fine fettle,” Jarrold observed with a grin.

“And already harassing our security detail,” Trujillo added, taking a pull from her coffee mug. “He seems irritable.”

Jarrold stood to observe the goings-on over the veranda’s railing. “You realize, of course, that this might be an indicator that our shore leave is drawing to a close?”

“Glal does tend to get a bit tetchy when he’s been out of action for too long,” Trujillo agreed.

Down below Glal was now huddled with the dripping specialist and the compound security detail’s senior chief but appeared reasonably civilized in his discussion with both.

A few moments later the Bermuda-short wearing commander appeared on the veranda, sipping at a concoction he had assured Trujillo previously was a Tellarite variant of a Bloody-Mary. In his other thick-fingered hand he carried a data-slate, which he extended to Trujillo by way of greeting.

“Good morning, sir. I’m requesting that you approve a personnel transfer.”

“I told you already, you can’t quit,” she replied, half in jest.

“No, sir, not for me. Young Mister Urumbe down there. I am requesting his transfer to *Gol*.”

Trujillo raised a questioning eyebrow. “As punishment for his lack of attention, Commander?”

“Actually, no, sir. He was appropriately mortified when confronted, and in examining his service record, he’s earned high marks in all his postings so far. The kid’s just bored, and justifiably so given the nature of his current assignment. When I asked if he’d rather be serving on a small warship that sees plenty of action, he just about jumped out of his armor at the invitation.”

Trujillo shook her head, smirking. “Of course.” She grew more somber, reflecting on the costs of their latest assignment. “Did you tell him who he’d be replacing?”

Glal nodded soberly. “I told him that the exceptional young woman who’s position he’d be filling died rescuing men, women and children from Orion slaver pens.”

“Good,” Trujillo said in a hushed tone. “She deserved more than a posthumous medal. Hers is a story worth telling.”

“No argument here, Commodore,” he agreed.

Trujillo pressed her thumb to the slate. “Approved.”

Glal gestured to one of the veranda’s chairs. “May I join you?”

Jarrold finished his tea in a single long sip, setting aside the cup and rising. “I was just heading up to *Gol*, sir. Standing in for Zatreah while she interviews with Captain Strazo. I’ll make arrangements for billeting Specialist...?”

“Urumbe,” Glal provided as he inclined his head towards his first officer. “Give Lt. Zatreah my regards and let her know I have every confidence in her.”

“Will do, Captain,” Jarrold said by way of farewell before sneaking another kiss from his wife before departing with a breathless, “Sexy Commodore, sir.”

A fountain of red-tinged beverage erupted from the Tellarite’s large nostrils as Jarrold stepped back into the house, leaving Trujillo covering her mouth and trying not to laugh aloud at Glal’s reaction.

At that moment, Trujillo's comm-link, disguised as a stylish metallic bracelet, vibrated.

Trujillo took a moment to collect herself before tapping the device. "Go ahead."

"*Sorry to interrupt your shore leave, sir,*" Commander Jadaetti Davula said from aboard *Reykjavík* in orbit. "*Starbase operations has just advised us that we have a situation developing along our border with the Gorn Hegemony.*"

"A situation, Commander? Any specifics?" Trujillo asked as Glal dabbed ineffectually at his drink saturated beard and shirt with a napkin.

"*Not many, sir. It looks like there's been a limited hostile exchange with the Gorn. We've reportedly lost contact with a surveillance outpost and a border cutter. The situation is a bit confused at the moment. Admiral Lannux has ordered a general recall from all leaves and passes.*"

"Understood. I'll be up in about twenty minutes; I just need to pack up."

She drained the last of her coffee and turned a satisfied expression on Glal. "I guess it's time to go back to work."

"Finally," Glal grumbled, still wiping at his beard.

* * *

The senior staff of *Reykjavík* had assembled in the windowless briefing room aft of the bridge, surrounded by the faux-wood ancient Terran naval aesthetic designed for the compartment.

Captain Alvin Tarrant from Starfleet Intelligence had transported up from the starbase to brief the commodore and her senior officers on what little was known about the quickly evolving situation along the Federation's border with the Gorn Hegemony.

Tarrant was a middle-aged officer with a receding hairline and a paunch along his midsection secured under his uniform tunic's belt. He had struck the others immediately as being affable, pragmatic, and professional.

The senior officers of *Gol* and *Zelenskyy* were also in attendance, via comms interlink from their respective briefing rooms.

Trujillo opened the meeting and gave Tarrant the floor.

"Good afternoon, everyone. I'll get right to it. Intel monitors Gorn military transmissions quite extensively, as their encryption and op-sec protocols are pretty slipshod by our standards. Yesterday at zero-four-thirty-one hours Zulu time, we picked up a flurry of Gorn comms traffic that seems consistent with their forces suffering a surprise attack. A Gorn military facility three-point-seven light-years from our mutual border was destroyed, and the Gorn subsequently scrambled all available assets to locate and repel their attackers."

He toggled an icon on the LCARS interface in front of him and a fuzzy but recognizable image of what could only be a Federation Excelsior-class starship appeared on the viewscreen set into the bulkhead. "This is the vessel that reportedly attacked the Gorn installation, prompting their retaliatory strike on our surveillance outpost and patrol cutter some six hours later."

Trujillo's eyes narrowed. "We struck first?" she asked dubiously.

Tarrant nodded regretfully. "It certainly appears so, though Command assures me no such orders have been issued."

"Who?" she asked, an edge to her voice.

"There are only two Excelsiors currently posted to the Gorn border. USS *Havana* has been within constant sensor contact of our monitoring stations and hasn't crossed the border. The starship *Repulse*, however, switched off her transponder at some point prior to the attack on the Gorn and hasn't been heard from since. She's refusing to respond to inquiries and orders from Command and her whereabouts are unknown."

"That's Theodore Keller's ship, isn't it?" Glal asked via the interlink.

"It is," Tarrant confirmed. "You know him?"

"By reputation only," Glal replied, his expression souring.

"Same here," Trujillo interjected. "I understand he's known for being rather... uncompromising," she added.

From the split-image viewer Glal snorted. "*You're* uncompromising, sir. Keller's a damned tyrant."

Trujillo fixed a chary eye on her former XO. "That's enough, Commander. Captain Keller isn't here to defend himself, and I won't have another officer condemned in absentia in front of our subordinates."

"Aye, sir. My apologies," Glal appeared chastened.

Trujillo turned back to Tarrant. "That's all we have so far?"

"Yes, sir," he answered. "The one bit of good news in all this is that it doesn't appear that the Gorn are marshaling their forces for any further follow-on attacks, at least not yet. They've increased their defensive posture on their side of the border, but we aren't seeing any signs they're gearing up for an all-out attack."

Trujillo nodded at Tarrant's assessment. "Let's hope it stays that way, but I'm going to want some additional assets in place to make sure we're prepared if something larger erupts."

Tarrant appeared uncomfortable with that idea. “With the exception of the Gu’zodid separatist movement four years ago, which I’m aware you were caught up in, sir, the Gorn border has been largely inactive for the past decade. We haven’t fought a major engagement with them since the Gorn War of ’08, and that was two years of repelling hit-and-run attacks on our colonies and installations along the border. Given that, I’d caution against drawing a sizable number of our ships to the area, as it might antagonize the Gorn further. So far, it very much looks like we’re at fault here.”

“So noted, Captain,” Trujillo affirmed. “I’ll draw up a task force some parsecs away. Close enough to respond to any incursions, but not near enough to be provocative.”

Trujillo’s first officer, the Bolian Commander Davula asked, “Captain, is it at all possible that the Gorn somehow overpowered or otherwise compromised *Repulse* and are using the ship to stage a false-flag operation?”

Tarrant’s expression was skeptical. “We’ve analyzed that scenario, and while it’s not impossible, Intel has judged it as being highly improbable. Something as involved as that is more along the lines of Romulan thinking. The Gorn have traditionally been far more direct.”

Lieutenant Helvia, the heavily built Magna-Roman security officer, spoke up. “It also depends on which stage of Gorn we’re dealing with here, sir. Their young are feral, their military-aged are ferocious and unrelenting, and their aged are large and slow but very cunning.”

Tarrant bobbed his head, “That also factors into it. Depending on which cadre is operating along this part of the border, we could expect much different reactions. My bet would be that so far the *Grolch*, ‘the wizened,’ are calling the shots here. They’re the most likely to demonstrate the restraint we’ve seen so far from their military forces.”

Lt. Commander Withropp, captain of the *Zelensky* offered, “I would like to recommend bringing along a JAG contingent, Commodore. If *Repulse* really has gone rogue, having a team present from the Judge Advocate would speed the investigation as well as make sure the rights of any personnel suspected of wrongdoing were being preserved.”

“Agreed,” Trujillo said. “Additionally, it might help to prove to the Gorn that any unprovoked attack we may have launched was unauthorized, and we’re serious about investigating the matter.”

“Sir,” Glal countered, “do you really think the Gorn are going to care about us bringing our space-lawyers along?”

Trujillo offered a halfhearted smirk. “I’m hoping for the best, Mister Glal. Be a good man and try not to be the screen door on my airlock, okay?”

That spurred a bout of shared laughter from all three linked compartments.

“Captain Tarrant, how would you feel about coming with us to the Gorn border?” Trujillo asked.

Tarrant raised his eyebrows in a mildly surprised expression. “So long as I have a real-time subspace link with our office here, I can work just as easily from your ship as I could the starbase, sir. However, I would note that the Intel asset *Harken* is currently in this sector, and as such could fulfill that role for you and your task force with greater flexibility.”

Trujillo’s expression brightened. “*Harken*? Is Captain Mistry still commanding her?”

“She is indeed, sir. You know her?”

“Quite well, actually. We’ve served alongside *Harken* previously. That ship and crew joining us would have substantial advantages for our task force. Though, I’d still like to have you on hand to liaise with *Harken* and Intel Command, Captain.”

“I’m at your service, Commodore,” Tarrant replied gamely.

“We’ll arrange quarters for you, then,” Trujillo advised. She turned to look at the viewscreen. “I am initiating the assembly of Task Force Bulwark, assigning available ships from this sector along with some of those already on patrol routes along the Gorn border. This will be Operation Lacertus. Our mission priorities will be to stabilize the political and military situation along the border and to investigate the circumstances surrounding the outbreak of hostilities with the Hegemony. If the situation deteriorates, we’ll move to intercede and defend our territory.”

She observed the reactions of her own senior officers and those of the other ships via the comm-link.

“Begin preparations for departure in sixty minutes, mark. This meeting is adjourned.”

The viewer winked off and Trujillo turned to Davula. “Commander, please take point with the starbase’s JAG office and make billeting arrangements for the legal team.”

“Aye, sir.”

Trujillo stood, the other officers following her to their feet. “We have very few hours in which to either prevent a war, or to win a war we may have already started. Dismissed.”

* * *

Chapter 2

* * *

The XO stood by as the starbase's JAG personnel arrived by transporter.

Five figures took shape atop the transporter pad as their bodies regained molecular cohesion.

The Bolian officer stepped forward. "I'm Commander Jadaetti Davula, executive officer. Welcome aboard *Reykjavik*."

Davula was of average height for her species, with her dominant features being her cobalt blue skin, bald head and the bifurcated ridge that bisected her facial features.

"Commander Leo Verde," said the lead officer of short and stocky stature. In his soft baritone, he explained with a boyish grin, "OIC of this JAGMAN detachment." A couple of steps forward from the pad with his palm outstretched toward Davula in greeting, Verde's companions filtered out around them to view the exchange.

Davula shook his hand firmly, her smile genuine. "I'm glad you were available, Commander. Otherwise, I'd have had to step in as potential legal counsel for any personnel under investigation. Let's just say JAG duties aren't my strong suit."

"Yes, of course," Verde said understandingly. "Your famous journey likely placed you in all manner of various duties, I'm sure. We should have a drink, sometime." He gestured to the group that arrived with him and acknowledged, "But, allow me to introduce the team. My second chair is Lieutenant Alejandro Martinez." The tall and wiry officer offered his hand.

"Chief Zenn is our yeoman on this trip," he continued with an open hand toward the short, but muscular Trill woman. "And we have our pair of investigators, First Lieutenant Marie Collins, and her partner, Sergeant Angela Torres." Both marines nodded toward Davula stoically.

Davula nodded to them individually as they were introduced, shaking hands as appropriate. "Commodore Trujillo's asked me to see you to quarters. We're scheduled for a senior staff meeting at seventeen hundred hours."

She gestured towards the exit. "*Reyky* pulls diplomatic escort detail fairly often, so our guest accommodations are rather nice. No enlisted bunks for you this trip, I'm afraid."

Verde grinned, as he led the team in following her out into the corridor. "She's a beautiful ship. This is my first time aboard a Shangri-La," he admitted. "I earned my sea pay aboard nothing but Chandleys."

"Thank you, we're rather proud of her and her record. Chandleys are a great design, probably why there are so damn many of them underfoot," she replied with a smirk, leading the group out into the corridor and towards the nearest turbolift.

The group managed to tuck into the lift car, in spite of the luggage and gear. "They say these things are designed for eight to ten, but these must have been tested with a group of Kelpiens," Verde jovially noted. "Sorry for the tight squeeze."

Davula chuckled lightly at Verde's witticism. "Deck Four," she ordered, setting the lift-car in motion. "We'll be departing in the next twenty minutes to form up with our task force en route to the border," she advised them.

The short trip to deck four brought the minor inconvenience to an end, but not before Martinez added his own humor to the proceedings. "Really glad you switched out your cologne, Leo." The rest of the team did not bother to hide their amusement.

Verde smirked. "Well, Maria thought I would get better results with her suggestions," he said as they all emptied out and waited for Davula to take up the lead position once more. "But if you are telling me you're interested, then you'll have to go through her, first."

Martinez smiled broadly at that. "I'm good, thanks."

"Just sayin'..."

Davula stepped past them into the corridor, gesturing to a series of hatchways. "Commander Verde's rated a single-occupancy cabin, and the rest of you are going to have to double-up. However, our double-occupancy VIP cabins have individual queen-sized beds, their own lavatories, and the sleeping areas are separated by a shared living area. *Reykjavik*... come for the combat, stay for the comfort."

She turned back to face Verde. "Commander, once you're squared away down here, the commodore would like to see you topside."

Verde smiled toothily at the mention of Trujillo. "Looking forward to it, Commander, and I really appreciate you taking the time to show us down here."

"My pleasure. Again, we're glad to have you along with us on this assignment. Forgive me for being blunt, but given how this looks at the outset, I'm hoping your particular skills won't be needed. This might just be a pleasure cruise along the Gorn border, but I've a sneaking suspicion that won't be the case."

Verde handed off his luggage to Zenn. "Since I'm bunking solo, we'll set up the boards and offices in there, Chief. I'm going to head up topside

with the Commander, here." He leaned over to the others, "Get yourselves unpacked and I'll be back shortly."

Zenn shouldered the duffel and satchel along with her own and nodded. "Aye, sir."

Verde turned back to Davula and with an open hand, he told her, "I'm all yours, sir."

* * *

Davula entered the ready room with Verde in tow, staying just long enough to make introductions. "Commodore Nandi Trujillo, Commander Leo Verde."

Trujillo stood from behind her desk, a radiant smile on her features. "Oh, Mister Verde and I are well acquainted, Commander. Back in the day he helped clear me of some rather unflattering allegations after a dust up with the Tzenkethi. I was delighted to discover Commander Verde was here on a detached assignment and was available to accompany us on this mission."

She moved around the desk to offer her hand. "Welcome aboard, Rally. It's wonderful to see you again. I just wish the circumstances weren't so dire."

Leo "Rally" Verde blushed under the nickname's attention, trying very much not to make eye contact with Davula. "Uh, it's always good to see you, sir," he replied with a friendly grip of hands. "You're lucky we were available; we just got done closing another case in the sector and were cooling our heels waiting for a transfer back to Starbase 8." He leaned in slightly and lowered his voice as he asked, "I trust that you received my wetting down gift through our mutual friend?"

"I did, thank you. It's remained unopened, awaiting a suitable occasion. Perhaps this mission will be it?"

He sighed, "I hope this is all much ado about nothing, so yeah. It'd be nice if this all turned out to be just a simple flag-flying excursion to the border, but..."

Trujillo nodded in turn, her expression darkening. "Yeah... I'm getting the same feeling. Maybe the Gorn really are behind all this, but that's not how things are adding up so far."

She turned to Davula. "Thank you. Please see to our departure, Commander, and have Lieutenant Shukla begin making arrangements for rendezvous with the task force."

As Davula exited, Trujillo gestured to a chair across from her desk before heading straight for her concealed mini-bar behind a nondescript bulkhead panel. "Name your poison, Leo."

Leo watched her move to the mini-bar and nodded. "Definitely calls for something strong. If you got anything within shouting distance of a whiskey, I'll take a shot."

"I have Scotch, Kentucky bourbon, and Aldebaran."

"The green stuff? I'll definitely take a quick hit of that," he said enthusiastically. "I've actually been cutting back recently, but it's a vacation, right?"

"If you say so," she laughed mirthlessly, pouring two shot glasses full of the milky green fluid. She handed one to Verde, holding up her own. "Salud."

Leo followed suit. "Salud," he murmured before knocking back the shot. As it sizzled down his throat, he grinned. "Oh, yeah. It's been a while since I've had this. With all the marines we got running around, you can barely find a bottle on the Crazy Eight," he said, using the pejorative unofficial name for Starbase Eight.

She set down her shot glass, wiping her mouth with the back of one hand while fixing an assaying look on Verde. "I trust you already know Theo Keller's apparently in the middle of all this?"

He met her look briefly, as he silently exhaled through pursed lips. "He does not like being called Theo or Teddy. And yeah, I read the brief." Leo stalled in his response, taking a little time to set the empty shot glass with its remnants slinking down the sides upon the pristine bartop. "Even though I might have a poor opinion of him, if he did go off half-cocked into Gorn territory, that would be crazy. He is so tightly wound."

"Do you know of anything in his history that ties him to the Gorn? Something that might have provoked an overreaction by Captain Keller?"

"Not that I recall," Leo replied thoughtfully. "When I sailed with him, we were on the Cardassian border; other side of Federation territory. Closest we'd got to the Hegemony was maybe a short supply run to one of the outposts near the Romulan Neutral Zone."

Trujillo shook her head forlornly. "If Keller did launch an unsanctioned raid against the Gorn, this'll be the biggest court-martial since Admiral Cartwright and Chancellor Gorkon's assassination."

"To say the least," Leo agreed with widened eyes. He sighed. "I know we're here as a detachment, sir, and ordinarily a team like mine isn't subject to your command, since we're supposed to be investigating, but..."

Trujillo refilled the shot glasses. "But...?"

"We could find ourselves in the middle of a crisis and if you need help beyond the law, you know I got your back," Leo said. "I may be a lawyer, but I still kept up my line officer status. Otherwise, my dad would never let me hear the end of it."

"I'd never sideline capable officers in such circumstances, and if the situation calls for it, I won't hesitate to reinstate you to line-duty. However, we're heading in with a task force of at least eight ships. Your legal expertise and that of your team will be of far more value than having you stand a post on the bridge for a shift or two. We may need to convince the Gorn that we're dealing with the situation internally, though how we might go about that is beyond me at the moment."

"Whatever you need," he promised with a curt gesture of his right hand. Leo's expression turned to one of curiosity. "You think diplomacy might work with the Gorn?"

"I don't know," she confessed. "I certainly hope so, but our history with them has been so fraught in the past fifty years that it's hard to know what they might do. If we're dealing exclusively with their elders, they might listen to reason. Their militant youth, though... they're always spoiling for a fight, especially one that results in prisoners they can use for gestation-stock on one of their horrific breeding planets."

Leo stared down into the refilled shot glass. "'Horrific' is an apt descriptor. I've never actually seen that, but I've heard the stories." He raised the glass and offered a short salute. "But, if you can manage to open relations with them, then maybe that'll lead to something."

She held up her glass. "Right now I'd settle for convincing them not to stage any further cross-border raids. We've already lost dozens of lives aboard our outpost and a score more on the border cutter they destroyed. Hopefully they'll be satisfied with that pound of flesh and call it even." Again she offered, "Salud" before draining the contents of the glass.

After draining his glass, Leo swallowed and smiled at the taste. Once more, he set it back down on the bartop and exhaled slowly. "Once we shove off, do you have a plan for tracking down our wayward ship?"

She retreated to her chair behind the desk and lowered herself into it. "We'll keep hailing and scanning, scouring the border region for any sign of her. Failing that, I'll send my former XO, Commander Glal, to run them down. He's got a sixth-sense for this kind of thing, a knack for putting himself inside someone else's head. If anyone can find Keller, it'll be Glal."

Leo followed her with a turned head and nodded once. "*Gol's* skipper. Great ship for scouting and hunting, too." He stepped over toward her desk and silently begged permission to sit down opposite her with his fingers in a quick motion. "You should tell him that Keller tends to favor the tactic of using magnetic resonance to mask or diminish his sensor signature. He's really good at running silent, too. He used to demand tactical drills constantly, so I presume he hasn't changed that over the years."

Trujillo motioned for Verde to sit while typing herself a note to that effect on her desktop terminal. "Good to know. How is Captain Keller likely to react to being confronted by another Starfleet vessel? How does he react when backed into a corner?"

The first question elicited a scoff from Leo. "Whenever he was faced with another Starfleet vessel, his demand for perfection would skyrocket. His Achilles' heel is his pride and ego. That was the source of his insufferable behavior in command. If anything happened that reflected upon him in any unfavorable light, woe betide the person who caused it, and woe betide their immediate superior."

She nodded fractionally in response, a sour expression tugging at the edges of her mouth. "I'd heard as much."

"If he's backed into a corner," Leo said with a single shake of his head. "I don't think this is him being in a corner, sir. I know this is going to sound crazy..."

"Unless he's under some extraordinary influence, this is wholly out of character for Keller. Under ordinary circumstances, he wouldn't take this kind of action without believing he had proper authority to do so," Leo explained. "There had to be something that he felt he had no choice but to storm across the border. His reputation is his most treasured currency."

"Maybe so," Trujillo conceded, "but we won't know until he makes an appearance and explains himself. Going to ground only makes it look worse for him. I'd understand if he's hiding in nebula or the upper layers of a gas giant while the Gorn hunt for him, but if he's just parked someplace trying to figure out how to squirm out of a series of piss-poor decisions, that's really going to irritate me."

"I would put a very large bottle of Aldebaran whiskey on the notion that he believes he's going to be welcomed as a hero when he sees another Starfleet ship," he said slowly. "Maybe you can use that to your advantage."

"I'd much prefer that to a scared, desperate man who wants to fight his way out of a hole he's dug for himself." She stretched, referencing the chronometer on her workstation. "You've probably got a lot of prep-work to do with your team, and I'm keeping you up here spinning what-if scenarios."

Leo smiled knowingly. "I'll get out of your hair." He rose from his seat and paused. "They got us assigned to the guest staterooms down on four if you want to come find me later. I brought some provisions, too, if you'll allow me the opportunity to return the favor."

Trujillo smiled. "I will indeed. Oh, and I'd like you at our senior staff meeting at seventeen-hundred. We'll be linked in with the command staff of my two escorts, setting the groundwork for this operation."

He strode toward the exit and called back, "I'll be there. Mind if I bring my yeoman? She takes all my notes."

“The more the merrier, Commander,” Trujillo rejoined.

* * *

Chapter 3

NCC-2544 (USS *Repulse*)

En route to the Gamma Hydraxis system, Warp 9.

June 12, 2322

Main Bridge

Commander T'Rel's sharp eyes stayed fixed on Captain Keller, her commanding officer. Leaning forward in the center seat, Keller's body exuded a tension that resonated through the bridge of the Excelsior-class USS *Repulse*. The vibrations of the ship's propulsion system at maximum emergency speed were almost a physical manifestation of his anxiety, pushing the very boundaries of subspace. Though his face remained composed, his whitening knuckles betrayed his concern. T'Rel knew from her years of service with him that his unease stemmed not from the ship's speed but the three Gorn hunters hot on their trail.

Seated at the helm in front of Keller, the helmsman, Lieutenant (jg) Thalix reported in her soprano tones, "Fifteen minutes until we reach the system, Captain."

Keller glared at the back of Thalix' head before growling. "Thank you, Mr. Thalix. XO!"

T'Rel replied quickly, "Sir?" She remained at her standing position to Keller's right, along the railing. She raised a hand toward her PADD, ready to access information or issue orders..

"Get me a preliminary analysis of the system," Keller ordered quickly. "This is where we make our stand. I want to know what the playing field looks like."

"Aye, sir," replied T'Rel. She turned and immediately began barking out orders to facilitate Keller's intentions. "Mister S'ran?"

The chief science officer replied, "Gamma Hydraxis has an unusually dense heliosheath, sir, compared to other systems with K-type stars. Sensors resolution at this distance is impacted. Also, we will experience the termination shock when we enter the system."

T'Rel acknowledged the information with a simple nod. "Very well. Ready a series of class two probes for planetary scans."

S'ran's blue antennae twitched at the order. "According to record, there are seven planets in the system, I am readying the probes for deployment at warp speed."

T'Rel accepted the answer with a simple nod, knowing that the captain likely kept his irritation hidden. He demonstrated an unusually low capacity for patience. In crisis situations, that capacity diminished further.

"Probes ready," Lieutenant Commander S'ran reported quickly.

"Fire," ordered T'Rel, on the heels of his report. Without waiting for any further commands, the probes deployed from the forward torpedo tubes. As they were designed for long-range scanning, their limited-fuel warp engines were designed to reach their destinations and then send telemetry and scan data via subspace communication. After their respective purpose is completed, they would either remain on station for recovery or be left to orbital decay and destruction on atmospheric entry or uncontrolled landing.

The probes reached warp nine-point-nine-seven-five, speeding away from *Repulse* very quickly on their independent trajectories. The first one reached the outermost planet and settled into orbit to deliver its scans to S'ran's station. Within a few minutes, all of the probes began sending their results.

T'Rel tapped her PADD and placed the system data on the main viewscreen.

"Two gas giants?" wondered Keller, with his hand now on his chin.

"Correct, Captain," replied S'ran.

T'Rel watched Keller's mind work, his rapid-fire questions probing for tactical advantages. No planetary rings, various types of atmospheres, the composition of the gas giants, and satellites—each detail assessed and filed away. Finally, he said, "Tell me about the inner planets. Any of them with turbulent atmospheres?"

"Number two," S'ran supplied. "The probe report is on the main viewer, now."

Keller snapped his fingers after a quick perusal. "That's our winner! Mister Thalix, if you would be so kind as to divert our course to intercept planet number... six."

T'Rel watched as Thalix turned her head slightly to listen closely to the captain's words. She once made the egregious mistake of executing orders before the captain's command. That error in anticipation of judgment resulted in a loud reprimand on the bridge. As she heard no further order, Thalix responded, "Standing by to divert my course to Gamma Hydraxis Six, aye, sir."

Keller continued. "Mister Kesshek!"

The Saurian tactical officer spun around in his seat to give the captain his full attention. "Sir!" he shouted clearly.

"Ready a class eight probe, rigged as a decoy copy of our sensor profile. Deploy in orbit, once we drop to impulse."

"Aye, sir!" Lieutenant Kesshek nodded. "It will be done!"

"Mister Thalix, once that probe is dropped, get ready to warp jump to planet number two and then take us into the planet's mesosphere."

Seated to Thalix' left, the Bolian operations officer, Lieutenant Commander Vara, glanced at Thalix to study the young Betazoid woman's face. Thalix had not responded, instead letting her anxiety prevent her from seeing the data she needed to confirm the order.

Not wishing for the captain's attention to be needlessly unfocused on the helm, T'Rel stepped forward with her finger outstretched to point to the proper reading.

"U-Understood, sir," Thalix said as she gave T'Rel a thankful nod. "Helm stands ready."

"Next time," growled Keller, "you may not be so lucky as to have the XO point out your error. Get it together or else call for your relief!"

Thalix gave the only expected response in that situation. The one least likely to anger Keller. "No excuse, sir. I will remain at my post."

Keller shook his head in disgust. With a heavy sigh, he turned his chair to face the rest of the bridge team. "Does everyone understand their roles in this maneuver?" When everyone raised their voices in a collective affirmative, the captain nodded. "You better. Execute!"

"Two minutes to heliosphere, Captain," reported Vara.

T'Rel took the remaining time to circle around the bridge stations, observing quietly and making notes on her PADD for later review. She knew that Keller would demand a high level of scrutiny on the performance of his command staff as soon as they had the opportunity to do so. By the time she completed her circuit, *Repulse* crossed into the system's heliosphere.

"Executing drop to impulse near planet six," reported Thalix, as the elongated stars distorted through the lens of interfold displacement returned to normal dots of light. In front of them lay the nearest gas giant and its moons.

Kesshek fired his probe, and Thalix spun the ship toward the second planet in the system quickly and jumped to warp for less than two seconds before the angry red planet appeared below.

"Adequate," was Keller's only assessment of the maneuver thus far.

Thalix took the nose of the ship and dove for the planet's atmosphere.

"All hands," called T'Rel, "brace for atmospheric entry."

Her gaze flicked to the forward shield as it took on the task of protecting the ship's outer hull from the friction of entry into the planet's atmosphere. This was no ordinary passage. The swirling clouds of terbium and neodymium, magnetically dancing with each other in the high temperatures, were taxing the shield more than normal. She understood the nature of these rare metals in their vapor state, their magnetic and paramagnetic properties creating turbulence that was causing the shields to flare and struggle. The impact of those metals and the sudden lag in the ship's inertial damping systems sent a shudder through the *Repulse*, a physical jolt that caught her off guard. She braced herself against the lurch, hands gripping the railing, her PADD slipping from her grasp. Her Vulcan calm wavered for a moment as she felt the disconcerting sensation of the ship struggling against the elements.

"Bridge, bridge, this is engineering," called the Irish lilt of *Repulse's* chief engineer, Commander Callum O'Brien. "This atmosphere is playing hell with everything, sir. Shields are not used to handling this level of unstable magnetic resonance."

As they spoke, T'Rel gathered her PADD and composure. Keller replied, "Mister O'Brien, how long would it take to mimic that resonance to shield our sensor profile from the Gorn?"

The bridge could practically hear the engineer's interest pique through his tone. "Oh, I see. Yes, that could work, but even if we manage to stay hidden, it'll only be for twenty or thirty minutes. The shields are still holding back that bloody awful soup out there. If they drop for even a second, we'll be subjected to the shear forces. Less than five minutes, give or take, before we sustain irreparable damage to the nacelles for starters."

"Understood," Keller said softly. O'Brien was one of the only officers he never seemed to find fault with. "We'll try not to overstay our welcome. Do your best for me, Callum?"

That elicited a chuckle from O'Brien. "I always do, sir."

"That's a good lad. Keller, out." With *Repulse's* position in the atmosphere at a slow pace, it decreased the interaction of the shields against the clouds somewhat, though the movement of the stormy weather still managed to jostle the ship every so often. Keller rose from his seat and approached Kesshek.

Sensing his presence, Kesshek turned around once more. "Sir?"

"I want another class eight probe ready to go, in case they find us again."

"As we've seen, the Gorn are formidable tacticians, Captain. It would be folly to assume otherwise."

"I'm counting on it," Keller replied. "A class eight probe, same as before, ready to fire. Then I want two full spreads of photon torpedoes standing by."

Kesshek tilted his head. "Sir, phasers would have better effectiveness in this type of atmosphere. Torpedo casings would be breached almost immediately after leaving the protection of our shields."

The captain pushed himself away from the railing near Kesshek and walked toward the lift exit. "You heard my orders, Lieutenant. Make ready in all respects!" Before the lift doors closed, he issued one more order. "XO has the conn."

* * *

NCC-3109 (USS *Reykjavik*)

The senior staff had been reassembled in the briefing room with the addition of Captain Tarrant from Starfleet Intelligence and Commander Verde from JAG. As before, the senior officers from *Gol* and *Zelenskyy* had been linked in via the viewscreens from their respective briefing rooms.

"We're six hours out from the border," Tarrant began at Trujillo's prompting. "Still no signs of additional Gorn incursions into our territory, but we're picking up continuing Gorn military activity on their side of the border."

The tall, turban-clad Sikh Operations Lieutenant Shukla noted, "Task Force Lacertus is assembling three parsecs coreward of the border so as not to potentially antagonize the Gorn. With our three ships, we'll have eight total, with another five within three hours if called upon to respond."

Trujillo turned her gaze on Tarrant. "Captain, this Gorn facility *Repulse* allegedly attacked, do we know what kind of outpost it was?"

"Yes, sir. We believe it was a weapons-research facility, based on the comms and logistics traffic to and from the station. Intel doesn't have any particulars on what specific kinds of weapons systems were being researched there, however."

Trujillo looked down to the far end of the table to where Lieutenant(j.g.) Rachel Garrett was seated. The ship's chief science officer's attention appeared to have been piqued by this detail.

"Mister Garrett, can you please work with Captain Tarrant to try and divine what the Gorn may have been working on there?" Trujillo ordered.

"Aye, sir."

She fixed her gaze on Verde. "I realize this isn't a JAG-specific question, Commander, but given that you're the only one here with any personal experience with Captain Keller, what do you believe his exit strategy might be if *Repulse* is still in Gorn territory?"

"That would depend on what his objectives might be, sir," replied Verde, his eyes looking upward as he thought about it. "If, for example, his intention is to continue his assault, then I would imagine he would be laying low to avoid detection for a possible hit-and-run. If his intention is to return to Federation territory, then he might opt to depart Gorn territory quickly and enter unclaimed space for a roundabout course back home."

Commander Davula frowned and interjected, "Continue his assault? Surely Keller would be trying to return to the 'safe' side of the border? You can't prosecute a war with a single starship, Commander."

Verde pressed his lips together in a thin smile. "I was hypothesizing based on the open nature of the question. I'm certainly not agreeing with his tactics. I served with the man for a little under three years before he beached me. I have a lot of speculation on his motivations, however, I'm mystified as to the actual objective of his actions."

Trujillo gestured towards Verde. "Seeing as we have nothing new on Gorn activity to dissect, I'm willing to entertain hypotheses on Captain Keller's motivations here. We've already established he has no bad blood towards the Gorn that anyone knows of, so what's driving this?"

"As I said during our discussion yesterday," Verde began with a heavy sigh, "Keller's not a captain who would stick his neck out on anything less than solid grounds. His primary motivation is to serve his ego, and he demands nothing less than perfection from his crew, lest they make him look bad to his superiors. Putting himself in a position like this without covering his ass? That would be wildly out of character for him, sir." He hedged slightly with, "I will also fully admit that the man ended my starship career, and if I hadn't had a law degree or two, I likely wouldn't have remained in Starfleet. So, take my opinion with that in mind. I'll admit to being biased."

"So noted," Trujillo replied, a hint of empathy creeping into her voice. "Given Keller's personality profile, perhaps we might want to begin examining the possibility that *Repulse* has somehow been compromised by the Gorn?"

Lieutenant Helvia, the massive Magna-Roman security officer, raised a finger and spoke following Trujillo's acknowledgement.

"With respect, Commodore, if *Repulse* had been captured by the Gorn and was being used to incite a larger military confrontation, why would

the Gorn merely strike a single defense outpost and a border cutter before withdrawing? We've given them their *casus belli* already. If they were going to use it to spark a full-blown confrontation, they would have done so before now. Now that Starfleet has had enough time to muster a response to any incursion, their window of opportunity would seem to have closed."

"Then... he's still there," Verde said softly. "He's probably using his bag of tricks to remain hidden, and that'll cause them to focus a lot of their resources trying to locate *Repulse*. It's also possible that if he's continuing to be a nuisance, they might not be aware of precisely how many starships are making other runs." He turned to Helvia, "If you were the Gorn, Lieutenant, under those circumstances, how would you react?"

"Pursue, contain, capture... and dissect," the large man replied gravely. He reached up by habit to brush one finger along the five-link gold chain that hung beneath his combadge, the symbol of the Children of the Son, the faith of his outcast homeworld to which he still adhered. "Only then would they know how many ships they faced, and what Starfleet's ultimate goals were within their territory."

Verde accepted the answer with an approving nod and leaned back. He turned to look at Trujillo, "And to make sure no other forces enter your territory, you give the enemy's border units a good whack to remind them that you're still watching."

The commodore absorbed that with a nod. "Which now begs the question, what, if any, assistance can and should we give to *Repulse* to get her back across the border safely?" She directed her gaze to Verde, "And would rendering assistance create any legal difficulties for us?"

"That would depend on our orders. Really, this is going to come down to whether we acknowledge that *Repulse* is acting with or without authorization. If we disavow Keller's actions, then he no longer has any protections by treaty; though I'm at a loss to recalling any treaties that the Gorn have been signatories to. Giving him an avenue of escape might also be seen as tacit approval or authorization of *Repulse's* activities in their space, which would just add to their *casus belli*... not that they needed more." Verde opined, though he cast a wry grin toward Helvia as he spoke that last phrase.

"Regardless of why Captain Keller may have launched this attack," Trujillo offered, "there are seven-hundred other souls aboard that ship I'd rather not see become breeding-sacks for the Gorn."

That statement brought a gravid hush over the meeting, broken by Trujillo's next statement. "To that end, I'm going to send *Gol* to search out and retrieve *Repulse*, so long as she's on our side of the border. Commander Verde, as a JAG officer you're not in my chain of command, but I'd like permission to detach you to advise Commander Glal for the duration of *Gol's* search mission. And, if located, you'd be on hand to provide legal-counsel to Captain Keller and his senior officers."

Verde turned back toward his yeoman, Chief Zenn, who had been taking notes during the meeting. "Chief, advise the team that we're packing up to transfer to *Gol*. Except Martinez." He returned his attention to Trujillo. "I'm going to leave Ale here to act as legal officer while we press on with Captain Glal."

From beside him, Davula leaned in to whisper to Verde, "Now you *will* be sleeping in enlisted bunks, Commander. Space is at a premium on those Akyazi's."

Verde chuckled silently at her remark. "It'll be fine," he whispered back. "I don't mind roughing it for a while."

"Hey!" Glal erupted over the interlink with mock injury, "I can hear you, you know!"

"No offense," Verde replied, his tone full of mirth, his eyes upon the screen. "I'm bringing aboard some select choices from my collection, to ease the pain." He assured Trujillo, "I'll save you some for when we get back, sir."

* * *

Chapter 4

Repulse's bridge buzzed with an underlying tension; the silent, scarlet pulsing of the alert status indicator appeared to be the only movement within the compartment's dim illumination. The sudden sound of the lift doors opening and uniform boots clicking against the deck snapped heads around to attention.

"Captain on the bridge!" Kesshek's voice sliced through the quiet hum.

Keller strode in, the lingering weight of his twenty-minute absence below decks evident in the set of his shoulders. "Status report," he demanded, eyes darting to each crew member.

T'Rel, ever-efficient, responded with calm and measured words, "Captain. The Gorn vessels are shadowing our warp trail, hovering closely and scanning our atmospheric traces. Their formation suggests they're not relinquishing their offensive stance."

Keller's lips curled into a sardonic smile. "XO, they know they're in a game against the best." There was unmistakable pride in his voice, tinged with challenge. Striding forward, he activated the intership communication system. "Engineering, what's the timer on our shields?"

O'Brien's voice replied, *"Roughly eight to ten minutes, probably closer to eight than ten."*

Keller's brow furrowed. "Can't you be more precise?" To T'Rel, he stated simply, "I have the conn."

"Captain has the conn," T'Rel intoned. She took up her standing position to his right, once more.

"Y'see that storm out there, sir? The clouds of vaporized metals are moving according to the magnetic field distortions, which are pretty unpredictable in terms of how they interact with our shields," explained O'Brien, in a tone that bordered on condescension. *"Sometimes, we have a good minute followed by two bad ones. It drains the shields at different rates."*

Understanding - though not necessarily appreciating - Keller nodded, "Notify me with three minutes remaining." He ended the communication, then addressed his crew, voice dripping with authority, "Attention, all."

Those last two words, as everyone aboard *Repulse* had come to know, acted as his code phrase to drop what you're doing and give the captain nothing less than your full attention. Every member of the crew swiveled around in their chairs and did so, immediately.

"In roughly eight to ten minutes," Keller began in a mocking tone, expressing his displeasure with the imprecision in O'Brien's report, "this ship will begin combat operations. Our goal is to disable or destroy the three Gorn hunters that have been tracking us since leaving their territory. We've managed to elude them enough to force them into a search pattern, meaning that they do not have a fix on our precise location, thanks to the magnetic soup out there.

"Mister Kesshek, I want to know the moment those three are in visual range."

Kesshek nodded and turned back around to get that information. "Sir! They are crossing into visual range now, on a flight path that will take them out of range in twenty minutes."

"Excellent, plenty of time. When they get to their closest point, fire the probe."

"That will be in... five minutes, forty-seven seconds, sir."

"Good. Mister Thalix, one minute before then, you'll invert the ship so that the main tractor emitter is facing the enemy ships. When they pass overhead, lock on to the rear guard ship and then pull them down with us at full impulse power." Keller laid out, using his hands to gesture how he felt the maneuver should be performed.

Thalix replied, "Aye, sir."

"Once that rear ship is down, Mister Kesshek, you will disable or destroy their sublight capability," the captain continued confidently. "I'll take two to one over three to one odds any day."

As Kesshek raised his voice to affirm the order, T'Rel pulled her PADD up and began tapping in the sequence of events for her own edification; perhaps even a detailed log entry should they survive the complex tactic.

"Two minutes to intercept, sir," Kesshek reported. Without waiting, he continued his report, "The Gorn flotilla is approaching in a vee formation, though the aft ships are closer to the stratosphere than the lead hunter."

Keller nodded. "They're correctly assuming we'll pop up below them. That formation will bring their weapons to optimal bearing. Mister Thalix, begin your roll."

"Beginning my roll, aye, sir," Thalix called out. The screen view flipped, showing the 'horizon' of space now below them instead of above. "Roll complete, captain."

"Adequate," was Keller's only reply. "Give me ten degrees nose down, and put the time to intercept on main viewer."

Repulse's view showed more of the stars than before, while the countdown overlaid itself in the upper right corner of the main viewscreen. When it hit thirty seconds, Keller ordered, "Deploy the probe."

When the probe showed itself on the on the viewer and sped away, Kesshek reported, "Probe away, sir!"

As the probe pulled itself on a straightaway up and away from the clouds, taking minimal damage due to its tiny profile compared to an *Excelsior*-class starship. The probe began actively announcing its position and flew at full impulse power in lower orbit.

"The lead ship is advancing on the probe," Kesshek started, though it was obvious when the hunter ship spun itself and began firing.

"Tractor the closest vessel, Vara, make sure you got a good lock! Then give me a quick Hammerhead, and then just snap-pitch us so we're facing the stars again," Keller said in rapid-fire. "Really swung that bastard around, Thalix!"

Commander Vara and Lieutenant Thalix worked together to execute the orders quickly. Vara announced, "I got 'em, sir!"

"Beginning my maneuver," Thalix called. *Repulse* swung hard downward toward the surface of the planet with the hunter vessel trapped in its tractor beam.

Keller slammed his fist down on the arm of his chair. "Open fire!"

The unmistakable orangish phaser beams lanced out and made a direct hit against the Gorn hunter, striking the rear-facing engines. Kesshek continued the firing pattern until they sliced through the hull and made contact with the propulsion unit. However, the damaged armor gave the metallic clouds an entry into the ship's interior.

"Release tractor beam, now," Keller said. "And put us behind the other two ships. Kesshek, once we're clear of the atmosphere, fire everything you got. Time on target!"

Repulse continued the Hammerhead climb quickly, shooting up out of the atmosphere like a whale swanning from a dive. But instead of crashing back down on its back, Thalix brought the ship, still inverted, so that all of her formidable forward weapons bore on the lower rear quarter of the remaining Gorn hunters still chasing the probe.

Kesshek announced, "Firing all weapons time on target,, aye, sir." Phasers and torpedoes worked in concert with one another. Twenty torpedoes on individual parabolic trajectories to their targets impacted against the shielded hulls just moments after the phaser beams struck. The beams' timing managed to cause a widespread energy fluctuation to allow the kinetic weapons to punch through easily. Within moments, the flotilla was no more, just debris now caught in a decaying orbit of the planet below.

Everyone on the bridge, except T'Rel, cheered or breathed a sigh of relief. The Vulcan exec continued to take her notes until she caught up to the action and ceased her writing.

Thalix turned around and asked, "How did you know that would w-work, sir?"

Keller's eyes bore into her momentarily, then softened with a hint of amusement. "S'ran and Kesshek, you may answer, if you so desire."

S'ran exchanged glances with Kesshek, the latter of whom deferred to the senior officer. The Andorian chief of sciences explained, "The tactic made use of the Gorn shielding system. Unlike ours, which are powered in six separate arcs, the Gorn utilize a cluster of shield generators to power multiple layers of contiguous shielding."

At S'ran's nod, Kesshek continued. "The phaser beam was modulated for the upper electromagnetic band, in the hopes that it would cause a lag in failover between the generators."

"It was a guess?" asked Thalix, her eyes widened.

Keller shifted in his seat, unabashedly preening at his subordinates' review. "I prefer the phrase 'provable hypothesis.'"

Seeing that Thalix and Vara faced forward with their own versions of incredulous expressions, T'Rel stepped forward. "Had the tactic been unsuccessful, the captain had other options open to him."

"Of course I did!" snapped Keller loudly, throwing his ire at T'Rel. However, seeing that it had no impact upon her other than a raised eyebrow, he relented. "All right. All's forgiven. Let's chalk it up to a tense situation."

T'Rel merely inclined her head toward him in a capitulating manner, with her eyes closed. She knew full well that it was what he expected of her, and it cost her nothing to maintain what little harmony on the bridge existed since Keller assumed command the previous year.

With a deep breath through his nose, Keller spoke sharply. "Take us out of the system, Mister Thalix, plot a course for a return to Gorn space at warp five." As Thalix repeated the order, the captain keyed open the intercom and called out, "Engineering, this is the bridge. We're securing from combat operations, so feel free to begin repairs underway."

O'Brien chuckled over the speakers. "Oh, thank you, sir. How magnanimous of you. O'Brien, out."

Keller managed a staccato chortle as the ship made the interfold transition back to subspace. "All right, enough jokes, everyone. Settle down. Maintain the watch and set condition yellow."

T'Rel repeated the order, "Set condition yellow throughout the ship, aye, sir."

The captain steepled his hands against his chin as he leaned forward in his seat. "Let's find our next target."

* * *

NCC-3109 (USS *Reykjavík*)

Davula entered the ready room to find Trujillo bleary-eyed, deep into a seventy-year-old treatise on the Federation's diplomatic history with the Gorn Hegemony.

"Any luck, sir?"

Trujillo deactivated her desktop monitor, taking a moment to rub her eyes and stretch. "Not much, I'm afraid. All our diplomats that interacted with the Gorn in the 50's and 60's are long retired if not deceased by now. It appears that all our treaties with the hegemony were conducted via subspace, something about the Gorn refusing to negotiate in person with 'prey.'" She blew out a sigh. "It's slow going."

Davula held up a data-slate. "I've got something that might be of value, if you have a moment, sir?"

Trujillo waved her tiredly towards a chair. "By all means, Commander."

The XO sat, passing the data-slate across the tabletop. "Lieutenant Garrett and I have compiled everything we have in our databanks on the Gorn biologically. They're actually quite fascinating, from a scientific perspective. Tissue samples gathered from Cestus III and other locations over the last century indicate the Gorn possess a very dense, intricately folded DNA structure, similar to that of the Xindi. It suggests that the various stages of Gorn maturation are almost akin to their metamorphosing into an entirely different species, not just once, but twice."

"That three-stage maturation process of theirs?" Trujillo asked.

"Exactly. At each stage, a Gorn undergoes a molting process that's more like a Terran butterfly's chrysalis, accompanied by a deep hibernation, lasting weeks to months. They emerge from these periods significantly changed, both physically and neurologically."

Trujillo appeared more alert now, brought to full wakefulness by Davula's discourse.

"So, we really *are* dealing with three separate species in a sense?"

"I certainly appears that way, sir. From a negotiations standpoint, that might be of some help."

"It is, thank you."

Davula touched a finger to her data-slate, transferring the files to Trujillo's desktop queue.

"My appreciation to Mister Garrett as well, Commander."

"I will convey that, sir." Davula paused. "A question, if I may, Commodore?"

"Certainly."

"Have you considered asking to send *Gol* into Gorn territory, with a Gorn escort, to track down and make contact with *Repulse*, sir?"

"I've given that idea quite a bit of thought, actually," Trujillo confessed. "However, I don't trust the Gorn not to attack *Repulse* on sight, and I don't want to put Commander Glal and his crew in the position of having to watch their comrades destroyed while they do nothing, or risk igniting a larger conflict by jumping in to assist *Repulse*. Additionally, I'm not sure if the Gorn get into a killing frenzy that they wouldn't destroy *Gol* right alongside *Repulse* if it comes to a fight with Captain Keller."

Davula digested that in silence.

"If *Repulse* makes it's back to our side of the border, we have greater control over the situation, and neither *Gol* nor any of our other starships are placed in harm's way needlessly.

"So, Keller and his people are on their own, sir?"

Trujillo nodded once, emphatically. "Correct. They got themselves into this mess, and they'll have to get themselves out of it, only to face potential courts-martial if they make it back to our territory."

"I understand, sir. Thank you for the explanation."

"Any time, Commander. Speaking of *Repulse*, I've composed a recall order to broadcast over encrypted channels to hopefully draw her back

here. She's not responded to anything Starfleet's sent over the past few days, so I'm not holding out much hope."

Trujillo reached out and toggled a control on her desktop interface. The commodore's voice issued forth.

"This message is a Priority-One Communique, and is being broadcast on an encrypted and secured Starfleet frequency. This is Commodore Nandi Trujillo, commanding USS Reykjavik and Rapid Response Detachment Delta.

"Any Starfleet personnel receiving this message who are associated with USS Repulse, NCC-2544, you are directed and required to return immediately to Federation space and submit yourself for inspection and investigation into the events surrounding your actions within the recognized territory of the Gorn Hegemony.

"There has been no declaration of hostilities between our two governments, and your actions have pushed the Federation and the Gorn Hegemony to the brink of war without explanation or known provocation.

"Failure to comply with these orders will constitute willful insubordination, in addition to potential charges of Conduct Unbecoming for initiating hostilities with a foreign power without authorization.

"Captain Keller, you and your crew are hereby officially recalled. The clock is ticking."

Trujillo met Davula's eyes across her desktop. "Let's hope for the best. Please transmit that over the emergency channels, highest possible gain on our transceiver."

* * *

Chapter 5

Chapter by [Gibraltar](#)

NCC-2472 (USS *Gol*)

Gol was too small a vessel to allow for a ready room attached to the bridge, so Commander Glal's office was located in a compartment adjacent to his quarters.

He was reviewing his senior officers' updates on departure preparations when the door chimed.

"Enter," the Tellarite growled, attaching his thick forefinger print signature to a deuterium consumption report.

The doors parted and Leo Verde stepped through; a small, nondescript bag at his side. "Sorry for the intrusion, Skipper," he said with a smile. "I thought I would pay my respects."

Glal offered a crooked smile, much of which was hidden by his scraggly beard. "Welcome aboard, Commander. I trust Mister Jarrod found you and your people adequate quarters?" He made a show of glancing around the small, Spartan office cabin. "You're sure as hell not sleeping in here!"

Leo laughed. "Yes, he is a well-trained exec, and found us a closet two decks down," he set the bag down on the modest desk and took a step back. "But, far be it for me to accept your gracious hospitality without a gift. This is just a little something I picked up on K-14."

Glal stood and squeezed out from behind the cramped desk to bend down, his knees crackling in protest. "And far be it from me to turn down a gift. What have we got here?"

He reached into the bag, grabbing hold of a colorfully labeled bottle of Tellarite Fizz. Glal spent a moment inspecting the label. "Well, this is most welcome, Commander. I thank you! The Commodore refuses to entertain my love of this particularly volatile beverage, so I often go without."

"Please, call me Leo," came his typical response. "And I know exactly four drinks that mix well with Fizz, but don't ask me to drink any of them," Leo added with a wry grin.

"Nothing an emergency site-to-site transport to Sickbay and a new esophageal lining wouldn't cure, Leo, I assure you!" Glal chortled, still eyeing the bottle appreciatively.

"New lining, new intestine, probably will eat all the way through my spinal cord, too," Leo said after a genuine wheezing laugh. "I'll stick with carbon and not volcanic gasses in my drinks."

Glal offered the Tellarite variant of a shrug. "To each their own." He gestured to the chair facing the desk. "Make yourself at home, please. We're making final preparations for departure, though I can tell you I'm not anxious to go hunting down another starship. I've done a lot of things in my time in the service, but never that."

Leo's expression hardened as he took the proffered chair. "Thank you. And agreed. I've JAGMAN'ed gross insubordination cases in the past, but this is... beyond the pale. I'll tell you what I told the Commodore; whatever this is... he has to be absolutely convinced he's operating with full authority. Keller does not wake up one morning and decide that he's going to start a war. I firmly believe he thinks when he crosses back into Federation space, it'll be to a hero's welcome."

Glal resumed his seat, shaking his head in bewilderment. "Unless he's given to wildly liberal interpretations of his 'observe and report' patrol orders, I can't fathom how that might be the case."

With a shake of his head, Leo shrugged. "There's got to be something we're not aware of. Something that's influencing his decision-making. I keep thinking about all the possibilities. Maybe he's being fed bad intel or orders. Maybe he's dead and someone else has command. Maybe Davula's right and *Repulse* is under enemy control and this is all a big false-flag."

"As horrible as that would be, I almost hope that's the case," Glal said with a sigh. "Nevertheless, we've got *Repulse*'s command prefix codes at the ready, should we need to employ them. Whatever their situation, I hope Keller can get his people safely back across the border before the Gorn zero in on them. That's not a fate I'd wish on anyone."

"No," Leo agreed immediately. "From what I understand, his exec is top-notch; a Vulcan named T'Rel. She adheres to the Surakian discipline, and if she's still serving in that capacity, I would imagine she would not hesitate to protect the crew. I think if we do make contact and he's unreasonable, we would have to appeal to her." He reached into the fold of his jacket and pulled out a display device. "I'm here as an officer of the court, Skipper. Whatever you need from me in terms of legal coverage, you let me know."

Glal fixed an assaying look on Verde. "Just between you, me and the bulkhead, how's Keller going to react to seeing you at the tip of JAG's legal spear? From what I picked up in our collective briefing, it sounds like he put you through Hell. I'd have to imagine he's going to think he's walked right into the hangman's gallows and you're holding the noose."

Leo sighed, visibly considering his words via his expression. "I... I'm not sure, honestly. Probably might assign some motivation to my being

here, for sure. And yeah, he beached me pretty good, Skip, won't lie about that."

Glal continued to observe Verde closely, drinking in the man's words and non-verbal cues.

With the device in his right hand, Leo raised both outstretched as he continued speaking, "But, in spite of all that, I'm still out here in space, and I'm still wearing the uniform. Maybe a little part of that is me thumbing my nose at him?" He lowered his arms and gave another shrug, this time with a grin. "I don't know. Let's just say he'll be apprehensive, to start. I'm just here to do my job."

The Tellarite nodded slowly. "That's all that can be asked of any of us, Leo. We've all got our own demons, Keller included. I've had some old friends with the misfortune of serving with him, so I know something of what you must have gone through. Regardless of how he reacts to your presence, I'm glad to have you aboard. I can use all the help I can get, and I'm not too proud to ask for a hand when it's needed."

"I'm a full-service lawyer," Leo noted. "I still carry my line officer qualification, so if you need me in a non-lawyerly capacity, the offer's on the table."

"I'll have Jarrod plug you into the duty officer's rotation, then. Never hurts to have another experienced officer in the center seat, and it gives my senior officers another few hours of precious rack-time."

"Anything I can do for your team," Leo promised. "Until we get our hands on Keller, I'm just live-lumber, otherwise."

* * *

The four vessels faced off across the invisible border from one another at a distance of ten-thousand kilometers. A Gorn Ravager-class cruiser escorted by a pair of flanking hunters had been dispatched in response to *Reykjavík's* request for parlay.

Trujillo had little experience interacting with the enigmatic Gorn, her sole encounter with them having come four years earlier during a brief incursion into Federation territory by Gorn separatists seeking to establish their own fiefdom in an already inhabited system.

There had been precious little talking during that encounter, with the Gorn government only too happy to see potential insurgents expunged by Starfleet.

"I am Commodore Nandi Trujillo of the Federation Starfleet. I've come to discuss the recent incidents along our mutual border."

There was a blur of indistinct motion on the viewer, then the menacing visage of a reptilian face came into focus, prominent teeth glistening. A series of clicks and hisses issued forth, which the Universal Translator obediently rendered into Federation Standard.

Trujillo was suddenly reminded of a Terran dinosaur exhibit her father had taken her to at the age of six. The holographic T-Rex had moved in much the same fashion, and she felt a thrill of dread as her mid-brain screamed at her that a predator was near.

"What is meaning of attack? Federation always predictable/non-threat/non-aggressor. Now Federation attacks. Does Federation intend to be unpredictable/threat/aggressor now?"

Trujillo muted the transmission, looking to Ops. "Mister Shukla, is there something wrong with the UT? Their transmission's coming across very stilted."

"UT lingua-matrix is showing ninety-eight-point-four percent efficacy, sir. I'd surmise this is just how they communicate in real-time, Commodore."

"Understood," she replied, then toggled the transmission open. "No, it is not our intention to be a threat. The attack appears to be the work of a single ship, operating without authorization. Do you understand the concept of a rogue ship? It's like when your separatist Gu'zodid clan tried to seize Boh-Rochele from us. They were operating without the official sanction of your government."

"We understand rogue ship," came the Gorn leader's reply, the even tones of the UT's translation a jarring counterpoint to the hissing, clicking, growling speech issuing from the reptilian. *"What guarantee you give us that this not happen again? Elder cadre orders calm, no further attacks on Federation, but if Federation strikes again, Hunter Cadre will seize command and will strike many targets. Many planets, many colonies, many outposts."*

"We have been sent to retrieve the ship that attacked you. Its crew will be subject to our laws, which they certainly appear to have violated."

"Insufficient," came the abrupt reply. *"Federation may retrieve ship, but crew that attacked Hegemony will remain with us. Crew will incubate and feed Gorn young and will atone for attack in this way."*

"Unacceptable," Trujillo parried. "The crew may not all bear the guilt for this attack. Our chain-of-command demands obedience of subordinates to their leaders. This must be decided by our justice system."

"Then leaders turned over to Hegemony?" the Gorn asked pointedly.

"Also unacceptable," Trujillo said. "Gorn reprisals do not constitute justice. Being eaten or used to gestate your young are not punishments the Federation is willing to entertain."

"Insufficient," the Gorn repeated. *"If compensation of ship leaders is not made, Hegemony will continue raids against Federation planets and*

outposts until parity has been achieved."

An eye for an eye, eh? Trujillo thought dourly.

"There must be another way, some kind of compromise we can reach?" Trujillo asked hopefully.

"We will discuss," the Gorn officer voiced as the visual pickup struggled to follow its erratic movements. *"You will wait."*

The transmission ended abruptly and Trujillo was left staring at the bow-on view of the three Gorn warships.

"Charming," she remarked acidly to no one in particular.

* * *

NCC-2544 (USS *Repulse*)

Approaching Gorn Hegemony territory, Warp 5

June 14, 2322

Main Bridge

The console's soft beep drew immediate attention. Lieutenant Commander Vara's fingers paused, then swiftly relayed the news, "XO, we're receiving flash traffic on the Starfleet emergency channel." A hushed silence settled; everyone aboard knew the weight carried by any message using that particular frequency.

With practiced elegance, T'Rel gently set her PADD on the captain's chair armrest and approached Vara's station. Flash traffic demanded firsthand validation by the ship's second-in-command. "It would appear so. Please proceed with authentication."

Vara responded with a determined nod, her fingers fluttering over her station, "Aye, sir."

T'Rel, ensuring her voice reached the ship's sensitive interfaces, called out, "Captain, XO. Flash traffic protocol."

Before the air could settle, Keller's voice, edged with irritation, crackled from the overhead, *"XO, Captain. Acknowledged. I'll be there directly. Out."*

The bridge doors swished open revealing Keller, his bomber jacket hastily thrown over a stark white turtleneck. Unbuttoned, it spoke to his urgency. His gaze darted around as he spoke sharply, "Report."

As the weight of the captain's presence settled, S'ran's deep voice resonated, "Captain on the bridge." T'Rel, Vara, and S'ran focused intently on Lieutenant Xi Ha-vatoreii, seated at the communications console.

Meeting Keller's impatient eyes, T'Rel began, "Sir-"

Keller's voice, now sharp with frustration, cut through, "What the hell is going on? This is flash traffic protocol? Three of my senior officers standing around doing nothing? Where's the god-damned message?"

Displaying Vulcan stoicism, T'Rel waited a beat before answering, "Captain, the message is multi-media. There is an audio and video component, however-"

Dismissing her with a wave, Keller commanded, "On main viewer. Now."

T'Rel signaled with a graceful nod to the Efrosian officer, "Lieutenant, please play the message for the captain on the main viewer."

The viewscreen flickered with Ha-vatoreii's touch, submerging the bridge in a torrent of subspace interference. Only fragmented audio fought its way through, with only flashes of Trujillo's visage as she spoke. *"This messa-... Priority-One... -crypted and secured... Trujillo, commandi-... -chment Delta... associated with... Federation spac-... -tory of the Gorn Hegemo-... declaration of hostil-... government-... -rink of war with-... provocation. -constitute willful... hostilities with a foreign pow-... -are hereby official-... -he clock is ticking."*

As the transmission ended, Keller's mounting frustration was palpable. "What the hell is this?! What happened to the message?!"

Positioning herself as a buffer between Keller and the comms officer, T'Rel explained, "The integrity of the transmission has been compromised, likely by a subspace event some one-point-seven-seven parsecs distant. We believe it to be a graviton-induced fissure, which has distorted our reception. We could, however, decrypt parts of the fragmented message."

Taking a moment to collect himself, Keller pondered, "Whatever Commodore Trujillo was trying to tell us required her to break radio silence; we know that much. But, I can't be sure she was trying to tell us that the Gorn declared war on the Federation."

Carefully choosing her words, T'Rel softly cautioned, "Captain, I would advise against attempting to draw any conclusions from this message."

Keller's gaze locked onto Ha-vatoreii, sharp and probing. "And that's the best you can do, Mister?"

With a protective air, T'Rel intervened before the lieutenant could respond, "Sir, I recommend we alter course to better receive the message. It

will continue to loop until acknowledged."

Keller's icy stare landed on T'Rel. He practically shoved himself out of his chair, and signaled Lieutenant Thalix. "Set a course, maximum warp. We need that full message."

* * *

NCC-3109 (USS *Reykjavik*)

Captain Tarrant looked up from his workstation as Lieutenant(j.g.) Garrett entered what until a few days earlier had been her astrometrics lab. For the duration of this mission, it had been reallocated to Tarrant to use as an intelligence coordination center.

"Lieutenant, thanks for coming down here so quickly... especially seeing as how I've chased you out of your own workspace."

Garrett gave him an easy smile. "It's no problem, Captain, glad to be of assistance. You wanted me to see something?"

Tarrant stood, gesturing to the seat he'd just occupied. "Indeed. My old intel analyst's brain is having difficulty deciphering something, and I've a sneaking suspicion I need a science officer's expertise."

Garrett moved to seat herself at the workstation. "Okay, what am I looking at, sir? I hope you're not asking me to try and help you decrypt something, because that is most definitely *not* my area of expertise."

"No, no decoding work, thankfully." The Intelligence officer appeared sheepish. "Let me preface this by saying I've just been granted access to this data, so please don't think I've been holding out on the commodore."

Garrett digested that amiably. "That's good enough for me, sir. We junior officers aren't in a position to question much of anything, let alone render value judgements."

Tarrant nodded. "Fair enough. Okay, about an hour ago I was advised by Intel that they'd dispatched a stealth reconnaissance probe into Gorn territory to try and determine if the Gorn were making preparations for another cross-border incursion that we couldn't see with standard sensors from our side of the border."

He toggled the console, calling up an image of a star field highlighted by a bright white eruption of what appeared to be some form of energy. Various analytics began to overlay the image as a host of sensor returns from the phenomenon began to coalesce.

"We picked this up near where *Repulse* reportedly attacked the Gorn research facility. Can you explain what it is we're seeing here?"

Garrett went to work, scrolling through a veritable river of data as she flipped back and forth between multiple images and scan results.

It took substantially less time than Tarrant had feared it might.

Tarrant realized that the color had drained from Garrett's features as she looked up at him. "We need to talk to the commodore, sir. Now."

* * *

Chapter 6

* * *

“Why the hell is there a goddamn intel probe sniffing around the Gorn facility our starship just annihilated?”

This was Trujillo’s initial reaction to the news.

“Are we trying to start a war? Because if so, we’re doing a damn fine job of it!”

Tarrant and Garrett had found Trujillo already in a video-conference with Verde over subspace. He had remained connected to hear Tarrant’s revelation about the recon probe.

Tarrant had his hands up, though whether in a warding gesture or primary defensive stance was unclear. “Commodore, I understand your frustration, but I was only made aware of its presence and telemetry a little while ago. I was going to brief you on the revelation of this asset, but I couldn’t quite grasp what I was seeing, so I asked for Mister Garrett’s assistance.”

Trujillo turned her desktop viewer towards the new arrivals so Verde could participate in the conversation.

“Who’s calling the shots on this?” Trujillo inquired insistently. “I can’t have someone from Intelligence sling-shotting probes into a powder-keg like this without my knowledge or authorization. Give me a name, Captain.”

“Rear-Admiral Constance, sir. Heading up the StellarSpatial Telemetry Office with Intel.”

Trujillo nodded. “Thank you. Now I know who to sick Admiral Saavik on.” She gestured for Tarrant and Garrett to be seated. “Now, please tell me what’s so important that you two rushed in here like your hair was on fire?”

Tarrant looked to Garrett. “Sir, I’d better let the lieutenant explain.”

Garrett took a moment to collect her thoughts and push the admiralty-level venom she’d just been exposed to into a tightly locked box in her subconscious.

“Sir, whatever the Gorn were researching at that facility, its destruction appears to have caused a highly localized rupture in space/time. It appears similar to what Federation science has conjectured to be a White Hole, an energy fountain spewing matter, radiation and gravimetric shockwaves into our dimension from... well, someplace else.”

Trujillo quirked an eyebrow. “Someplace else?”

“Another dimension, sir. Possibly one of pure energy, or potentially energy evulsing from a rupture of one of the energetic membranes between dimensions.”

Trujillo slumped back against her desk, partially sitting on its edge. “What could do that?”

Garrett cast a quick glance at Tarrant before answering. “If I had to guess, sir, I’d put my latinum on isolytic weapons. If that’s what they were researching, they might have had dozens of the weapons stored there. That many devices detonating in concert might theoretically create such a trans-dimensional tear.”

“Subspace ordinance?” Trujillo bowed her head, rubbing the bridge of her nose to try and forestall the headache that was quickly forming. “We never did get the Gorn to sign the treaty banning those, did we?”

On the small screen atop her desk, Leo’s eyes widened as he noted, “I think we count ourselves lucky we got them to sign the one about Cestus III.”

Tarrant appeared deep in thought for a long moment. “Commodore, I’m a bit uncomfortable accepting that the supposedly secret Gorn research facility that a rogue starship captain apparently decided to attack without authorization just happens to be one in which they’re researching some of the deadliest and most unpredictable weapons known to science.”

Trujillo held up a hand. “Hang on, Captain. I’m right there with you, but I need to know more about what this White Hole phenomenon is and what its ramifications might be.”

Garrett, sensing that she was in the spotlight once again, offered, “I have absolutely no idea what this thing might do, sir. It could continue to expand, or it might collapse on its own. Starfleet’s only ever detected one of these previously, and it’s deep in the Delta Quadrant, almost at the edge of the galaxy. This one in Gorn space has apparently affected subspace communications in the area, as the intel probe had to withdraw nearly back to the border to be able to broadcast the telemetry”

Leo sighed. “Oh, no...”

Trujillo glanced towards her desktop interface. “Leo?”

He reached forward, out of the visual pickup and pulled back his display device. "You've got authenticated orders pumping out at max volume on repeat. If the probe had to pull back to transmit home, then *Repulse* may have only received a partial. And as you're very aware, under those circumstances, a ship on that kind of mission..." He trailed off, leaving the rest unspoken.

"You're suggesting I may have inadvertently given Captain Keller an 'open season' notice on the Gorn by way of an incomplete order?" Trujillo asked, aghast at the idea. "I really don't see how even a partial intercept of my message could be misconstrued in that way, though."

"Not originally, but now that nightmare is in my head, thanks," Leo replied wryly. "No, my point is that if he's under orders or has any kind of mandate... then your message isn't likely getting through the interference, if he's operating behind the effects of this White Hole. At best, he only got a fragment of your message. He doesn't know he needs to cease operations and Romeo-Tango-Bravo, post-haste."

Trujillo's existing frown increased threefold. "Wait... what do you mean, 'if he's under orders?' We've confirmed with Command that no orders were issued for anyone to violate Gorn territory, and certainly not to attack any of their installations."

With a deep, controlled breath, Leo shook his head. "I'm looking at this as though I had to defend Keller in a court-martial, sir. Even though this is conjecture at best, given that Keller's record as a CO is pretty clear... His actions have proven that a border nation has been developing weapons of utter catastrophe to the interfold layer." His eyes drifted over to Tarrant for support of his hypothesis, "Captain, back me up, here. Doesn't this sound like plausible deniability?"

Tarrant nodded slowly, looking pained. "Unfortunately, yes, Commander. It does. Though I can't think of Starfleet Command doing anything like this for decades. Not since... well, they sent Captain Kirk to steal a Romulan cloaking device back in the '60's and would have disavowed him had he failed."

Trujillo was now scowling. "Are the two of you telling me that this whole song and dance we're doing here may be cover for someone's hare-brained black op?" She paused and looked to Garrett. "Lieutenant, my apologies, but I'm going to have to use some adult language with these gentlemen and I need you to clear out of the compartment."

Garrett nodded and abandoned the ready room without another word.

"I know it's a stretch," Leo started after waiting, his tone underscored by his reticence. "Glal, Jarrod, and I have been wracking our brains trying to get inside Keller's head. You know my history with Keller, but Glal and Jarrod are helping me remain objective. This news about the probe, it's like a new piece of the puzzle. It could help build a different story for Keller's defense, one that introduces reasonable doubt about him acting alone and going completely out of character."

"It's... possible, sir," Tarrant confessed, "however unlikely. It's happened before, but only under the most extreme circumstances." The Intel officer looked over to Verde on the desktop display. "The question is, would Captain Keller accept such extreme orders, knowing that he might well be disavowed by Starfleet if he and *Repulse* were captured?"

"Hell, no, sir," Leo responded with conviction. "If he had orders to operate against the Gorn, then he has to be absolutely convinced that he is covered. He would never risk his career like this. I'll stake my own career on *that*, Captain." His eyes tracked back to Trujillo, and added, "Commodore."

Trujillo heaved a heavy sigh. "Okay, we're wandering into complete conjectural territory here, gentlemen. None of this gets us any closer to locating *Repulse* or mollifying the Gorn. What this *does* do is potentially give us some leverage with the Hegemony. I have a sneaking suspicion that neither their government nor their military has the first notion of what to do about this hole that's been blown open in their space."

She pointed towards the ready room doors out onto the bridge. "I, on the other hand, have two of the Fleet's finest science officers out there." Trujillo looked from Tarrant to Verde on the screen. "Any objections to me offering our scientific assistance as a carrot? It's a bit more difficult to justify attacking someone if they're actively trying to help you. Not impossible, mind you, just harder."

"Speaking strictly as your legal officer," Leo began, his eyes focused on the screen, "that's within the scope of your written orders, Commodore." He glanced at the device in his hand. "No objections here."

Tarrant raised his hands in a gesture of mock-surrender. "If it saves lives, sir, and here I'll admit to selfishly thinking of my own in this circumstance, I'm absolutely for it."

* * *

The unabashed excitement evidenced by both women ignited the beginning of the headache Trujillo was sure to come.

Garrett began, "Sir, just as nothing known, not matter, energy, light or information can escape the event horizon of a black hole, none of these things are believed to be able to penetrate the event horizon of a white hole."

Davula offered, "It might be best to think of a white hole as a geyser erupting so forcefully nothing can be introduced into its venting aperture."

Garrett nodded, "Right, yes. And given that situation, our ability to introduce something into the phenomena to initiate its collapse is effectively zero."

"Our understanding of the white hole phenomena begins with Einstein's equations and has been enhanced by the 22nd century work of Sopek

of Vulcan,” the younger woman continued. “White holes are predicted as part of a solution to the Einstein field equations known as the maximally extended version of the Schwarzschild metric, describing an eternal black hole with no charge and no rotation.”

Trujillo held up a hand in a gesture of abeyance. “Let’s dumb this down to the level of your poor CO who hasn’t attended an academy astrophysics course in the better part of a quarter century, shall we?”

A blush crept up Garrett’s neck to color her cheeks. “Of course, sir. I’m sorry. In effect, we can’t jam something into the maw of this thing to snuff it out. However, if we were to tunnel into a layer of subspace contiguous to where this eruption originates, we might be able to extinguish it.”

“Tunnel how?”

“Utilizing our navigational deflector, and those of other ships in our task force. We’d have to modify and re-tune them, but it’s the only component aboard capable of channeling that much power with the kind of focus we require.”

Trujillo’s discomfort was evident. “Do the Gorn have the technology to initiate such a procedure?”

The two officers looked at one another.

“I… uh, I’m not sure, sir,” Garrett confessed.

“I’m not at all comfortable with multiple starships taking their navigational deflectors offline long enough to perform this ‘tunneling’ you’re proposing while inside Gorn territory. It would effectively strand the ships at sub-light speeds and leave them vulnerable to Gorn attack.”

“But sir, if we created this damage, shouldn’t we be the ones to fix it?” Garrett asked, guileless.

“The Gorn are a mercurial species, Lieutenant,” Trujillo said. “They could easily agree to allow us to try this tunneling process, only to attack us in the midst of our efforts. They’re highly unpredictable at the best of times, let alone when they’ve been justifiably provoked.”

Garrett looked crestfallen. “I understand, sir.”

Trujillo smiled in response. “That wasn’t an invitation for you to give up, Mister Garrett. Please, both of you continue with your research into the possibility of using this technique. We may be able to present it to the Gorn as a peace offering of a kind.”

The two women nodded in unison, their enthusiasm reigniting.

* * *

Chapter 7

* * *

NCC-3717 (USS *Gol*)

"Commander, new sensor contact at long range. No transponder ID, but the vessel reads as an *Excelsior*-class by mass and configuration."

Whereas Lieutenant Commander Jarrod wanted to expel a heavy sigh and mutter 'finally', he held that impulse in check. He was the XO and at present, the duty officer on the bridge, and thus must conform to regs... or more so than he might otherwise. "Ops, confirm sensor contact. Comms, send challenge hail and our encoded ID. Helm, alter course to intercept, best speed."

Jarrod tapped his combadge, "Captain to the bridge."

* * *

NCC-2544 (USS *Repulse*)

Keller narrowed his eyes toward T'Rel. "What do you mean the message stopped transmitting? You said it would loop until acknowledged," his tone, though quiet, held a knife's edge.

"Sir, once we cleared the interference, it seems the source ceased transmission," T'Rel replied, keeping her poise under the circumstances. "Reason unknown."

He thrust himself from his seat, not bothering to hide his agitation. "My patience is reaching its limits, XO. We're under strict orders to maintain radio silence and we're diverting from the mission to chase down message fragments and a trumped-up commodore." His hands clasped at the small of his back as he paced from the center of the bridge to where T'Rel stood on the perimeter. "You understand there can be no further delays, don't you?"

T'Rel's eyes shifted over toward the communications position, where Lieutenant Ha-vatoreii's maroon-covered back showed his attentiveness toward his duty. Her gaze reached out almost as a silent plea for any information.

As though by her will, the lieutenant turned to announce, "Captain, we have the flash traffic in whole, now. It appears the message was on a delayed cycle from the source."

Keller turned his scowl away from T'Rel and focused it on the lieutenant. "On screen!"

"Aye, sir," replied Ha-vatoreii immediately. Then, he hesitated. "Sir, incoming challenge and hail from the starship *Gol*."

The captain furrowed his brow. "*Gol*?" He turned back to T'Rel, "Get me everything you got on that ship and her captain." He then ordered, "Let's hear the commodore's message."

The viewscreen blinked away from the warp-distorted stars to show the visage of Commodore Trujillo, clearly and without the interference from before. She stared into the visual pickup and intoned, "*This message is a Priority-One Communique, and is being broadcast on an encrypted and secured Starfleet frequency. This is Commodore Nandi Trujillo, commanding USS Reykjavík and Rapid Response Detachment Delta.*

"Any Starfleet personnel receiving this message who are associated with USS Repulse, NCC-2544, you are directed and required to return immediately to Federation space and submit yourself for inspection and investigation into the events surrounding your actions within the recognized territory of the Gorn Hegemony.

"There has been no declaration of hostilities between our two governments, and your actions have pushed the Federation and the Gorn Hegemony to the brink of war without explanation or known provocation.

"Failure to comply with these orders will constitute willful insubordination, in addition to potential charges of Conduct Unbecoming for initiating hostilities with a foreign power without authorization.

"Captain Keller, you and your crew are hereby officially recalled. The clock is ticking."

One the message finished, the atmosphere of the bridge changed considerably. T'Rel paused her lookup of *Gol*'s information in the ship's computer to give the message her full attention, and now with the weight of Trujillo's words hanging in the air, she checked Keller's reaction before doing anything further.

Keller wore a red-faced scowl on his features. "Conduct Unbecoming?!" How dare she!"

Lieutenant Ha-vatoreii called out, "Captain, *Gol* is awaiting our response."

T'Rel returned to her display device and called up the information. "*Gol* is an *Akyazi*-class perimeter action ship, commanded by Commander Glal." She transferred her findings to the main viewscreen, overlaying the frozen face of Commodore Trujillo.

The captain returned to his seat, saying nothing in response to either officer. His own gaze drifted to the deck as he moved slowly into a sitting position.

Ha-vatoreii tried once more. "Captain?"

"Give me a damned moment, Lieutenant!" Keller snapped at the communications officer. "XO?"

"Sir?" replied T'Rel, after raising a reassuring hand toward Ha-vatoreii.

"Given that the Commodore has sent these orders... in your interpretation, does the radio silence order still apply?" he asked her, his tone much softer than before.

She called up the ship's logs to locate the precise verbiage of their mission orders. Her long fingers tapped the inputs quickly, though her quarry eluded her after a full minute of searching. "Captain," she said with uncertainty, "I'm unable to locate our orders in the ship's computer."

* * *

Glal strode out of the turbolift onto *Gol's* bridge with Leo hot on his heels, sliding into the chair as Jarrod relinquished it and headed to his own post.

"No response as yet to our challenge hails, sir," Jarrod advised.

Glal grunted sourly and shot a glance at Leo. "He seems to be insisting on observing comms silence. I know *Reykjavik's* still broadcasting the recall order, so he should have heard it by now. I'm open to ideas on how we play this, Commander."

Leo glanced at the tactical display from just over the shoulder of the person seated there. "Well... she's just broken free of the interference, so they're probably listening to the commodore's orders clearly for the first time." He turned back toward Glal and smirked. "Wish I could be a fly on that bulkhead, listening in, right?"

Glal's eyes bulged as he struggled to maintain his composure. He cleared his throat loudly, eyes watering. "No comment."

Leo held his smirk. With a pat on the shoulder of the lieutenant junior grade seated at tactical, he asked, "No change in *Repulse's* course or speed, so far?"

The lieutenant replied, "No, sir. Still at warp eleven, headed for our border. They'll reach our position in twenty minutes if they hold their speed."

"Alright, thanks," Leo noted with a succinct nod. "This ship is pretty stealthy, right? Likely, they don't even know we're right here, watching them." He addressed Glal and Jarrod. "Recommend we reposition ourselves to make certain Keller can see us. And by now, you're going to want to order him to divert. He's had enough time to ponder and respond to the initial hail." He paused, "Hey, we should also maybe let the commodore know that we found them, Skip."

Glal gestured to the text interface on his armrest display. "I did that three minutes ago. The commodore doesn't like to be kept waiting." He smirked within his thatchy beard at Leo. "We're stealthy, but *Repulse's* sensors are top of the line and a helluva lot more powerful than ours. If we can see her, you can be sure she's seen us for a while now."

"Then definitely order her to divert and respond," Leo affirmed, his lips pulling back into a grimace. "If he deigns to respond, stand ready to take some verbal damage. He's going to pull rank on you every chance he gets."

Glal growled from deep within his throat. "And we'll see how far that gets him." He gestured towards Jarrod's station on the bridge's upper level. "Repeat the challenge hail."

Jarrold turned to do just that, only to raise an eyebrow as he touched a hand to his comms earpiece. "We have a response coming in from *Repulse*, sir. Visual comms."

Glal sat back in his chair, his tusks quivering with anticipation. "By all means, XO. Let's not keep the captain waiting." He looked over at Leo, the Tellarite's eyes sparkling with mischief. "Tuck in here right next to my chair. Don't be bashful."

* * *

"What do you mean, you can't find the orders?" Keller asked. His entire body visibly tensed; his complexion threatening to turn a deeper shade of red, reaching more of a purple. "Check the communications logs, now!"

T'Rel wasted no time. "Lieutenant," she called to Ha-vatoreii, "some assistance, please." Crossing over to the communications station, both officers worked in tandem to locate the transmitted orders, or even record of receipt.

Ha-vatoreii shook his head. "Apologies, sirs, but I cannot find any record of any transmission at the given stardate. In fact," he elaborated with a short pause, "the only traffic from headquarters received close to that time was the scheduled system update of our timekeeping program. As we've been operating under radio silence since, until Commodore Trujillo's message today, we've received nothing."

Ashen while hearing the explanation, Keller stalked toward communications and yanked the lieutenant out of the seat in order to directly access the controls and inputs. The captain stabbed commands into the system and with his own eyes witnessed the same as both his executive officer and communications specialist reported.

Keller lifted his haunted eyes toward T'Rel. "Where did it go?"

The Vulcan shook her head slowly, once. "Unknown, sir. It's as if the message was never transmitted to or received by this ship." She let out a short sigh. "Therefore, to your earlier question, given that we have no proof of being ordered under radio silence, protocol demands we respond to *Gol's* hail."

The captain's throat worked angrily as he dry-swallowed air. He rose from the communication panel and passed by Ha-vatoreii without so much as an apology for his assault of the lieutenant. When he reached the center seat, he touched the arm, but did not reseal himself. "Mr. Ha-vatoreii, as the XO says, open a channel to *Gol*."

Aboard *Gol*, Jarrod nodded to Glal. "Channel open, sir."

Glal sat resolutely in his chair and dipped his head in acknowledgement of Keller. "Captain Keller, this is Commander Glal. I've been ordered to locate *Repulse* and escort you back to Commodore Trujillo for further inquiry into the goings-on out here on the border with the Gorn."

"*Goings-on?*" Keller shot back angrily. "You are addressing a superior officer, *Commander*-" Before his tirade could properly find speed to take off, his eyes drifted over to Leo Verde. "Son of a bitch! *Verde!*"

"Present," Leo replied tonelessly, offering nothing more than a casual wave of his left hand.

"I don't know what this... *officer*... has been telling you, Commander, but he is nothing more than a miserable disgrace to the uniform," Keller growled loudly, his right hand gripping the arm of the captain's chair next to him. "What did you do, Verde, beg your daddy to reinstate you to the space service?"

Taking in a deep breath, Leo shook his head. "No, sir. I'm still in the JAG Corps," he said calmly, touching his badge of office displayed proudly on his chest under the line officer's badge. "I feel that we should table our reunion until after you respond to Captain Glal, here. With all due respect and everything."

"*Due respect*," my ass," Keller grumbled. "Yes, fine. *Commander* Glal, seeing as how I'm the senior officer here, I will take your order under advisement. We have higher orders."

As soon as Keller said that, T'Rel hesitated visibly on the screen, and the other officers suddenly found their stations very interesting as none of them looked in Glal's direction any longer.

"Do you, Captain?" Glal asked in a seemingly reasonable tone. "Starfleet Command disagrees. Commodore Trujillo was dispatched out here with a task force to locate you and find out what spurred a seemingly unauthorized attack against a Gorn installation. As my orders come from the commodore, a member of the admiralty, duly authorized by way of Fleet Operations, for the moment I exist outside your chain of command." He sat forward in his chair, his thick-fingered hands clasped in front of him. "I'm merely the messenger, sir."

Before Keller could respond, Leo asked, "Commander T'Rel? Can you confirm that *Repulse* has higher orders on record, something we can read for ourselves to confirm the captain's claim?"

Keller snarled, "How dare you impugn my word, Verde? You're the insubordinate bastard, here, not me."

T'Rel allowed Keller to say his piece before responding. "Commander, I'm unable to respond to your inquiry."

"Unable?" wondered Leo. "Or unwilling?"

Again, she hesitated before responding to Leo's question. Finally, she admitted with a nod. "I invoke the Seventh Guarantee, sir."

Keller turned his head slowly toward T'Rel. "What have you done?" As she opened her mouth to respond, he cut her off with a curt gesture; a knifed hand slicing through the air. "Go below, you're relieved!" He then told Glal, "I need to handle my staff, Commander. I'll contact you within the hour." The transmission closed without anything further.

Glal emitted something between a sigh and an analytical hmmm, a deep, gravelly sound. "That went about as well as I expected." He raised an eyebrow at Leo. "You?"

"You threw him off his game by having me stand next to you," Leo admitted. "But then, I assume that was your plan," he finished with a smirking grin.

The Tellarite leaned back into his chair once again. "Why, Commander, I have no idea what you're talking about."

Leo chuckled softly. "Sure." He noted, more seriously, "I had a hunch that T'Rel wouldn't give him up, but her response was admirable under the circumstances. I feel bad for putting her on the spot like that, though."

"I feel for his unfortunate officers and crew as well," Glal confessed. "Nevertheless, we have to investigate this thoroughly."

Leo glanced back at Jarrod, to make sure he said his next sentence loud enough for both officers to hear, "You should prepare to have to relieve Keller of command. And uh... if there's going to be any sort of boarding action, then I should go with them."

"I'll give him his one hour before pushing any harder," Glal said. "Then it'll be up to him how far or how badly this goes."

Jarrod cast a glance at Leo from his station. "And why would you want to be part of any boarding action?"

Leo smiled sadly. "This has essentially turned into a JAGMAN investigation, now. But, uh... I'm still boarding-qualified from my service on the border. Ultimately, and I can't believe I'm going to say this out loud, I think I'm going to volunteer to defend that asshole. So, I need to make sure the son of a bitch's rights are being secured."

Glal nodded. "Nobody's talking about denying an officer their rights, Leo. But if he puts up a fight in the face of lawful orders, he'll get what he's served."

"Of course," Leo said confidently. "And I wouldn't imply otherwise... it's simply my duty to carry out." He sighed. "So... we'll wait the hour, then I guess we'll arrest him. My gut's saying he has no legal leg to stand on, and knows he's in deep. Played enough poker in my life to know what a bad bluff looks like."

* * *

After closing the channel and sending T'Rel belowdecks, Keller ordered Lieutenant Commander Vara to take the conn and slow the ship to warp four before they crossed over into Federation space. He followed in T'Rel's path from the bridge to the lift, until he reached the hatch leading to her quarters and announced himself.

T'Rel opened the hatch, still wearing her uniform. "Captain."

"Commander," Keller responded softly. "Might I have a word?"

She blinked at his change in tone when addressing her. In the years of service together, Keller never once hesitated to treat her with contempt. "Of course, sir," she said, stepping aside to admit his entry.

Once the hatch closed itself behind him, T'Rel guided him to an empty seat as she took the other within the spacious stateroom afforded to the senior officers aboard *Repulse*. "How can I be of service, Captain?"

Keller sighed, letting his chest sink downward and almost inward. "I don't think you realized the damage you've done, XO. You and I witnessed those orders together. They're in the computer, we need more time to find them. Why did you choose not to give us that time?"

T'Rel's expression softened, albeit only slightly. "Sir, time was of the essence. Commodore Trujillo's orders were clear, and however it may have happened, we had no evidence of our orders to prove that we were operating under higher authority."

"But we would, eventually-"

"No, sir," she interrupted him uncharacteristically. T'Rel rose from her seat and approached an elaborate tapestry upon the bulkhead within the front room. "As you pointed out to Commander Glal, an officer of higher rank has authority to recall or rescind us, if necessary. We had no orders. In other words, sir, we look like rogue officers off on a mission to start a war between the Federation and the Gorn."

Keller regained his confidence. "The Gorn started this!" he thundered. "The mission was in response to attacks on the border."

"Was it, though?" T'Rel asked. "If the orders didn't exist, how can we be sure that the briefing associated with it held any truth?"

The captain stopped his response under her questions. Shaking his head, he closed his eyes. "No. I refuse to believe that we were fooled into marching across the border without cause. There had to be justification for this action. The admiral said-"

"And where is the admiral, now, sir?" T'Rel wondered softly. "Before you arrived," she said, pulling a display device from her personal desk, "I tried to locate that name in the listing of flag officers. I found no such mention in any department or any division within Starfleet."

Keller snatched the PADD from her hands and peered at it. He tapped and scrolled through the text. With each passing minute and second, his desperate eyes scanned each screen until his rage blinded him from reading a single letter.

"I came to my conclusion on the bridge when Commander Verde asked me to confirm your report," T'Rel said, after a few moments of silence. "We lack the resources to search. The JAG Corps can help us do that. They will conduct a full forensic investigation into our systems and records."

He tossed her PADD across the distance and let it crack against the bulkhead. "Turn myself in? For carrying out orders?" He spat, "Never. I will not suffer the humiliation of being arrested and relieved of my command. Certainly not by a man like Leo Verde. He's probably laughing his ass off, right now."

She pressed her lips together as Keller spoke. When he finished, T'Rel noted, "I have no other recourse at this time, sir. And, I plan on standing next to you when they arrest you. I do not plan on avoiding prosecution."

Keller scoffed. "You're damned right, you won't. If I'm going down for this, you can bet you will, too." When she did not respond to him, he

took a step forward and raised his voice, "You thought I was going to be grateful for your sacrifice, Commander?"

T'Rel shook her head. "No, sir. That was not my expectation."

"Then what do you think you get out of telling me this?"

She stepped forward and closed the distance to meet his challenge head-on. "A Starfleet officer's first duty is to the truth."

* * *

Chapter 8

* * *

The starship *Gol* signaled again one hour to the second after Captain Keller had terminated their previous conversation.

“Hailing a second time, Captain,” Ops advised Glal. “Again, no response.”

“Red alert,” Glal ordered. “All hands to battle-stations.”

“Mister Sabharwal, raise shields and acquire *Repulse* on our targeting sensors.”

Glal opened a channel in the clear to the other starship. “*Repulse*, this is *Gol*. I’d rather not press the issue, but I’m under orders. I have no desire to fire upon and thereby cripple another Starfleet vessel, but you’re not giving me any choice. You have exactly thirty seconds to respond.”

He threw a glance in Jarrod’s direction. “XO, be prepared to utilize *Repulse*’s command prefix codes to disable her defensive systems if she powers up shields and weapons.”

As his senior officers confirmed his orders, Glal fixed his eyes on the descending numerals on his thirty-second counter.

Glal advised his Tactical officer, “Sabharwal, if this turns into a fight, *Repulse* outguns us three-to-one. We’ll want to cripple her propulsion first, then her weapons emitters.”

The petty officer at Ops announced, “We appear to have got their attention, sir. They’re signaling.”

* * *

“*Gol* is hailing again, sir,” reported Ha-vatoreii to Vara, seated in the captain's chair. "Shall I respond?"

Vara held up her hand as she called out once more, "Captain Keller, this is the bridge, please respond." He had not responded to her first call, given that she had the conn. The Bolian wiped a stray bit of perspiration from her blue cheek.

Lieutenant Kesshek added, "Commander, *Gol* is tracking us with their targeting sensors. They will have weapons lock shortly."

Ha-vatoreii's voice rose sharply, "They're giving us thirty seconds to respond or they will open fire!" He played Glal's message over the bridge speakers.

Vara sighed. "Open a channel."

"You're on, sir."

"*Gol*, this is Lieutenant Commander Vara, chief operations officer. I have the deck, and cannot reach the captain. The XO has been relieved. I am ordering this vessel to divert to your position. As I have no other option but to surrender, I do so willingly. I will not fire on another Starfleet vessel. Please acknowledge." She did her best to keep any timbre of pleading from her voice.

Glal appeared on their forward viewscreen, his expression tight with anger and regret. “Understood, Commander. For what little it’s worth I’m sorry for having to place you in this position. By authority of Commodore Trujillo, you are hereby commanded to take control of *Repulse* until relieved by myself or one of my officers. You are not to accept any further orders from Captain Keller or Commander T’Rel, is that clear?”

She nodded, relief evident on her face. "Aye, sir," she replied. "Might I ask if those of us among the senior staff should consider ourselves also under arrest?"

“Negative, Commander. Right now it’s limited to your CO and XO, though that could change as our investigation unfolds. However, your cooperation in this situation would be duly noted in any event.”

Vara sighed. "Thank you, sir. If the captain and exec are relieved, then I will need someone to beam aboard to secure the command codes per protocol."

“That’ll be me in about five minutes,” Glal fairly growled. “Inform your crew that I will be coming aboard with a security team. Nobody from your crew complement is to be armed when we arrive. To be clear, I will stun the ever-living shit out of any armed personnel we encounter.”

With widened eyes, Vara nodded mutely twice. "I will pass the word, sir."

From *Repulse*'s helm, Lieutenant (jg) Thalix reported, "Now crossing into Federation space. Closing in on *Gol*'s position, forty seconds to all stop."

Glal took no pleasure from uttering the words, “*Repulse*, heave to and prepare to be boarded.”

As the transmission closed, Vara keyed open the all-hands circuit and intoned, "All hands, this is Commander Vara. On orders from Commodore Trujillo, Captain Keller is relieved of command. We are coming alongside *Gol* to receive her captain. Crew is ordered to man the sides and prepare for piping aboard; no weapons, ceremonial or otherwise. That is all."

* * *

As Vara's call sounded over the speakers within his stateroom, Theodore Keller grimaced as T'Rel's prediction came to pass. While checking the ship's position, the computer disconnected his screen just before *Repulse* closed the distance with *Gol*. The screen would not render itself as before, simply stating that his access was denied.

A loud and shrill boatswain's whistle sounded over the speakers, along with a young voice intoning ceremoniously, "Attention all hands; *Gol*, arriving."

Keller began putting his personal effects into an empty duffel bag. The same bag he used when arriving aboard to assume command just over three years prior. Angry at the circumstances he now found himself within, his forcefulness with some of the more fragile items within his collection resulted in damage.

That only served to anger him more.

With his duffel slung over his shoulder, Keller moved to access the hatch and leave. When it snapped open, he was surprised to see three members of ship's security waiting for him; led by one of the ship's chief warrant officers, a Tellarite named Dursh.

Dursh raised his hand. "Sorry, sir. You need to return inside."

Keller frowned. "Stand aside, Mister." He noted none of the three carried any weapons. When none of them moved to clear his path, he pressed, "I said, stand aside. That's an order."

The Tellarite added his frown to Keller's. "My apologies, Captain. We're under orders from the new CO to arrest you to quarters. You will need to go back inside."

"Or else, what?" Keller puffed up his chest. His arms tensed, and his fingers tightened around his bag.

"Captain..." Dursh lowered his gaze downward with a heavy sigh. "Do us both a favor and go back inside. The captain of the *Gol* will see you shortly."

"I outrank the captain of the *Gol*, Mister," Keller hotly rejoined. "He doesn't have the authority to tell me where to piss!"

Dursh shook his head. "You leave me no choice." He glanced at the two master-at-arms, one Human male, the other an Andorian female. "Show the captain back inside, please."

Without a single word, both petty officers grabbed Keller at his upper arms and shoved him back inside. As the hatch slide closed, Keller screamed in frustration over the treatment from his own (former) crew.

* * *

Glal and his security team, joined by Leo Verde, materialized in one of *Repulse*'s transporter rooms. He was surprised to hear the trilling of the boatswain's pipe just as he discerned the two ranks of officers and personnel lining either bulkhead as an impromptu honor guard.

Caught flat-hooved and despite leading an armed boarding team onto the vessel, Glal was too long in the service to break with tradition, as ridiculous as present circumstances rendered them. "Permission to come aboard?" he asked with no small amount of irony.

Vara stepped forward, "Permission granted, sir." She then nodded to the ensign at the console.

"Attention all hands; *Gol*, arriving!" said the ensign, calling out over the ship's intercom.

"Welcome aboard, sir," Vara continued, extending her hand. "I surrender the command of *Repulse* to your authority."

Glal shook her hand firmly. "Thank you, Commander." He nodded in the direction of a nearby computer access terminal. "If you please."

The pair took a moment to register the transfer of command code authorities over to Glal, fully terminating those privileges previously entrusted to Captain Keller and Commander T'Rel.

Once that was done, the wizened Tellarite turned again to address her. "Thank you for the welcome, Commander Vara. Please resume command on the bridge while Commander Verde and I have a sit down with Captain Keller." He gestured to three members of his security detail. "They'll be taking positions on the bridge to make certain nobody with conflicted loyalties tries to interfere with the provisional chain-of-command."

She offered a wan smile. "Aye, sir. I've taken the liberty of confining Captain Keller and Commander T'Rel to quarters. Mister Dursh is seeing to it, presently." Vara asked, "By your leave?"

"Good work and carry on, Commander." Glal looked to Leo and bobbed his head in the direction of the hatch. "Let's do this," he muttered

distastefully.

Vara ordered, "Crew dismissed!" Then, preceded Glal to return to the bridge.

Leo wordlessly followed Glal through the hatch, until they were on the other side. "What a production," he noted. "My dad would be proud, though."

"She's scared shitless and I don't blame her," Glal grouched as they marched side-by-side up the corridor. "Computer, location of Captain Keller's quarters..."

* * *

Glal paused on the threshold of Keller's cabin door, nodding to the two unarmed security officers standing watch outside. He unholstered his phaser and handed it grip-first to the older of the two security specialists. "Don't disappoint me, son." He then turned to Leo. "Can I have a moment with him, or would you rather go in first and establish the legal lay of the land?"

Leo considered his options. "I don't think anyone would mind if you go in there, captain-to-captain. I'll say I was elsewhere until you called for me. Just remember two things: If you arrest him, I need to be there to offer counsel. And second, you might be called to testify what you said and heard, later. "

"With pleasure," Glal confirmed.

He nodded to the door and the security man he'd just armed toggled the hatch to open.

Glal stepped through into the cabin beyond.

* * *

"Captain Keller, I'm Commander Glal of the *Gol*. Under orders from higher authority I've taken temporary command of *Repulse* until relieved by another duly designated officer, or until such time as command is returned to you."

Keller lounged on the couch within the middle section of the captain's stateroom. If he acknowledged Glal's presence, he made no movement or sound to do so. In his hand he held an old-fashioned glass with a green liquid within. While Glal spoke, he lifted the contents to his lips and let it slide down his throat.

Unfazed by Keller's silence, Glal continued, "I was prepared to afford you the dignity of leaving *Repulse* under your command until we'd joined up with the commodore's squadron, but you chose to ignore me. You seem to be dead set on making a bad situation even worse. Do you mind if I ask why?"

The question hung in the air as Keller decided to respond with another drink from the glass, which resulted in an empty glass. He reached for the bottle on the table nearby and poured more for himself, but did not offer anything to Glal. Without so much as a raised glass, Keller drank more as though he remained alone.

"So be it," Glal said. "The right to remain silent is one of your guarantees." He walked over and triggered the hatch to open, ushering Leo inside.

"I am not going to arrest you for the attack on the Gorn outpost, seeing as that matter is still very much under investigation. I am, however, placing you under arrest for failure to follow a lawful order of a superior officer, that being Commodore Nandi Trujillo. Further charges may be forthcoming."

Glal gestured towards the mute Keller as he looked at Leo. "He's all yours, Counselor."

As soon as Leo came into view, Keller launched from his couch, spilling his drink as it sloshed around within the glass. "Get him the fuck out of here," he ordered, seething with fury.

Leo raised a hand. "He can't arrest you without offering counsel, Captain. You have rights."

"I don't give a damn about rights!" Keller boomed at Leo. "This is your revenge for beaching you, isn't it? Well, I got news for you, *Commander Verde*; you stepped over the line on the bridge of my ship. You were one hair away from mutiny, as far as I'm concerned. You should have been court-martialed out of the service and sent to a penal colony!"

Leo sighed. "Sir-"

Keller finally addressed Glal. "Did he ever tell you? He was hot shit in the Border Service. On track for command of his own someday. Make his father proud... a *real* officer, by the way, Admiral Rey Verde. Served with Hikaru Sulu and Pavel Chekov during the Gorn War. And this snot-nosed fortunate son with privilege tries to tell me I'm treating his friends poorly. Stuck up know-nothing legacy ingrate!"

Glal interposed himself between the men, facing down Keller. "It's clear there's bad blood here, Captain. Be advised, Commander Verde was selected for this assignment, he did not volunteer. He is also the person best suited to defend you, so you just might want to consider putting that ego in check long enough to weigh the best interests of your career."

"Oh, so now you care about *my* career?" Keller snorted and laughed at the idea. In a slurring tone, he accused, "You both are just... so fucking full of yourselves, aren't you?"

"Captain!" Leo called. "That's enough!" He approached Keller and removed the glass from the older man's hand. A mere whiff of the captain's general odor made Leo blanch. "He's drunk as hell, Skip."

“Then I’ll leave him to you, Commander. I’ve had my fill.”

Glal headed for the doors, convinced that remaining in the vicinity of the toxic Keller any longer would see himself brought up on charges of assault.

* * *

Chapter 9

* * *

Lieutenant Titus Helvia stood near one edge of *Reykjavík's* arboretum, a compartment of the ship few crew ever visited. Being as the ship was not designed for deep-space exploration and was granted frequent shore leave privileges, there was no need for a larger, more diverse arboretum facility aboard. As such, it was only the die-hard botanical enthusiasts who frequented the area, Helvia among them.

He gently trimmed the bonsai trees with practiced delicacy, each cut a deliberate movement, intentional violence inflicted upon a living thing in the interests of beauty, of form. He was accustomed to such gestures, given his eclectic upbringing.

Once a wealthy, preening dilettante, his family's misfortune had seen them cast into the gutter and him into the arena, a puppet for the entertainment of others. His Starfleet crewmates knew him only as an ascetic, a solitary figure who neither drank nor socialized with his fellow officers. As far as his shipmates knew, Helvia's life consisted almost exclusively of work, training, prayer and meditation.

Helvia was a great bear of a man, nearly two meters in height. He possessed thickly muscled arms, a massive torso, and well-defined legs of surprising speed and power. The man was the living embodiment of his people's twisted ethos, the product of generations of eugenics sorting for traits of strength, intelligence, stamina and guile. His blond hair was cut stubble-short, accentuating his deeply set blue-gray eyes under a heavy brow. He had an aquiline nose and well-defined jawline that only served to enhance his seemingly cold, aristocratic mien.

Helvia had been born and raised to be a leader, a man equally at home whether standing in on the floor of the Senate or in mud up to his waist leading men in battle against the barbarian hordes of the hinterlands.

Here in his off-duty hours, he wore a simple blue tunic of rough material and a Roman kilt of exquisitely tailored leather. On his feet in lieu of uniform boots were caligae, heavy-soled hobnailed military sandal-boots favored by Roman legionaries of centuries past. Into the neckline of his tunic had been stitched five golden links of chain, the symbol of his faith, the outlawed church of the Children of the Son.

In his mind's eye he saw the flash of swords clashing as he executed each cut of the small tree. The warmth of the UV ceiling lamps reminded him of the blistering sun overhead the coliseum, heating the burning sand that scorched his feet as he scrabbled for purchase, seeking firm footing against his circling foes.

Helvia had been born on a planet which appeared as 892-IV on Federation star-charts but was known as Magna Roma to its inhabitants. It was a world nearly identical to Earth, populated by people of human stock who had likely been seeded there millennia earlier by parties unknown. As for what had produced a planet so geologically, gravitationally, and environmentally similar to Earth, down to the shape of its oceans and land masses, Federation science had no rational explanation.

"Good evening, Lieutenant."

Trujillo's unexpected arrival startled Helvia, who stiffened before turning abruptly to come to attention. "Commodore, sir."

Trujillo, clad in her uniform vest over her white turtleneck undershirt, smiled patiently. "At ease, Lieutenant. I wanted to pick your brain regarding the Gorn, and how they might react to our diplomatic overtures."

Helvia set aside the pruning shears. "You sought me out here, sir?"

"I did," she confirmed. Trujillo glanced around for a moment before her eyes settled back on Helvia. "You've been aboard almost six months, and I hardly know anything about you, Mister Helvia. You keep to yourself, as is your right, but aside from forcing my way into your quarters, this seemed like a reasonably good alternative for discovering more about you."

"I *am* my duty, sir," Helvia replied. "I serve Starfleet as recompense for the Federation taking my family and I in when we had nowhere else to go. This..." he gestured to the surrounding arboretum, "...is as close as I come to recreation. I have found that I can meditate here as well as in my quarters, but here I can simultaneously contribute to the beauty and order of the surroundings."

"Order is important to you," she said. It was a statement rather than a question.

"It is. Order is predictable. Comfortable, even."

She nodded. "Having read your service jacket, I think I can understand the attractiveness of an orderly existence after the life you led prior to Starfleet." She looked up at him as he towered over her like roughly hewn statuary. "And I'm guessing your biographical profile likely doesn't cover even half of what you endured prior to leaving Magna Roma."

Helvia nodded fractionally. "And you would be correct, sir."

Trujillo gestured to the pathway of crushed rock that meandered through the arboretum. "Walk with me, Lieutenant."

Helvia dutifully followed, a half-step behind his commanding officer.

"The Gorn," Trujillo said. "We've apparently attacked them without provocation. So far, they've demonstrated admirable restraint, but that may not last, especially if we discover *Repulse* has struck other Gorn targets we aren't yet aware of. Commander Davula and Lieutenant

Garrett have devised a plan which might enable either we or the Gorn to collapse the white hole phenomenon. That could repair the environmental damage we caused. However, I don't know how receptive the Gorn will be to our overtures."

Helvia pushed past a varietal of grape vine as the two of them passed under a trellis. He said, "The Gorn are unpredictable, and their behavior is dependent on a host of factors. Those are, in no particular order, which Gorn faction we're dealing with, how territorial their military command is at any given moment, and whether the Gorn are at the mercy of any outside influences."

"Outside influences?"

The pair paused to duck under a low hanging branch from a type of Tellarite tree with bright pink leaves and lavender seed pods, with Helvia having to stoop much farther to avoid the obstruction.

"It has been known for almost seventy years that Gorn behavior can be affected by stellar phenomena and variations in stellar light emissions, though the precise mechanisms are not yet fully understood."

"So, what you're telling me is that it's nearly impossible to judge what kind of reception we'll get from the Gorn?"

"An accurate summation, Commodore. I *can* tell you that they will be dangerous in any event, and even if we've established some kind of rapport with them, one or more of their kind may not hesitate to attack if they sense an advantage or perceive a weakness."

Trujillo shook her head, frowning with frustration. "How can a species so hyper-predatory even cooperate with each other sufficiently to achieve space-flight, let alone an interstellar empire?"

Helvia offered a smile. "God's universe is endlessly complex, sir. Within it lay limitless variety."

Trujillo stopped in her tracks, glancing back at the large man. She was unaccustomed to genuine spiritual references from her subordinates, and to her knowledge Helvia had never made one while on duty. "Did the Children of the Son crib that from the Vulcans?" she teased.

He laughed, and Trujillo thought it was a delightful sound, full of genuine warmth. "Not to my knowledge, sir. However, most sentient species come upon these truths in their own time. Call it IDIC or call it the Word of the Son, truth is truth."

She cocked her head, hard-pressed to argue the point. Her combadge chirped, "*Davula to Commodore Trujillo.*"

Trujillo tapped the device, "Go ahead, Commander."

"*Commander Glal has signaled to advise us that they've made contact with Repulse, sir. Captain Keller and his XO have been placed under arrest for failure to follow orders of a superior, and Commander Verde has appointed himself their provisional legal counsel. Gol and Repulse are on their way to us, ETA is a little over ten hours.*"

"Understood. Tell Glal nice work, and we'll see him shortly."

"Aye, sir."

Trujillo fixed her gaze on Helvia. "Hopefully we'll have answers to some of our more pressing questions before too long."

"Yes, sir," he agreed. "However, I would advise keeping *Repulse* out of Gorn sensor range. If they're able to identify her, it could encourage reprisals that would endanger our present détente."

With a sober nod of assent, Trujillo muttered, "Indeed."

* * *

Leo followed the curve of the narrow corridor on deck six, approaching T'Rel's stateroom. He kept his eyes upon the numbered sections, as he intended not to miss it. Upon witnessing the security trio guarding her door, he realized the futility of such a fear.

A Tellarite chief warrant officer wearing a short tan beard raised his hooved hand toward him. "Sorry, Commander, but are you authorized to be in this area?"

Offering a friendly smile, Leo pulled his credentials from a pocket and handed it over. "I presume you're Sheriff Dursh?" He addressed the chief warrant officer using his colloquial title, as those with years of experience in security often earned.

"I am, sir." Dursh accepted the badge case, opened it, and studied his status and authorization. "My apologies," he replied, handing it back.

"Never apologize for doing your job," Leo told him as he replaced the case in his pocket. "Listen, I had one of your deputies formally arrest Captain Keller and read him his rights."

"Good," Dursh grunted. A smirk tugged at his right tusk. "I presume that the captain was displeased."

Leo closed his eyes, smiled, and hung his head. "To say the least. Before he tossed me out and exercised his rights, he took the opportunity to shout some obscene invectives in my general direction."

Dursh glanced back. He and Leo noticed that their conversation enjoyed no privacy, judging by the amused expressions on the faces of the

deputies. "What's your next step, sir?"

"Sadly, I have to arrest T'Rel as well." Leo lowered his voice and asked, "Could I impose upon you to step inside with me?"

"She won't give you any trouble, sir," Dursh assured him. "But, I suppose you need a witness per procedure." Off of Leo's confirming nod, his snout twitched. "Very well. I will accompany you."

"Thank you, Sheriff, I appreciate it."

"Before we go in, let me say, she doesn't deserve this," Dursh informed Leo sharply. "She's a good officer."

Leo sighed. "I know."

Dursh approached the hatch and touched the annunciation control on the panel. "Commander, it's Sheriff Dursh and Commander Verde from JAG."

T'Rel's contralto tones resonated over the small speaker. "Enter."

Leo followed Dursh inside and waited for the hatch to close shut behind him before speaking. "Commander, I'm Leo Verde, deputy sector judge advocate."

She rose from her seated position and nodded. "We meet again, Leo."

Her claim of familiarity briefly stunned him into silence. "My apologies, Commander. I don't recall that we've met before."

"It was brief, but we were introduced by a mutual friend; Lieutenant Commander R'raia. At her Wetting Down on Starbase Ten," T'Rel supplied the details. She added, "It is how I know that she and many others refer to you as 'Rally.'"

Leo cheeks colored as his more intimate nickname surfaced. The exposure left him stammering before he recovered. "O-Oh. Right. Forgive me, then, as my only recollections of that evening may have been compromised by the volume of alcohol consumed."

"Indeed." She held out her hands with her wrists together. "I presume that you are here to take me into custody. I willingly surrender to your authority."

Her capitulation discomfited Leo. With chagrin, he turned to Dursh. "Sheriff, sorry to ask you, but would you mind reading the commander her rights?"

Dursh frowned at Leo. "Fine." He reached for a set of wrist binders from his belt.

"No binders," Leo added quickly. He leveled his gaze upon T'Rel, "I have your word you'll remain in quarters until further notice?"

She lowered her hands and inclined her head a single time. "I agree to remain confined to quarters."

"Then, by order of the convening authority, Commodore Nandi Trujillo, you are under arrest for violation of the Uniform Code, specifically Article Ninety-Two, Failure to Obey Order or Regulation, Ninety-Nine, Misbehavior Before the Enemy."

T'Rel noted tonelessly, "I understand the charges."

Dursh began speaking, "Commander, you have the right to remain silent..." He continued, informing her of her right to counsel, to be informed of all charges, and a fair trial. "Do you understand these rights as I have informed you, sir?"

"I do," she said, in a tone slightly softer than before as she spoke to Dursh.

Leo asked, "I have questions for you, Commander. However, if you wish to invoke your rights to counsel or to remain silent, I can save those for when we return to base."

"Has Captain Keller been arrested?"

"He has."

"Then may I ask how he chose to act?"

"Uh..." Leo stammered as he glanced at Dursh, who shot him an angry glare in return. "He chose to remain silent."

T'Rel placed her hands behind her back and nodded twice. "I understand. Then, with all due respect, Leo... I shall do the same. I invoke my right to remain silent."

Dursh grunted his approval.

"I understand," Leo replied. "I have other aspects of the investigation to complete in the meantime, but if you wish to speak to me, please let the guards outside know and they'll reach me."

Wordlessly, T'Rel acknowledged his offer with a small bow of her head before turning her back on the pair.

Dursh led Leo back out to the corridor. "I did not enjoy that."

"Nor I, Sheriff, trust me. But... it had to be done. Commodore's orders," Leo reminded him.

Faced with the reality of a flag officer's command, Dursh sighed. "Very well. What's next?"

"I need to get to the bridge and chat with Captain Glal to advise him of our status," Leo said as he walked toward the turbolift. Dursh followed, so he continued, "Then, if you can help me out, put me with the best snipes you got on board, because I need to pour through the computer and find out what happened over here."

* * *

Reykjavík now held position proximate to a larger grouping of Gorn vessels. The reptilians' equivalent of a battleship was flanked by two Ravager-class cruisers and a full half-dozen hunters.

The visual feed opened to display an elder Gorn, a *Grolch*, a massive slab of reptilian ferocity. The older the Gorn became, the more hardened they were, literally. Their skin thickened into a scale-like armor, the outer layer of their eyes crystalized into well-nigh impenetrable protective lenses, and their tails atrophied and fell off. These seniors of their species were much slower than their younger soldier cadre, but they were cunning, seasoned, and ever so hard to kill.

Trujillo had taken to heart the old axiom, 'Beware the elderly in a species where beings usually die young.'

Gone was the stilted communication as apparently the *Grolch* were more adept at linguistics than their younger kin.

The hisses, clicks, and growls from the wizened Gorn leader were duly translated into Federation Standard.

"Federation vessel, we have discussed the situation and your offer of compensation. It is wholly insufficient. We are the aggrieved party, and yet every compensatory gesture we have offered has been refused. We realize you are soft, and weak, and that the consumption of the offending starship crew may seem excessive by your perverse mammalian morality, but if adequate compensation is not made, we will attack until we have achieved parity of loss."

Trujillo cleared her throat, "What would be your estimation of loss parity?" she asked.

"A number of defensive outposts and ships equal to the investment in time and resources necessary to construct the base that you have attacked and destroyed. We estimate that to be at least twelve of your ships and five of your outposts, or the destruction of your nearest starbase facility."

Davula muted the comm-channel and noted, "Sir, they really are being very pragmatic about all this. Almost any other species would have already attacked, given the level of provocation we've provided. We have to give them *something*, or they'll strike, and they'd likely demand loss parity for any more of their ships we destroy defending our territory from their reprisal raids."

"The tab is in danger of getting very steep, very fast," Trujillo muttered. She opened the channel. "What if Starfleet were to scuttle the appropriate number of facilities and starships within view of your sensors. Would that suffice?"

A number of officers turned from their posts to look at Trujillo with expressions of open surprise, one fully slack-jawed. She ignored them.

"Let us discuss this further among our cadres, Starfleet," the elder said.

"Before you go, in the interests of demonstrating our goodwill, I would like to send you our research on possible ways to seal the rift that has formed at your facility's former coordinates," Trujillo offered. "Otherwise this might become a major navigation hazard and a source of communications and sensor interference throughout the region."

"We will accept your data transmission," it answered.

Trujillo duly sent the files containing Davula and Garrett's ongoing theories regarding the white hole phenomenon.

"We will contact you again in thirteen of your hours to continue negotiations," the elder advised, severing the comm-link.

Trujillo sank back into her chair before turning to face Davula. "I have the strangest feeling that I'm about to become even less popular with Command than I already am."

Her Bolian XO raised an appraising eyebrow. "Do you want my response, sir, or a Glal answer?"

Trujillo smirked. "Oh, this I have to hear. A Glal answer, please."

"Yes, sir. I believe that in these circumstances Mister Glal would say, 'diplomacy, house-guests, and fish all begin to smell after three days.'"

The commodore nodded slowly. "They're welcome to send a full ambassador out here if they don't like the options I'm providing."

"And risk taking the reputational hit for potentially sparking a war with the Gorn, sir?" Davula said, stepping closer to Trujillo's chair and speaking in a low tone for her ears only. "Oh, no. I think they'd much rather you take the fall for all this."

"That, Mister Davula, is precisely what I'm afraid of."

* * *

“Good grief, Trujillo, you can’t be serious?” Vice-Admiral Nkosi stared at her across the intervening light years, as displayed upon the data-terminal in her ready room.

“I’m simply exploring options, Admiral, based on my ongoing negotiations with the Gorn.”

“But I can’t believe Command would— no, certainly not. I’ve never heard the like!”

“I would remind you, sir, as my own exec reminded me a short time ago, that the Gorn are being uncharacteristically reasonable about this. Were this nearly any other major military power in the quadrant, we’d likely already be at war.”

Nkosi’s ebony skin accentuated the tiny lines around his eyes that crinkled when he was in distress. He was clearly in distress now. “This was an accident at best, a rogue officer at worst...” Nkosi fretted, his mind still struggling to catch up with recent events that had plunged his quiet little command over the sectors along the Federation/Gorn border into chaos in a matter of days.

“None of which matters at the moment, sir,” Trujillo replied, nudging the man gently back on topic. “*Repulse* is on her way back here under escort, and early reports indicate that Keller and his XO both insist they had valid action orders to attack that research facility, orders that now cannot be located. We’re at fault here, regardless of why. We destroyed their station and likely killed hundreds if not thousands of Gorn in the process. If they agree to this proposal, we’d be sacrificing replaceable equipment, not people, in the interests of preserving the peace.”

“How do you know that if we start scuttling starships and defensive outposts along our mutual border that they won’t take the opportunity to attack while we’re wrecking our own fortifications?” Nkosi posited.

“Because we’d station a fleet out here just to be sure they didn’t, sir,” she answered calmly.

“I don’t know,” he said, shaking his head in frustration. “I’ll kick it up the chain-of-command, but I can’t imagine your plan will find much traction.”

Trujillo leaned closer to her terminal. “I have Captain Tarrant from Intelligence aboard, both consulting and collating intel from both sides of the border. These repeated Gorn pauses to consider our offers are serving two purposes, one of which is allowing them to bring more ships to the area. Long range sensors indicate that the Gorn have gathered somewhere in the vicinity of fifty or more vessels within two light years of our border, with more arriving by the hour.”

“Meaning, what, precisely, Commodore?”

“Meaning, sir, that if we don’t agree to some kind of terms offered by the Gorn, they will almost certainly launch an incursion into Federation space and attack targets of opportunity until they determine they’ve balanced the scales.”

“So, a war then,” Nkosi said with a deepening frown.

“Yes, sir,” Trujillo affirmed.

“And nothing else will satisfy them?”

“Nothing that doesn’t involve handing over Captain Keller and his crew to the Gorn to be used as gestational nutrition or hunting practice, Admiral.”

“It might just be easier to fight them,” Nkosi huffed, half in jest.

“I can do that as well, sir, if that’s Command’s order. With the force we’ve been covertly assembling, I can have thirty-two ships in position within twelve hours. The white hole phenomenon is still playing havoc with their communications and sensor net on their side of the border, giving us a decided advantage in the opening stages of any prolonged engagement.”

Nkosi eyed her warily. “Are you suggesting you want to fight them, Commodore?”

Trujillo returned his gaze evenly. “No, sir. I do not. I am informing you that I am prepared to explore multiple contingencies, should that become necessary. My first choice would be the one I contacted you about initially.”

He pursed his lips thoughtfully before offering. “I see your point, Trujillo. We have a scarcity of good options.”

“I would agree with your assessment, sir,” Trujillo answered, impressed at her ability to edit all sarcasm from her response.

“Maintain position, and keep me apprised of updates. I’ll take this up the chain and see if anyone has the stomach for it.”

"Yes, sir."

* * *

Chapter 10

* * *

With his wiry frame, Commander Callum O'Brien, *Repulse's* chief engineer, hunched over the large "pool table." He dragged a hand through his short, light brown hair, spiraled with its natural curls, while his grayish-blue eyes scanned the current output of the ship's powerful propulsion systems. Though the Excelsior-class cruiser remained at station-keeping with Gol, his hands moved across the touch panels to call up more information.

In his tenor voice with an Irish lilt, he called out, "Mazer. Take a damage control team up to deck three. I need you to run a magneton scan and report back."

Chief Damage Control Technician (DCC) Mazer nodded. "Aye, Commander." She turned and barked orders to a quartet of similarly rated personnel and within seconds of grabbing equipment, they vanished into the nearest turbolift.

"Something wrong with the containment chamber, Commander?" asked a baritone voice; the tone respectfully curious.

Without turning around, O'Brien replied, "I think the sensors that report status on the resonance might have been damaged. The output is showing a number out of expected norms." Keeping his eyes on the display, he asked a question of his own: "May I help you?"

"I'm Leo Verde." After a pause, he added, "It's a pleasure to meet you."

O'Brien turned around and grimaced. "You're the JAG lawyer. Forgive me, if I don't share in your pleasure." He shook hands with Verde fleetingly before turning back around. "And with all due respect, I'm a little busy right now."

Leo approached the table and peered at the display over the man's shoulder. "I promise I won't take up too much of your time, but I had hoped you might help me piece together what happened over here."

"What happened was the captain received orders to prosecute targets in Gorn territory and that's what we did," the engineer fired back with irritation. "Case closed. Bye."

"I see..." Leo's voice trailed off as he tried a different tactic. "It's a shame, then. It would appear someone managed to pull one over on your department, because the orders have been deleted without your knowledge. The captain and the XO are in a tight spot since we can't prove this ship ever received such a transmission from Starfleet Command." He turned to leave. "But, hey, thanks for your time," he said, walking toward the lift doors.

O'Brien scowled. "Hold it right there, JAG," he ordered sternly.

Leo came to a halt. "Yes?" he asked, not turning around. "How can I help you?"

The chief engineer gave Leo his full attention. "What do you mean, exactly, by deleting data right under my nose?"

"Commander," Leo said politely, "I don't want to take up too much of your valuable time- "

O'Brien growled, "Stow it! You deliberately baited me, so don't play games!" He closed the distance between them and placed his hand on Leo's shoulder. The tight grip tugged on Leo's stance as he ordered, "Turn around and tell me what's going on."

Leo looked down at the hand. With his half-profile, his voice growled in a lower timbre. "Remove your hand, Commander." When the hand lingered, he added, "I will not ask you again."

Slowly, O'Brien slid his hand from Leo's shoulder. He folded his arms across his chest. "Tell me what happened." When Leo turned around and fixed him with a glare, he hastily appended, "Please."

Softening his expression, Leo nodded. "Captain Keller and Commander T'Rel both mentioned that they had authorization to operate within Gorn territory because of a set of orders received on or around Stardate three-five-eight-one," he referenced his notes on the screen of his display device.

The chief engineer twisted on his heels and approached a terminal station. After a quick login, he called up the communications records and scrubbed through the entries after landing on the reported stardate. He filtered for priority or command-level messages and found nothing, one week prior or after. "This is the correct stardate?"

"Yes," confirmed Leo. "The comms lieutenant on the bridge had similar trouble locating anything."

"That would be Lieutenant Ha-Vatoreii, I presume," O'Brien mentioned matter-of-factly. "He's good, but we need some specialists." He stopped a passing ensign with a waving hand and told him, "Tell Mister Gee and Chief Sheesta to come down here, instantaner."

The ensign, fearful of disappointing him, nodded quickly and scurried off to carry out the orders.

"Why do we need them, exactly?" Leo wondered, already knowing the answer.

"Gee's a warrant officer. He is a communications technician. Sheesta is a data systems technician," explained O'Brien as he worked within the computer system. "I'm a dab hand, but they're the best."

Leo nodded silently, allowing the disgruntled officer to work without further distraction. Five minutes later, the lift doors opened and raucous laughter filled the main propulsion compartment. The man, a human with raven-black hair dressed in a casual engineering vest, emerged from the lift, his eyes squeezed shut as laughter overtook him. The female Rigellian Senior Chief Petty Officer in her coveralls joined in on the mirth, playfully smacking his back in shared amusement.

The signs of a well-worn joke were evident in Gee's strained vocal cords as he squeezed out his words amidst spasms of laughter, "And then the Orion turns to the Klingon and says-" The mirthful exchange between the two non-commissioned officers was abruptly curtailed under the icy gaze of O'Brien.

"Erm, reporting as ordered, sir," Gee said, his face still red from his exertions.

O'Brien gestured to his workstation. "I'm having trouble locating a message sent to the ship around Stardate thirty-five eighty-one."

Gee and Sheesta exchanged glances. "Lieutenant Ha-vatoreii asked us the same thing, sir. We just came down from the bridge," Gee spoke first.

Sheesta added, "Whatever message it might have been, both the records of receipt and the message itself are unrecoverable. The puzzling thing is that the data blocks where the message might have resided appear to have been shredded."

"Shredded," repeated O'Brien. "Are the blocks unusable?"

"May I?" asked Sheesta as she approached the station.

The chief engineer pushed himself away to allow her access. They all watched as she manipulated the controls expertly, calling up sections of the ship's computer cores.

"Under normal circumstances, when you delete data using the computer's everyday subroutines, the data is erased. However, we have a secondary and tertiary computer system that can recover the data if someone inadvertently calls for deletion."

Gee stepped in to provide more color. "Whenever this ship receives a transmission from an authenticated source, it writes the data in fifteen different places. Five on the main computer core, and five on both the secondary and tertiary cores."

On the heels of Gee's comment, Sheesta noted, "But all of the blocks on all three cores were not just blanked. Each block underwent a systematic destruction. They're marked by the ship's computer during the diagnostic sweeps as unusable."

"You might as well have melted the isolar circuits with a damned plasma torch!" O'Brien snarled, followed by a four-letter invective. "How the hell does something like this happen?"

Sheesta shrugged. "Sir, I could speculate all day about how to do it from the software side. My guess is that whatever did it, it came with the message, because I've been crawling all over the computer for the last day and a half. No program that interacts with the data does that."

"Perhaps then, the method and the absence of the data is enough to show that the captain and the exec are telling the truth," Leo surmised aloud, mostly to himself.

Gee and Sheesta peered at Leo, unsure of his identity. O'Brien introduced inattentively, "This is Commander Verde. He's from JAG."

"Good to meet you both," Leo said with a smile. "I was looking for a couple of experts, so I appreciate you coming down to talk to me."

"Uh, sure," Gee said hesitantly. "Is the captain going to be court-martialed?"

"I'm sorry, I can't discuss that with you," Leo replied softly. "But, any information you two can gather for me will be very helpful."

O'Brien's consternation centered around a related point. He shot an angry glare at Leo. "I swear, when I get my hands on whoever did this to my ship..."

* * *

"Admiral Saavik, what an unexpected pleasure," Trujillo said by way of greeting. "What can I do for you, sir?"

Saavik's visage appeared on the desktop monitor in Nandi's quarters, the priority communique having reached her on the cusp of turning in for the night.

"I am calling to ascertain if you've suffered some kind of sudden cognitive impairment," Saavik deadpanned, her Vulcan half dialed up for the occasion.

Trujillo stared for a moment, at a loss for words. Finally, she said, "Can you elucidate further, Admiral?"

“Indeed. I have just received not one, but several messages from multiple flag-level officers in near-histronics regarding an alleged offer you’ve supposedly made to the Gorn military, Commodore. I trust that the truth of the matter is somewhat less dramatic than I’ve been led to believe?”

Trujillo fought back a wry grin, looking down for a moment to collect herself before answering. “In the interests of preserving the peace, I’ve been talking with the Gorn about what they would find a reasonable solution to our present situation, aside from us handing over *Repulse* and her crew to their tender care. Their primary concern appears to be the loss of material investment in the facility we destroyed. I was endeavoring to determine whether we might achieve what they term ‘loss parity’ without the accompanying deaths that an armed confrontation would generate. They actually seemed interested in the prospect.”

“I see,” Saavik replied stolidly. “So, you have not, in fact, ‘sold us out to the Gorn’ or ‘basically surrendered all Starfleet assets along the border’?”

Trujillo shifted uncomfortably in her chair, rubbing at one temple with her hand. “I did send along a report to you with an attached recording of that specific conversation, sir,” Trujillo offered. “I thought it prudent after my discussion with Vice-Admiral Nkosi seemed to leave him rather agitated.”

Saavik’s expression relaxed and the faintest hint of a smirk tugged at one corner of her mouth. “I know. I read it and watched the transmission before being inundated by several officers who had only heard about it second or third hand, yet still felt the need to share their uninformed opinions. Your outside-the-box thinking has more than a few of the admiralty in a collective cold sweat. I assured them that you were merely exploring possibilities and nothing had been agreed upon as yet.”

Trujillo shook her head disbelievably, puffing out a frustrated breath. “Just between you, me and the bulkhead, Admiral, I think there are a few too many people who’d like to see us in a fight with the Gorn right now, and I’m at a loss as to why. A lot of them are the same ones who were wetting their pants six months ago, terrified that we were going to war with the Tholians. For whatever reason, they seem to think fighting the Gorn would be easier or less costly. I’m guessing they don’t realize that although the research facility building those isolytic weapons may have been destroyed, we have no way of knowing how many of those weapons were distributed to their fleet prior to *Repulse*’s attack.”

Saavik inclined her head, conceding the point. “I’m taking your plan under advisement, and I’ll be approaching some cooler heads on the Security Council about its merits. I’ll do what I can to keep any political heat off you in the meantime, Nandi. You keep doing what I hired you to do, what you excel at, in point of fact. I share your reluctance to fight an unnecessary war that we just inexplicably tried to start.”

“Thank you, sir. Your support is always appreciated.”

The transmission terminated and Trujillo stared idly at the Starfleet Command delta for a long time afterward before reluctantly climbing into bed.

* * *

"Though Keller's claims appear unsupported, Skip, there's been a curious - indeed, one might say exceptional - push to not only prevent the recovery of pertinent data but also to obliterate entire sectors of storage, thus preventing forensic examination." Leo's voice resonated in a deep baritone over the viewscreen, his heterochromatic eyes reflecting the glow of the screen.

Wearing the iconic Starfleet communications earpiece, he sat at one of the stations in *Repulse*'s command center, ensuring a somewhat confidential discussion with Glal aboard *Gol*. The background revealed officers on the bridge, each fully engrossed in their respective duties.

Leo's duty weighed heavily on him, evident in his audible exhale and a slight drop of his broad shoulders. With a slight tone of frustration, he continued, absentmindedly running his hand over his beard in thought. "I could construct a solid defense from this... if only Keller would grant me the opportunity to tell him."

“We can’t make the man cooperate,” Glal huffed from his cramped office compartment. “If he wants to throw away his career and spend his twilight years in a penal colony, that’s his business. How are your engine diagnostics and repairs coming along?”

“Shields are rising,” Lieutenant Kesshek’s voice echoed, a tremor of alarm threading through his words as the ship’s computer translated them. His large black eyes reflected the scarlet-hued alert from the tactical console, a silent testament to the developing circumstance.

Leo swiveled in his seat, his eyes drifting away from the station’s visual pickup. The Saurian tactical officer’s palpable concern drew immediate attention; an unsettling undercurrent that permeated the command center. With a deep breath, Leo turned back to Glal on his screen.

“Hang on, Skip,” he said with an authoritative calmness that belied the tension knotting his stomach. “We’ve got a situation developing here.”

From her position at the heart of the bridge, Lieutenant Commander Vara leaned forward in her chair, her blue skin taking on an icy hue under the stark lighting of their surroundings. Her voice cut through the silence, sharp and precise. “Report,” she demanded.

Adding to the growing sense of unease was Lieutenant Thalix’s input. Their voice wavered as they reported from their helm station, “Commander, our ship’s attitude and pitch adjustments are steering us towards a trajectory that will take us back across the border.”

The ship’s intercom crackled to life, a note of panic lacing the usually steady voice. “*O’Brien to Bridge; abort warp activation! We’ve got a crew working on the antimatter containment unit!*”

Leo shot up from his chair, his heart plummeting as a stone in heavy gravity at the severity of O'Brien's words. The possibility of disaster was very real. An unexpected warp could spell catastrophe for those unsuspecting engineers.

Through his earpiece, Glal's voice sliced through the mounting tension, a sharp edge of bewilderment cutting through his usual calm demeanor. "What's happening, Leo?"

Sinking back into his seat, Leo's fingers danced over the console's input with practiced ease even as he grappled with the uncertainty. He shook his head, dread coiling within him. "I'm not sure yet, Skip," he admitted reluctantly, "But it seems someone is attempting to seize control of *Repulse*."

The steady voice of Vara wavered, the undercurrent of fear unmistakable as she relayed the grim news to O'Brien. "Engineering, we've lost control of the ship. Get that team out, now!"

The chilling reality of her words rang clear in the silence that followed, and Leo could see the shock register on Glal's grizzled Tellarite face. His eyes bulged, and he managed a guttural "What-" before their communication link cut off. The Starfleet Delta insignia flashed ominously on screen with the words "transmission ended".

With a sense of urgency gnawing at him, Leo rose from his chair and made his way towards Vara's central position, each step echoing through the tense bridge.

Thalix's voice sliced through the mounting tension like a knife. Their tone was one of disbelief as they reported, "Sir... I can't explain it, but we're going to warp in ten seconds!"

"Red alert," came Vara's command; her voice strained but resolute despite her evident fear.

O'Brien's voice crackled back over the intercom, laced with confusion and concern. "*Bridge, we've evacuated the teams! What in blazes is happening up there?!*"

Before anyone could muster a response, a collective gasp echoed through the bridge. The crew's eyes widened in sheer terror as they watched the stars on the main viewscreen stretch into long streaks of cosmic light. It was an unmistakable sign; *Repulse* made the transition into the interfold layer of subspace. They were only moments away from departing Federation territory, unable to act against the threat of an irreversible course.

* * *

The red alert klaxon jolted Trujillo awake from a dead sleep and the comms in her quarters came to life with Davula's voice just as she was rolling out of bed.

"Commodore, sensors have detected Repulse changing course abruptly, jumping to high warp and heading into Gorn territory. We received word from Gol a few hours ago that they and Repulse had dropped to impulse to repair damage to Repulse's injectors and anti-matter containment system from redlining their engines for so long during their time in Gorn space. Then we lost comms with both ships just before Repulse warped away, and now it appears Gol's been disabled and is adrift."

Trujillo dressed quickly but not frantically, having long ago learned that slow is smooth, and smooth is fast.

"Disabled how?" Trujillo asked as she cinched her tunic's belt around her waist and sat down on the rumpled bed to pull on her boots.

"Unknown, sir. It appears she's running on emergency power. Warp and impulse systems are in emergency shutdown mode. No comms with Gol at this time."

"Alert Command and contact the *Arcadia*. Tell Captain Locke that I'm initiating Opplan Iron Curtain and to get the task force into position. We'll also need whatever ships Task Force Truancy has managed to cobble together and get them headed this way."

"Aye, sir."

"All outposts, vessels and defensive points along the border are to come to red alert." Trujillo stood as Davula confirmed her orders, and straightened her uniform tunic, fastening the flap at the shoulder. "What's our nearest asset to *Gol*?"

"The *James Kirk*, sir. A Loknar-class frigate."

"Dispatch them to recover *Gol* as soon as possible. Set course for a position along our side of the border proximate to where *Repulse* penetrated Gorn space and execute immediately. If Keller and some of his crew staged some kind of ruse to seize the ship, disabling *Gol* would have been the first order of business before driving back into Gorn territory."

"Do you think the reported engine problem was a diversion, sir?" Davula asked.

"I don't know, Commander. But I fear what may happen to Commander Verde if he's still aboard that ship and Keller's back in command," Trujillo said, stepping out of her cabin and into the corridor. "I'll be in CIC, have Lieutenant Shukla meet me there."

* * *

Chapter 11

Chapter by [Gibraltar](#)

* * *

Leo filled the vacant ops position on the bridge of *Repulse*, his robust form sinking into the seat as if it were custom-built for him. Over four years had passed since he last controlled this role on a starship's bridge, yet the familiar dance of his fingers over the console was a testament to his training and experience. "Systems are accessible," he announced.

However, as swiftly as victory appeared, it receded. The output display flickered before blanking out completely. A stark message and the seal of the Federation replaced the intricate data that had previously danced across the screen: "This Station Under Computer Control."

His eyes narrowed at this unexpected development. "Seems I spoke too soon," he admitted with a grimace. "The computer's kicked me out." He swiveled towards Thalix, her youthful face etched with concern beneath their cropped blonde hair. "Are you seeing this on your end?"

Thalix nodded solemnly. "Yes, sir," she confirmed in soprano tones that barely hid her worry. "Same message popped up when I attempted to override our course correction."

Leo scanned the bridge, his eyes darting from one station to another like a hawk zeroing in on its prey. The stations darkened sequentially, mirroring Thalix's alarming report — as though an unseen force methodically deactivated each one. Propelling himself away from ops, he weaved his way towards Kesshek's console, threading through the labyrinth of control panels and crew members with a seasoned agility. The Saurian tactical officer met his gaze, his vast black eyes brimming with a potent mix of vexation and doubt.

Vara clung to the captain's chair like it was her lifeline amidst a stormy sea, her blue-skinned hands white-knuckled against its arms as she watched Leo navigate through their crisis. "Commander Verde?" Her voice wavered slightly, revealing her mounting anxiety.

Kesshek cut in before Leo could respond. "No access here either, sir."

Leo held up a placating hand towards Vara and turned his attention back to Kesshek. "Any luck with manual override?"

Kesshek's slender fingers danced across the console in a futile attempt at regaining control. "Computer's blocking my input, sir," he reported, his bassy voice heavy with defeat.

"Appreciate the effort," Leo acknowledged, giving Kesshek a firm nod. He then swiveled to face Vara again. "Apologies for the delay. My curiosity got the best of me."

Vara offered him a shaky smile and shook her head dismissively. "No apologies necessary, sir." She paused for a moment before adding, "As the senior officer on deck—"

Leo sighed heavily as he interrupted her, already knowing where this conversation was headed. "I was hoping you wouldn't notice that."

"I presume you are a line officer, given how you seem to be familiar with starship operations."

He replied tightly. "You presume correctly."

Vara rose from her chair and approached him with an air of resolve. "Then per Starfleet protocol," she said formally, "I relinquish command of this ship to you."

Leo's eyes scanned the faces of his crew—his responsibility now—as they watched him expectantly from their stations. The weight of their hopes and fears settled onto his shoulders like a well-worn cloak.

"Alright then," he conceded with a half-smile that didn't quite reach his eyes, "I accept command."

Vara let out an audible sigh of relief as she stepped back to her station—the ops position Leo vacated—and turned back to face him expectantly. "Orders?"

Pacing the circuitous edge of the bridge, Leo took advantage of his routine inspection to subtly study each member of the crew. His heterochromatic eyes flickered with quiet intensity as he scrutinized their reactions, ostensibly under the pretense of verifying computer control at each station.

As he completed his round, he found himself facing the colossal viewscreen. In a blink, it too succumbed to darkness, mirroring the rest of the bridge as it flashed with an ominous message. "Perfect," he grumbled under his breath.

The resonance of his voice cut through the tense silence like a blade as he issued orders to his crew. "All non-essential personnel are to remain in their quarters. Go to security alert three, all decks. Each department head to do a full systems analysis and confirm loss of access." His words were laced with urgency, underscoring the severity of their situation.

* * *

CIC, *Reykjavík's* Command-Information-Center had been an idea proposed by Commander Davula following the Tholian Incursion six months earlier. Davula had noted that Trujillo trying to command the ship in battle while maneuvering their whole task force had come perilously close to taxing her abilities. Therefore, the CIC was built so that Trujillo could focus solely on issuing orders to the task forces she led while Davula assumed responsibility for commanding *Reykjavík*.

The compartment had previously been the ship's auxiliary bridge, located on Deck 6, and had been thoroughly reconfigured to afford Trujillo the best intelligence possible on the 'battlespace' surrounding her ship and any others accompanying it.

A central command chair was flanked by two abbreviated consoles, while four stand-alone stations ringed the perimeter of the bridge's lower well area, facing inward. Here, members of the Operations, Science, Tactical, and Navigation departments would assist Trujillo with all manner of technical expertise necessary to effectively wield something as complex as a task force comprised of dozens or more vessels.

The outer ring of bridge stations had been left largely untouched, though each had larger viewscreens now mounted above the workstations. The consoles had been reconfigured for Communications, Strategic Operations, Logistics, Intelligence, and a more robust Science station than the stand-alone version nearest the commodore's chair.

Holographic projectors had been integrated throughout the compartment, offering three-dimensional views of all manner of stellar phenomena or spacecraft formations.

Trujillo stepped into the fully staffed CIC, nodding to Captain Tarrant, the intelligence officer they had liberated from Starbase 177. In Trujillo's absence, Tarrant had operational command of the CIC, collating all available data on nearby sectors and any Gorn activity within them. He smoothly vacated the center seat and surrendered it to Trujillo.

Lieutenant Shukla had beat her to the CIC by mere minutes and had taken up post at the Strategic Ops station, helping to coordinate scans of Gorn space as *Reykjavík* rushed headlong into hostile territory.

"Update on *Repulse*," she commanded.

Tarrant reported crisply, "*Repulse* is emissions quiet, sir. Neither broadcasting or receiving transmissions. No response to multiple challenge hails on secured frequencies. She is on a course towards a Gorn fleet assembly area one-point-seven parsecs from her current position at warp ten-point-seven, ETA to that position one hour and forty-three minutes.."

"Status of *Gol*?"

"Still no response to hails, and she continues to operate at minimal power, sir."

Trujillo turned to enter a series of commands into one of her flanking workstation pedestals. "I'm initiating *Repulse's* command prefix codes to seize control of her main computer and order the ship onto a return course to our position."

She struggled through multiple safety interlocks asking repeatedly if she was certain she wanted to do this before toggling the final execute command.

Nothing happened.

Repulse's computer stubbornly refused to accept her override commands. Trujillo experienced a sudden thrill of realization that someone had beaten her to it.

She quickly powered through another series of digital firewalls to manually change *Reykjavík's* own command codes while ordering, "Ops, hail both task forces and tell them to alter their prefix codes. I think *Repulse* may have used *Gol's* codes to disable the ship and now hers are locked out."

* * *

Inside the captain's ready room on *Repulse's* deck two, Leo poised himself on the edge of the chair behind the garishly opulent desk. He spoke aloud, "Computer, perform an identity and clearance check. Commander Rainerio Eulalio Verde, Starfleet Judge Advocate General's Corps."

The computer answered with its calm contralto voice, "*Please prepare for retinal scan.*"

Leo offered his right eye to the computer's scanner, holding it open against the intrusive light. A chime from the door system signaled someone waiting outside. "Enter," he beckoned.

Commander O'Brien stepped in, trailed by Gee and Sheesta. Leo halted their greetings with a raised hand as the computer declared, "*Security scan completed. Commander Verde identified. Alpha One clearance granted.*"

With calculated phrasing, Leo proceeded. "Computer, under authority granted by Starfleet regulations, Captain Keller and Commander T'Rel are hereby relieved of duty and confined to quarters."

"Acknowledged," responded the computer in its ever-neutral tone. "*Arrest notification accepted. Command codes for Keller and T'Rel suspended.*"

"Computer," Leo pressed on relentlessly, "due to this emergency situation and as senior officer aboard this vessel, I have assumed acting command."

"Understood," replied the computer. "*Commander Verde is acknowledged as acting captain of USS Repulse.*"

"Activate my command codes and grant me unrestricted access to all ship systems."

An error tone reverberated ominously throughout the room. "*Unable to comply,*" announced the computer coldly. "*A clearance level X-Ray security lockout has been initiated by Starfleet Command. Verde command codes are insufficient to override.*"

A sigh of frustration escaped from Leo's lips as he looked up at O'Brien shaking his head incredulously. "This is our third attempt at this logic sequence and we keep running into this X-Ray override wall! Could someone aboard be playing tricks?"

Warrant Officer Gee unholstered a compact device and activated it, catching Leo's attention. Gee motioned for silence as he worked on the device. Once done, he flashed a triumphant grin, "We can now talk without fear of being overheard."

With newfound freedom to speak candidly, Chief Sheesta stepped forward. "It could be a remote operation, Captain," she suggested. "Every Starfleet vessel has a prefix code that can be manipulated remotely by an officer of sufficient rank, typically a Captain or higher."

O'Brien reported, "We've received full reports from all departments, sir. We're restricted to using offline PADDs for now but our data systems team had some in reserve." He slid one across Leo's desk. "This one's yours."

"Thank you." Leo considered Sheesta's point further. "If they are operating remotely...?"

"We could disconnect the transceiver array," Warrant Officer Gee offered, "but we'd also lose our own communication capabilities."

"Not much good they're doing us either way."

"Fair point, sir," replied Gee.

Leo pointed towards the Starfleet insignia on Gee's uniform. "And these new commbadges? Would they still work if we lose communications? Could we use them to contact the Commodore?"

Gee shook his head regretfully. "No, sir. Severely limited range. We'd need to be in close proximity - no more than a hundred kilometers at best."

"Alright... any good news?"

O'Brien interjected with a glimmer of optimism in his voice, "Captain, there might be a chance we could force ourselves out of warp."

Leo scrutinized O'Brien's expression skeptically. "Your face tells me I'm not going to like this plan."

"We could misalign the magnetic constrictors manually," explained O'Brien cautiously.

"That would stop us." Leo contemplated this risky strategy. "You're suggesting inducing a plasma overload in the core."

"The computer safety measures would automatically drop us out of warp to prevent a core breach, then initiate venting of the excess plasma," O'Brien clarified. "But we'd need to put in to a starbase for repairs. To replace the damaged subspace field coils," he added with a hint of disappointment.

Sheesta interjected skeptically, "Assuming the computer safeties are still operational."

"Whoever is controlling this ship obviously has an end goal," Leo argued. "They likely need us intact to achieve that."

* * *

"Trujillo to bridge, set an intercept course with *Repulse*, best sustainable speed. I'm ordering *Zelenskyy* to hold position on our side of the border and join up with the task force when they arrive."

"We're breaching the border in pursuit of *Repulse* and you don't want to wait for backup, sir?" Davula asked by way of clarification.

"Affirmative," Trujillo replied. "There's no sense in compounding our casualties if this goes badly. We have one shot to try and stop *Repulse* before she turns this into an all-out war."

"Yes, sir. Any further instructions?"

"That's it for now."

"Understood, sir. Bridge, out."

Trujillo lost herself in thought for a few moments before ordering, "Comms, get me a priority encrypted channel to *Harken*."

The CIC communications officer, a post Trujillo had eliminated from the bridge years earlier as redundant, confirmed the order.

The mocha-skinned Captain Audea Mistry, her ebony hair tied into a loose braid hanging over one shoulder, smiled crookedly at Trujillo from her office aboard the Stalwart-class reconnaissance scout. “Hello, Commodore. Can I be of assistance with something?”

“Yes,” Trujillo confirmed. “We’ve got a mess developing out here. *Repulse* somehow crippled her escort on the way back here and is making a high-speed run back into Gorn territory. I’m taking *Reyky* in to try and disable or destroy her before she provokes the battle fleet the Gorn are assembling. The white hole is garbling their comms and sensors already, and I need you to make it worse.”

“Worse, sir?” Mistry’s lopsided smile erupted into a full-blown grin. “As in communications and sensor higgledy-piggledy?”

The captain’s raw enthusiasm elicited a smirk from Trujillo despite the circumstances and her dour mood. “I trust your gang in the Radio Shack is still up to the task?”

“Very much so, sir. We’ll likely need to launch a series of low-profile comms probes into their territory to propagate the signals interference, but they’re practically invisible under ideal conditions, and with the white hole’s output the Gorn should remain blissfully unaware.”

“Do it,” Trujillo ordered. “Hopefully it’ll buy us the time we need to corral *Repulse* and drag her back with us.”

“Are you in need of backup, Commodore?” Mistry asked, despite commanding a highly modified version of the older Ranger-class scout.

Trujillo couldn’t help but be touched by the woman’s willingness to jump directly into the fray, despite her vessel’s tactical shortcomings.

“Not this time, Captain, but the offer is appreciated. I owe you and your comms wizards a drink when we get back.”

“I’ll hold you to that, sir. Perhaps the bottle I sent for your wedding?”

Trujillo inclined her head with a smile. “Great minds think alike. Please keep me updated as to your progress and keep Captain Locke on *Arcadia* in the loop as well. *Reykjavík*, out.”

* * *

Task Force Lacertus

USS *Reykjavík* – Shangri-La-class attack cruiser – Commodore Nandi Trujillo - *flagship*

USS *Havana* – Excelsior-class heavy cruiser – Captain Elizabeth Moonshadow

USS *Arcadia* – Matsumoto-class multi-mission heavy cruiser – Captain H. Isaiah Locke IV

USS *Javelin* – Belknap-class cruiser – Captain Ynami

USS *Rapier* – Hornet-class tactical carrier – Captain Willa Thorbet

USS *Polaris* – Miranda-class light cruiser – Commander Gzut Jareux

USS *Zelenskyy* – Miranda-class light cruiser – Lt. Commander Eldred Withropp

USS *Arden’sur* – Northampton-class frigate – Commander Azum S’ah-nahm

USS *Lung Hsiang* – Chandley-class frigate – Commander John M. Smith

USS *Zeyzula* – Chandley-class frigate – Captain Editha Bakari

USS *James Kirk* – Loknar-class frigate – Commander Hirano Yori

USS *Planck* – Newton-class frigate – Captain Ba’oria Tamedon

USS *Elba* – Akula-class destroyer – Lt. Commander Samantha Stromgren

USS *Harken* – Stalwart-class reconnaissance scout – Captain Audea Mistry

USS *Krtor* – Pioneer-class scout – Lt. Commander Zhāng Lì Nà

USS *Gol* – Akyazi-class perimeter-action scout – Commander Glal

Task Force Truancy

USS *Atlas* – Georgiou-class cruiser – Fleet Captain Emma Rosewarne

USS *Resilient* – Fortitude-class cruiser – Captain Aeson Albert-Groves

USS *Duralla* – Curry-class cruiser – Captain Maximilian Gouveia

USS *Maalg* – Miranda-class light cruiser – Commander Adisa Temitope

USS *Mandela* – Chandley-class frigate – Commander Kaikoura Agarwal

USS *Lviv* – Kiev-class frigate – Commander Adredo

USS *Damascus* – Akula-class frigate – Lt. Commander Gured Honorn

USS *Koh Yor* – Lenthal-class destroyer – Lt. Commander Aronas Žukauskas

USS *McIntosh* – Munro-class scout – Lt. Commander Nogura Yabushige

USS *Pathfinder* – Remora-class scout – Lt. Commander Kolya Sokolov

USS *Honshu* – Okinawa-class scout – Lt. Commander Kenojuak Nîpisiy

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Chapter 12

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NCC-2204 (USS *Arcadia*)

"Ah, your timing is impeccable, Chief," Captain H. Isaiah Locke IV acknowledged with a nod. He leaned over his desk while seated within the ready room aboard USS *Arcadia*. The Matsumoto-class command cruiser was his territory, a domain he ruled with a firm yet fair hand. Accepting the offered mug of hot coffee, he flashed an appreciative smile that warmed the atmosphere of his private compartment.

Chief Yeoman (YNC) Miles grinned. "Anytime, sir," he replied, stepping back to take his customary seat along the far bulkhead. As soon as he seated himself to allow Locke to enjoy his coffee, the door chime sounded.

"*Entrez*," he said aloud after quickly swallowing. His dark almond-shaped eyes flickered towards the entrance at the arrival of his executive officer. A broad grin spread across his ebony skin, and he raised his coffee-filled mug in a silent greeting. However, his smile faltered as he caught sight of her stern expression and the intelligence officer shadowing her steps closely. His deep voice could be heard as he muttered a low, "Uh oh."

Commander M'Rera strode purposefully towards Locke, her Caitian features more pronounced than usual with her ears flattened and her grey and white fur raised in alarm. Captain Lorraine Apurahama of Starfleet Intelligence trailed just behind her; every line in her tattooed face spelling out urgency that mirrored M'Rera's demeanor.

"Sir," she began in a calm tone, "we've received traffic from the flag. Iron Curtain has been activated."

Locke's gaze darted to Apurahama whose silent confirmation was evident on her weathered face. Despite this tacit affirmation though, protocol demanded vocal verification. The Maori officer nodded solemnly before confirming in a tight soprano voice, "The message is indeed authentic, sir."

With an audible exhale, Locke shifted his weight, leaning to the side to align himself with Chief Miles' anticipatory expression. Lifting his half-drained mug in a display of casual camaraderie, he commanded in his rich bass voice, "Keep this warm for me, would you?" Upon receiving a silent affirmation from the chief, he pushed himself up from his chair. He reached for his bomber-style jacket, draping it over his pristine command white turtleneck shirt. His voice carried a resigned determination as he declared, "Time to get our hands dirty."

* * *

NCC-2544 (USS *Repulse*)

Sinee Putrie, with a practiced flick of her wrist, drew a card from the deck. Her dark brown eyes flickered over it before she carefully tucked it into her hand. She hovered momentarily over a triplet of threes nestled in her grip. With a swift yet calculated move, she laid them out on the table before discarding the five of clubs into the pile. "Your move," she declared to the man seated on her left, Weapons Technician Second Class (WT2) Anas el-Rafiq.

A spark of amusement ignited in el-Rafiq's brown eyes as he glanced towards his friend and teammate, WT1 Jordina Bush. "She's got that predatory gleam in her eye," he warned with a chuckle. "I swear she's going to win the game again."

Jordina responded with a smirk that tugged playfully at the corners of her lips. She bobbed her chin upward in an impromptu salute and retorted, "Quit stalling and draw your card."

Their game of rummy was their shared sanctuary - an oasis of camaraderie amidst their demanding duties aboard USS *Repulse*. El-Rafiq reached for the discard pile, drawing Sinee's five of clubs and casting aside his eight of diamonds. He passed his turn to Ensign Kimberly Timm with a nod.

Kim picked up el-Rafiq's discard and swiftly arranged a sequence from five through eight on the table before tossing an ace into the discard pile.

As Jordina deftly snatched up the discarded ace, she slid away her two of diamonds to signal the end of her turn. With a casual tilt of her head towards Sinee who was about to draw another card, Jordina asked, "So does anyone have any clue what's happening?"

The question hung unanswered in the air for a moment before Kim shrugged lightly, "No idea." She sighed, "I just thank my lucky stars that we were all here in Sinee's quarters when the lockdown was announced. Beats being stuck with my bunkmate."

Her comment drew a ripple of empathetic smiles from her friends, a silent testament to their shared experiences on the starship. As it was Anas' turn to draw again, he mused aloud, "Seems like it's been a wild ride since we left starbase. I shouldn't be surprised by any of this, right?"

Sinee tossed her head back in laughter, her eyes twinkling with mirth. "I'm just glad I've got you all to share this waiting game with. It would've been a real snore-fest if I was alone."

Anas rolled his eyes, a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Yeah, more like you're thrilled to have more victims for your card game

massacres."

"Hey, can't blame a girl for enjoying a winning streak," Sinee shot back, her grin undiminished.

Just as Anas drew breath for another playful retort, the ship's public address system buzzed into life. Simultaneously, the modest viewscreen adorning the far wall flickered on, revealing the stern face of Commander Leo Verde seated behind his desk in the captain's ready room. Their friendly banter was abruptly halted by the shrill call of the boatswain's whistle echoing from the intercom.

"Crew of USS *Repulse*," began Commander Verde, his voice steady and authoritative. "This is Acting Captain Leo Verde. I wanted to provide an update on our situation and outline our next steps." He proceeded to explain their predicament - how they had been involuntarily warped into Gorn space due to a remote override and were now locked out of their own computer systems; even this announcement required hacking into those very systems.

As they absorbed this alarming news, glances were exchanged around the room – each seeking reassurance from familiar faces amidst unsettling revelations. Jordina reached out instinctively to squeeze Sinee's arm; she being their sole civilian companion.

"Now onto our plan," Verde continued, his voice resonating with confidence that seemed almost contagious. "I need every crew member proficient in small craft piloting and systems operations to report immediately to the shuttle bay. Following them will be those designated as non-essential personnel in thirty minutes." He paused, allowing the gravity of his words to settle before proceeding. "We will attempt a maneuver to force our ship out of warp, launch two shuttles, and have them return to Federation space carrying all our logs and reports. Our aim is to inform Starfleet of our current predicament. With your assistance, we can prevent an all-out war with the Gorn. Thank you. Verde, out."

As the screen faded back into darkness, three pairs of eyes swiveled towards Ensign Timm.

"Kim?" Jordina ventured tentatively. "You're up for this challenge, right?"

Exhaling slowly, Kim nodded her affirmation. "He mentioned anyone with piloting experience." She laid her cards down on the table and rose from her seat. "Catch you all on the flip side," she said lightly before exiting Sinee's quarters.

Anas broke the ensuing silence with a soft murmur that echoed their collective worry: "I hope those were not her last words to us."

* * *

Accompanied by a security detail, Captain Keller and Commander T'Rel were led into the shuttlebay, which is situated at the furthest point of the ship. Sheriff Dursh's imposing presence commanded his team as they made their way towards the looming shuttles through the towering entry doors. A team of personnel, mainly pilots, gathered in anticipation of their orders, facing two colossal shuttles.

Among the group, Keller saw a face he knew well - Lieutenant (jg) Guilla Vazen. He called out to her, his voice tinged with desperation. "Lieutenant Vazen! I demand you take command of this security detail and release me from arrest! Immediately!"

In a fleeting moment, Vazen locked eyes with T'Rel, who then subtly shook her head. With a confident shake of her head, Vazen responded by crossing her arms. "I am unable to accept orders from officers under arrest, sir."

"It's an unlawful arrest!" Keller protested vehemently.

Dursh swiveled on his heel and barked back at him, "The prisoner will maintain silence!" The raw ferocity in the chief warrant officer's voice left Keller startled into silence.

With a satisfied smirk playing on his lips, Dursh turned away from the silenced captain.

Moments later, Leo Verde and Callum O'Brien made their entrance accompanied by several boatswain's mates. As they halted in front of the pilots, their entourage continued towards the shuttles and began preparing them for departure.

Leo clasped his hands together in gratitude. "Thank you all for your swift response." His gaze settled on the senior pilot, a lieutenant commander. "Is this everyone?" Upon receiving verbal confirmation, Leo continued in a tone laced with urgency: "Excellent. I require four pilots – two per shuttle."

Four pilots stepped forward from among their ranks including Vazen and Ensign Kimberly Timm who were assigned to the first shuttle. The remaining two would man the second.

Leo addressed the selected pilots with a stern gaze, "In approximately twenty minutes, this bay will be teeming with non-essential personnel. The boatswain's mates are preparing both shuttles to accommodate as many as possible. You will load until you can't fit another soul on board and upon receiving the order, execute an emergency launch maneuver – one following closely behind the other. Do not hesitate."

Timm queried, her voice tremulous with apprehension: "What's our course of action once we're clear, Captain?"

"Both shuttles will make a break for the border at maximum warp," Leo instructed crisply. "Your priority is to safeguard your passengers and in case you encounter a Starfleet ship, surrender all data that we're transferring to your shuttle computers."

The selected pilots responded in unison: "Aye, sir."

T'Rel voiced a question that was both practical and critical. "Captain Verde, I am intrigued by your method for slowing this starship from its warp speeds?"

Leo's eyes, one green and one brown, flicked momentarily to Keller. The once-commanding figure seemed smaller under Dursh's looming presence. His reply was swift and sure, "Our engineering team is getting ready to manually disrupt the magnetic constrictors."

The Vulcan former executive officer nodded in understanding. "A significant gamble. The ship's computer will automatically cut off all power to the warp core to prevent a plasma overload. Fascinating." She paused briefly before launching another query, "What safeguards have been established to protect the field coils?"

O'Brien wore a look of resigned acceptance as he responded. "None, truthfully. We're intending on redirecting some of the excess plasma along the field coils to activate the automatic shutdown systems."

"I see," T'Rel affirmed, her deep voice carrying an undertone of thoughtfulness. "If you permit me, Captain, I would like to contribute my expertise."

Keller hurled an accusation steeped in bitter resentment, "Traitor."

Ignoring Keller's acrimonious outburst, Leo turned his attention back towards T'Rel. "My initial intention was to have you and Captain Keller escorted off this vessel under security."

"I appreciate your prudence, sir," T'Rel replied with characteristic calmness. "However, considering my proficiency in starship propulsion systems, I believe I can assist Commander O'Brien in safely disengaging warp drive without causing harm—if my theory proves accurate."

Leo refocused his gaze on O'Brien asking him directly, "Could we benefit from another set of competent hands?"

"If it ensures preserving this ship then unquestionably," O'Brien conceded gratefully. "Will she remain in custody?"

After pondering briefly, Leo nodded decisively, "Given the emergency situation—I'll reinstate her." He directed his gaze towards Dursh and commanded with authority, "Release the XO, Sheriff."

Keller's reaction was volatile, "Have you lost your senses, Verde? You'll reinstate her but not me? I possess the access codes that can override computer control!" His bravado quickly vanished when Dursh advanced on him with weapon in hand. Keller raised his hands in surrender without uttering another protest.

"Regrettably for you, Captain," Leo responded to Keller's outburst with a controlled voice, "the arrest protocol invalidated your codes under Starfleet regulations. If I had faith in your capacity to contribute positively to this predicament, I would have requested your assistance first. However, whomever has compromised this ship's prefix code possesses a clearance level exceeding both of ours."

"Wait just a moment," Keller's assured demeanor resurfaced, buoyed by the fresh intel. "If they're operating under X-Ray clearance, this has Starfleet Command's fingerprints all over it, Verde. A flag officer is pulling the strings behind the curtain, can't you see?"

Leo extended a pacifying hand towards Keller. "I see your point, sir, but let's tackle one crisis at a time."

Keller's voice hardened into a growl. "But this absolves me of guilt!"

"The safety of this vessel and her crew are paramount!" Leo retorted with an uncharacteristic bite in his tone. Sensing his own patience wearing thin, he cast his eyes downward and took in a calming breath. He offered a contrite smile to the officers around him before adopting a more composed tone, "My apologies."

O'Brien placed a supportive hand on Leo's shoulder. His voice carried the soothing rhythm of his Irish accent as he reassured him, "It's been a taxing day for us all, sir."

Keller wore an expression sourer than vinegar at O'Brien's display of solidarity toward Leo – the man he considered to be Starfleet's most irksome officer - yet he held his tongue.

"Thank you, Callum," Leo said graciously. "As I was saying earlier, once we've stabilized our current predicament here on the ship, Captain Keller, I would like to assist in building your defense."

"Go to hell and back again for all I care, Verde," Keller spat venomously. He literally hocked a globule of spit at Leo's feet that splashed onto his uniform boots. "I wouldn't trust you even if my life hung in the balance."

T'Rel stepped up alongside Leo and turned her gaze on Keller. "In fact Captain Keller," she said with an icy precision in her voice that matched her Vulcan heritage perfectly; "it does."

Keller shook his head and sneered at his former senior officers. "You're ready to tailor your loyalties to suit his whims. I see now I had not a single loyal officer standing with me."

Leo let out a weary sigh. "Sheriff, could you please escort the captain to the passengers lounge until he's ready for departure?"

Dursh smirked, a glint of satisfaction in his eyes. "With pleasure, Captain."

* * *

Warrant Officer Gee, a maestro of the ship's communication systems, effortlessly activated his combadge. "XO, we're at the ready." His eyes were glued to the complex data streaming from Repulse's towering subspace transceiver array - their only tether to the Federation's FTL subspace communications network. T'Rel's voice crackled through his badge, sharp and precise. "Received loud and clear, Mister Gee. Thanks for your hard work."

Opposite him stood Data Systems Technician Chief (DSTC) Sheesta, her face an intriguing mix of curiosity and unease. Their bond had been cemented over two years of working elbow-to-elbow in the tech labyrinth; their camaraderie was a testament to shared knowledge and mutual admiration. "Gee," she ventured, her tone apprehensive, "I'm still wrestling with what happens when we start pulling this beast apart."

Gee swiveled towards her, his mismatched eyes twinkling with zeal as he launched into an explanation that only a seasoned comms tech could deliver. "To put Mister Boogeyman out of commission," he elucidated with assurance, "we're going to take down the entire transceiver. Once command gives us the green light, I'll kick off the manual disconnection sequence here while you disconnect the control computer from the main bus over there."

Sheesta huffed out a sigh laced with amusement despite herself. "Look Gee," she clarified as she pointed at the conduit by her feet, "It's not about your plan or my part in it. What I'm fretting over is this EPS tap loaded with juice. If I pull it while it's hot...?"

A shadow flitted across Gee's face as comprehension hit him like a photon torpedo. "Oh," he mumbled sheepishly, "That might have slipped my mind."

"You forgot?!" Sheesta retorted, her disbelief echoing through the room.

Gee's laughter reverberated around them, momentarily lifting the tension that hung in the air. "My bad."

Shaking her head, a touch of a smile tugged at Sheesta's lips despite their precarious predicament. "You do realize Gee, us Rigellians aren't wizards. We're just as likely to get zapped to death as you humans."

"No kidding," he responded, his chuckles subsiding.

She switched gears abruptly. "'Mister Boogeyman'?"

"Ah," Gee replied nonchalantly, "just a nickname for our invisible troublemaker stirring up this mess. Helps me vent my frustration."

Sheesta simply shrugged in response, her features softening into an understanding smile. "Whatever helps us keep our wits about us in this chaos works for me."

* * *

The sweltering heat radiating from the power transfer conduits near main engineering was causing beads of sweat to form on both T'Rel and Chief Misty Mazer's foreheads as they labored side by side. As she finished up her task, T'Rel passed the nearly-drained plasma torch to the chief before descending from the ladder that led into the nacelle struts.

While replacing her maroon uniform jacket, she queried, "Status of the other teams?" Her tone was even, but there was an undercurrent of urgency.

Mazer's ice-blue eyes flickered over her PADD's display. "Almost there, Commander," she replied in a gruff voice that echoed her years of hard labor across Starfleet.

T'Rel's brow knitted slightly at this news. She turned fully towards Mazer, her face impassive but for a slight tightening around her eyes. "Could you kindly remind them that time is of the essence?"

The chief smirked, wiping away a bead of sweat with her grease-stained sleeve. "We don't all have your Vulcan precision, sir."

"Regardless." T'Rel responded coolly.

With a few quick taps on her PADD, Mazer relayed instructions to the other four teams working along the conduit's length. "Reminder sent."

"Your assistance is appreciated," T'Rel said with a curt nod.

Stepping closer and lowering her voice to a conspiratorial whisper, Mazer broke protocol slightly. "And if I may say so, sir, it's good to have you back on deck."

T'Rel closed her eyes briefly and inclined her head in acknowledgment. "I am gratified that our new captain agreed to reinstate my service."

Mazer nodded earnestly. "When Captain Verde showed up outta nowhere and took command... well, let's just say I wasn't thrilled. But compared to Keller..."

“Indeed,” T'Rel interjected swiftly, "It is fascinating how we adapt to the... peculiarities of various commanding officers. But when compared to a more objective leadership style, longstanding issues become glaringly apparent."

Mazer chuckled softly. “That's one Vulcan way of putting it, sir. But you were always the calming balm in this ship full of firecrackers.”

“Your sentiment is appreciated,” T'Rel responded.

After a moment of hesitation, Mazer broached a delicate subject. “Do you reckon... I mean, you’ve been giving your all to the captain’s plan. Do you think he might consider dropping the charges?”

T'Rel paused before answering, her voice steady and clear. "It is not within my power to predict such outcomes. And based on my little knowledge of JAG procedure, I do not believe that decision rests solely with him," she admitted. "If evidence confirms that I violated Starfleet regulations, whether knowingly or otherwise, then justice must take its course."

* * *

Chapter 13

* * *

As Leo stepped onto the bridge of *Repulse*, he felt a magnetic pull towards the command center. The center seat, a symbol of authority and responsibility, beckoned him. He moved towards it with an air of familiarity and was about to sink into its cushioned comfort when something unusual caught his eye.

A glinting object lay atop the seat; a metallic insignia representing the rank of a Starfleet captain. Heat flushed his ears as he realized what this meant - the entire bridge crew had orchestrated this moment, their eyes now fixed on him with anticipation and respect.

He extended his hand, fingers brushing against the cool metal as he picked up the rank insignia. His baritone voice echoed around the room as he spoke, "I... I'm at a loss for words," he admitted, holding up the insignia for all to see. "You all know I can't officially wear this."

Commander Vara rose from her station at the operations console, her blue skin glowing under the bridge lights. A warm smile lit up her face as she addressed Leo. "Sir," she began respectfully, "this is our way of showing gratitude on behalf of everyone onboard."

One by one, S'ren, Kesshek, Thallix, and Ha-Vatoreii stood from their stations to join Vara in solidarity. Their smiles were genuine and hands rested casually by their sides—an unspoken gesture of their regards for his work.

Leo felt warmth spread across his cheeks at this unexpected display of affection. His jaw worked silently for a moment as he grappled with what to say next. However, instead of dismissing their gesture due to imminent dangers they were all about to face together, he decided to embrace it.

With swift precision born from years in Starfleet service, he removed his commander's rank insignia and replaced it with the gift from the crew. "I'll only wear this onboard *Repulse*," he declared, striking a compromise.

Once the new insignia took up residence on Leo's shoulder, Vara's voice rang out clear and proud, "Captain on the bridge!"

A round of applause echoed through the chamber, punctuated by smiles and nods of approval. Leo raised his hands to quiet the crew, a grin tugging at the corners of his lips. "We still have work ahead of us, everyone. Stations, please."

As the bridge's atmosphere returned to its usual focused rhythm, Leo keyed in the ship's intercom to connect with engineering. "Callum," he asked into the open circuit, "are we ready?"

Instead of O'Brien's Irish-accented voice replying, it was T'Rel's calm tones that filled his ears. "*Captain*," she began formally, "*Mister O'Brien is currently overseeing final modifications in the starboard nacelle. Once complete, we're ready to proceed.*"

"Understood," Leo replied with a nod even though she couldn't see him. "Have all other modifications been double-checked?"

"*Yes sir*," came her crisp reply. "*Chief Mazer and her teams have signaled full confidence.*"

"Maintain the connection," Leo commanded, his baritone voice steady as he pulled Gee and Sheesta into the conversation. "I trust you're both primed for action?"

Gee's response was immediate, a hint of anticipation in his tone. "*Captain, we're practically glued to the transceiver controls, just waiting for your green light.*"

Sheesta chimed in shortly after, her voice reflecting her readiness. "*My team is poised to switch over to the secondary computer core, sir. If all goes well, it should sever this remote stranglehold on our command functions.*"

Thallix posed a question that hung heavily in the air. "Why not simply deactivate the computer and transceiver then drop us from warp using the helm?" As if on cue, the turbolift doors slid open with a soft hiss, revealing T'Rel clutching her PADD.

Leo offered T'Rel an acknowledging nod before addressing Thallix's query. His heterochromatic eyes held a spark of determination as he explained, "An excellent point. It might seem like overkill but if we can't break free from this override by switching cores then we need to have contingency plans in place to evacuate our crew."

T'Rel's stoic voice cut through any lingering tension as she reported, "Engineering has finalized all necessary adjustments, Captain."

"Thank you, XO," Leo responded softly before once more engaging the commpanel. "Bridge to Flight Deck. We're set to start the festivities. Report your status."

The responses came swiftly:

"*Shuttle One reporting in*," Lieutenant Vazen's voice crackled through the speaker. "*We are fully-loaded and ready to go, Captain.*"

"*Shuttle Two, here*," Commander Dini confirmed in return. "*We are go.*"

O'Brien's familiar voice joined them next: *"Bridge, engineering is at standby ready to commence misalignment."*

With another tap on the controls, Leo summoned his authoritative tone, projecting confidence and resolve. "All hands, this is the bridge. Assume brace positions for subspace disruption."

* * *

NCC-3717 (USS *Gol*)

Glal had never before so closely examined the intricacies of his bridge's overhead. His eyes traced the finer details of the recessed lighting matrices as he stared straight up at them from less than a meter away. Their illumination flickered randomly as did the consoles somewhere behind him, in a direction that should have been but was no longer strictly down.

His minute inspection of the ceiling was unintentional, and due to the complete loss of artificial gravity aboard ship, along with primary and secondary power systems and life support.

The eerie red cast of emergency lighting bathed the compartment, and Glal could hear the gasps and muttered curses of other crew struggling to regain their equilibrium or to gain an hand or foothold on a stationary object.

Glal floated there, too far from anything to push off, effectively helpless.

He slapped his combadge, praying to deities from several worlds that internal communications were still functioning. "Glal to Engineering!"

After a moment's stomach-clenching silence, Lieutenant Camila Galvez's voice emerged loud and clear. *"Galvez here, sir. We're... we're trying to get our footing down here, Skipper."*

"Easy, Captain, I've got you," came the voice of his XO, Lt. Commander Gael Jarrod.

Jarrod floated past him, executing a slow somersault that enabled him to push off the ceiling with his legs towards Glal, whom he took hold of with surprising gentleness and carried with him towards the command chair. Jarrod hooked his toes under the chair, pulling Glal down into place and triggering the emergency restraints to activate and hold him fast to his seat.

Jarrod then pushed off with his hands, twisting and turning through the air like some kind of zero-g ballet performer as his momentum carried him to the Engineering station.

"Damned showoff," Glal muttered under his breath.

"Galvez to the captain," the Chief Engineer's voice broadcast out over the bridge. *"It appears someone triggered our command prefix codes and disabled all our systems. I've initiated the master override, but it doesn't appear to be working."*

"What's our next step?" Glal asked.

"Complete shut down of the main and auxiliary computers and reboot from the protected archives. We should have main systems coming back online in ten minutes, with full restoration of all ancillary systems within a half hour."

"And until sensors, shields and weapons come online..." he began.

"We're effectively helpless, yes, sir," Galvez completed the mordant thought.

"The good news is that if all this is *Repulse's* handiwork and she was going to fire on us, she'd have done it long before now," Jarrod advised from where he was supervising activity at the Engineering station.

"And what's the bad news?" Glal graveled.

"We're completely crippled and adrift along the border with the Gorn," Jarrod supplied helpfully.

Glal grunted. "Forget I asked."

* * *

NCC-3109 (USS *Reykjavik*)

"Status update," Shukla called from the Ops station in the CIC. *"Repulse is continuing on course, and she's still pulling away from us. Records show that ship had the Mark III engine upgrades eight months ago, so there's no chance of our catching her."*

Trujillo was about to reply when the chief petty officer at the damage control station noted, "She's also redlining her engines, sir. She's just a touch shy of warp thirteen, and I'm detecting increasing variances in her subspace field attenuation. They keep pushing her like this and her nacelles will rupture or shut down within the next twenty minutes."

She nodded fractionally, "Acknowledged." She gestured towards Shukla's standing station facing her command chair. "Time until Lacertus makes it to the border?"

"Unknown, sir. All the sensor and comms interference *Harken's* kicking up along the border has blinded us. ETA at last contact would put the task force arriving on the border in twenty-seven minutes."

Trujillo stood. "Mister Shukla, join me on the bridge." She tapped her communicator. "Trujillo to Commander Davula, Shukla and I are headed topside. Not much more for me to do down here with the task force cut off from comms."

"Understood, sir. Standing ready to transfer command upon your arrival."

She nodded to Tarrant. "Captain, you have the CIC watch. I stand relieved."

* * *

In the right seat next to Ensign Kimberly Timm, El-Aurian Lieutenant (jg) Guilla Vazen's slender fingers danced over the forward controls of *Repulse's* expansive transport shuttle; designated as Shuttle One. "All systems go on your end?" she queried, her voice a soothing melody in the otherwise sterile environment.

Kim offered a brisk nod, her eyes glued to the pre-flight checklist. "Just tying up loose ends," she responded, her tone tinged with an air of concentration. "Would you mind checking on our cargo?"

"Yeah," Vazen conceded. She exited the cockpit and entered the passenger compartment immediately aft, acknowledging the throng of passengers within their shuttle. The vessel boasted a capacity for thirty-eight souls across four rows of five and two inward-facing rows from the port and starboard bulkheads; all situated behind the cockpit's nerve center. Venturing into the passenger hold, she noted with approval how the boatswain's mates had ingeniously adapted seating arrangements to accommodate six extra jump seats at the rear, raising their total capacity to forty-four.

Her gaze met Captain Keller's relentless eyes as he reclined in one of those added jump seats alongside his trio of guards. A silent exchange passed between them before Vazen broke away, turning her attention back to her duties.

With a commanding air that belied her delicate appearance, Vazen raised her voice above the discordant symphony of overlapping conversations. "Eyes front!" Instantly silence fell like a curtain; all eyes were on her now. She nodded appreciatively before launching into her speech.

"I'm Lieutenant Vazen, your co-pilot. We are currently under evacuation protocol alpha; expect non-standard flight maneuvers throughout our course. It is paramount that everyone remains securely fastened unless we say otherwise." As if on cue, several passengers tightened their restraints further.

"Moreover," she continued gravely, "we're launching blindfolded. We may be thrust into combat as soon as we clear the bay doors." A wave of apprehension rippled through her captive audience. Hastily, she added, "Or we might slip safely back to our fleet undetected. Without sensors, it's a toss-up. Be prepared for anything."

A grating voice cut through the tension—Keller's. "Lieutenant, I demand you relinquish command to me."

Before anyone could react, Vazen raised a placating hand. She was loathe to embarrass the man, the questioning glances from the passengers forced her to address the matter openly, "Captain Keller, you've been relieved and you are presently under arrest. Starfleet regulations bar me from complying with your orders," she reminded him coolly.

Shifting gears to address her final point, she said, "For those susceptible to space-sickness, refuse pouches are stowed under your seats or within armrests for those in jump aisles. If any medical assistance is needed, two corpsmen are seated on opposite ends—give them a signal now." The silence hung heavy in the air, a tangible weight that seemed to pull at everyone's attention as she paused for effect. The words that followed were an open invitation to curiosity: "Any questions?"

A passenger, nervously clutching the armrests of his seat, asked about their departure time. Vazen responded with a noncommittal shrug, her voice cool and professional over the shuttle's intercom. "We'll try to give you as much notice as possible, but it's likely you'll find out when we start moving. This is covered under the aforementioned protocol. Everyone, stay secured in your seats. The gravity system isn't perfect; it will lag behind sudden maneuvering. No one needs to find out what that will feel like if you're out of your seat."

Kim's voice sliced through the tense quietude with a single command: "Departure positions." The order echoed in the shuttle's cabin before being swallowed by an anticipatory hush.

Vazen returned to her sanctuary - the cockpit - slipping into the right-hand seat once more with practiced ease. She looked over at Kim expectantly and queried, "Status?"

"Checklist completed," replied Kim curtly, her eyes still on her console screen. "Just waiting on the bridg-"

The familiar baritone of Verde's voice interrupted Kim mid-sentence over the open channel: *"Bridge to Flight Deck. We're set to initiate proceedings. Report your status."*

Vazen keyed open her audio pickup promptly and announced, "Shuttle One reporting in. We are go, Captain." She muted herself immediately after hearing the other shuttle chime in and turned towards Kim with a slight nod of respect, "Your spacecraft."

"My spacecraft," Kim confirmed succinctly yet firmly, adhering strictly to verbal procedure.

"This is the pilot-in-command, Ensign Timm," Kim declared confidently over the compartment channel after hearing from engineering about their readiness status. "This is your only warning. Emergency launch imminent."

The tension aboard the shuttle seemed to thicken, becoming almost palpable. Vazen could feel it seeping into her bones, or perhaps it was just her own nerves playing tricks on her. She shot a quick glance at Kim, finding reassurance in the ensign's calm demeanor amidst the mounting pressure. Kim's reputation as the top pilot of her Academy class wasn't just hearsay; it was a comforting reality in their dire situation.

"Ever done this before?" Vazen asked, trying to keep her tone light despite the gravity of their situation.

"Nope," Kim replied with an almost cheeky grin.

"Got a plan?"

"Yep."

"Going to share?"

Kim's lips twisted into a lopsided grin, an enigmatic spark lighting up her eyes as she said, "I wouldn't want to ruin the surprise."

Verde's steady, calm voice commanded, "*Execute.*"

Across the same channel came O'Brien's response, "Aye, sir. Misalignment underway."

Vazen's fingers tightened around the controls. Her knuckles whitened as she fought to keep her nerves in check. Under her breath, she muttered a terse mantra to steel herself for what lay ahead. "Here we go."

Abruptly, the ship bucked and shuddered as plasma coursed recklessly through the subspace field coils nestled within the giant nacelles. The violent tremors surged through the shuttle, escalating in severity until they triggered erratic power surges that sent flickers of light dancing chaotically across the flight deck.

With an assertive tone that belied her concern, Kim commanded, "Initiate a one-second full impulse burst on my mark." To the passenger compartment, she ordered, "Brace, brace, brace!"

Vazen's fingers danced over her console, translating Kim's orders into precise commands on her screen. "Ready," she affirmed, her eyes flitting up to the gaping flight doors where the distorted image of open space shimmered ominously with signs of dangerous disruption to the subspace field.

"Shuttle One departing," Kim announced over the open channel with a calmness that felt like defiance against their precarious situation. Her fingertips brushed a single command and the small craft nudged away from the deck just as *Repulse* began its chaotic tumble out of subspace. As they cleared distance from the starship, its protective field vanished into nothingness. "Raise shields! Engage!" she ordered Vazen.

"Aye," Vazen responded dutifully. With a brief, forceful expulsion of energy, their shuttle was catapulted out of the bay and into open space using its own momentum to distance itself from *Repulse* which spun erratically on multiple axes.

Vazen's eyes were glued to her sensors as she scanned local space and reported crisply, "No hostile contacts detected. *Repulse* is adrift and moving away at one-half cee!"

Kim maneuvered deftly to adjust their trajectory back towards Federation territory. The high-gee banking turn caused the inertial dampening field to lag slightly, but enough to cause her stomach to flip. When the nose of the shuttle faced their objective, she let go of a held breath, then called out, "*Repulse*, if you're receiving this message: we've plotted our course back home. Initiating warp drive... now."

In response to her command, Shuttle One surged forward, disappearing into subspace, leaving only a momentary trail of prisms light.

* * *

Chapter 14

* * *

"Captain, the flight deck confirms departure of both shuttles," Vara's voice cut through the tense silence, her words echoing from the operations console.

Leo's heterochromatic eyes flickered with a glimmer of hope as he commanded into the open channel, "*Repulse* to shuttles. Report in."

Gee's voice crackled back over the channel, a gentle reminder of their situation, "*Apologies, sir. They've already slipped beyond our short-range communication reach.*"

Chief Sheesta's steady voice joined the chorus, bringing Leo back to their immediate predicament. "*My team is on standby for core failover, Captain.*"

"Understood," Leo responded, his baritone voice carrying an undertone of grim resolve. He directed Sheesta to coordinate with Mister O'Brien.

The channel buzzed with technical chatter as they outlined their risky plan: It necessitated a total shutdown of the primary computer core, leaving *Repulse* without autonomic functions for an unnerving thirty seconds while they manually rerouted the primary command processor to the secondary core. Both teams were suited up in EVA gear for this maneuver - even artificial gravity would be lost when environmental systems went offline.

As they recited their plan one final time - each step weighed heavy with potential consequences - Leo felt a knot tighten in his stomach. With a deep breath that echoed eerily in his helmet's comm system, he activated the shipwide circuit.

"Attention all crew, this is the bridge speaking. We are on the verge of transitioning to a total shutdown of the ship's systems in order to switch over to our backup core," Leo's voice was steady and calm, his baritone echoing through every corner of the ship. "This will cause a temporary loss of all environmental controls, including gravity. Secure yourselves as swiftly and safely as possible. Medical teams are on standby for immediate deployment in case of injuries. Stay strong, we'll get through this together. Bridge out."

The moment he cut off the connection, Leo hit the control that clamped his seat arms tightly against his thighs, anchoring him in place amidst the impending chaos. Simultaneously across the bridge, each station mirrored his actions.

His eyes shifted towards Kesshek at tactical. "Lieutenant Kesshek, is our emergency lighting ready?"

"Standing by, Captain," Kesshek confirmed with an assuring nod.

Leo returned it with one of his own before drawing in a lungful of air and issuing his next command: "Chief Sheesta, initiate failover process."

"Aye sir." The countdown began from ten and when it hit zero, *Repulse's* ambient hum disappeared into silence so profound it was almost deafening. Only the crimson glow from emergency lights pierced through the sudden darkness.

Instantly Leo felt himself jerked around haphazardly by unseen forces while nausea clawed at his insides. He resisted the urge to retch and instinctive impulse to tense up his limbs; instead recalling past zero-gravity training sessions where he'd learnt to let go and adapt to such disorienting sensations by going limp. Shouts of surprise echoed around him as other members on the bridge grappled with their own disorientation under these unfamiliar conditions.

From her station Thalix's voice rang out clear despite her struggle: "We're tumbling and adrift!"

Without acknowledging the question, Leo maintained his eyes sealed shut, enduring the tumultuous ordeal. A thought meandered through his mind, questioning why thirty seconds could stretch out to feel like an eternity. His heart pounded in sync with his silent hopes that every soul on board had found safety in time. He lost himself in the disarray of time once he surpassed counting to thirty, but he was certain it had been well over a minute and a half before the bridge's primary lights flickered back into existence, accompanied by the familiar low hum of the starship's machinery purring beneath him. The nauseating spinning ceased abruptly as environmental systems reasserted their control, infusing the air with a refreshing purity that replaced its previous stagnancy.

Sheesta's voice echoed through the bridge, her tone teeming with relief and triumph. "It worked! All systems are back online, Captain!"

"Confirmed," O'Brien chimed in. "But we need your authorization to proceed further. Sir, can you make it to the computer control station?"

A groan slipped from Leo as he felt his joints protest under his conscious control again. "Uh.. give me a moment to find my footing." He relinquished his grip on the armrests as they unfolded back into an upright position. As he staggered from his seat, a wave of lightheadedness washed over him like a punch to his gut. "Hell of a ride," he mumbled under his breath.

T'Rel swiftly moved towards him; her Vulcan strength offering much-needed stability against his unsteady stance. "Are you all right, sir?"

Leo shot her a dazed look through half-lidded eyes while trying to regain balance. "Your eyes are quite captivating," he slurred as if intoxicated by her presence alone; his vision constricting around her figure until everything else blurred into insignificance. The pulsating

rhythm of his own blood echoed ominously in his ears, a relentless reminder of the peril he experienced. Leo clenched his eyes shut, willing the adrenaline-fueled thundering to subside. Gradually, the frantic drumming in his chest eased into its customary cadence, and he steeled himself against the powerful urge to succumb to exhaustion's sleep.

"Captain?" T'Rel repeated, her tone laced with concern.

With a slow, deliberate nod, Leo acknowledged the concern in the room. "I'm okay... Just a bit overwhelmed." His eyes swept across the bridge, holding each gaze that reflected back a mixture of worry and anticipation. He offered them a reassuring smile, though it didn't quite reach his eyes. A hand lifted in a casual wave as he tried to diffuse the tension thickening in the air. "I'm fine. And I'm now noticing that I'm the only human on the bridge," he quipped lightly, alluding to the diverse array of hardy species comprising his bridge crew.

The impact of Leo's words was palpable, the tension in the room dissipating like a sigh of relief. The officers around him visibly relaxed, their shoulders dropping as if a heavy burden had been lifted. Their eyes, moments ago filled with uncertainty and fear, now gleamed with renewed resolve.

Leo's stocky frame leaned subtly towards T'Rel, his voice dropping to an intimate whisper. "A little help?"

Slowly but surely, they made their way across the bridge, with T'Rel offering him unwavering support as they navigated towards Lieutenant Commander S'ran's seated position at the science station.

A dryness clung to Leo's mouth, his throat parched as he issued his command. "Computer," he croaked out, the tension in his voice palpable even in the sterile confines of the ship's control room, "request security procedure for access to command functions."

The computer hummed in response, its synthetically feminine contralto tones filling the room with an eerie calm. *"Please identify for retina scan."*

"Commander Rainerio Eulalio Verde," he declared, a hint of defiance lacing his baritone voice. He stared unflinchingly at the scanner as it bathed his right eye in a scarlet glow.

"Security scan approved," the computer intoned after a moment that felt like an eternity. The words hung heavily in the air, their implications sinking into Leo's mind. *"This procedure requires the command codes of the current commanding officer."*

An icy dread gripped him as he asked the question he already knew the answer to. "Who is the current commanding officer?"

"Captain Theodore Keller." The name echoed through Leo's thoughts like a chilling wind, bringing with it the anxiety over memories, recent and distant.

"Under the jurisdiction of Judge Advocate General's Corps, Captain Keller is hereby arrested under multiple charges, and relieved of his command," Leo declared, his voice echoing throughout the bridge.

The computer produced acknowledging tones in response, its logic adhering to Starfleet protocols. *"Executive Officer T'Rel is named as acting commander."*

T'Rel's stoic features remained unflinching, her Vulcan discipline holding firm against the tide of uncertainty that had washed over the crew. Her calm voice broke through the tense silence that had followed Leo's explanation. "Computer, this is Commander T'Rel speaking. As the senior line officer present, I relinquish command to Commander Leo Verde."

The computer confirmed T'Rel's credentials with its typical precision. A few confirming tones later, it stated, *"Executive officer testimony accepted. Verde command codes activated. Ship command transferred."* Subsequently, a sharp boatswain's whistle pierced the air, followed by the computer's declaration: *"Attention all hands, NCC-2455, USS Repulse, is now under the command of Commander Rainerio Eulalio Verde."*

The newly recognized commanding officer of *Repulse* stood tall despite his below-average height. His eyes sparkled with determination as he tugged at the hem of his maroon jacket in an almost ritualistic manner. A smirk played on Leo's full beard-framed lips as he addressed the computer in his baritone voice:

"Please, call me Leo."

* * *

NCC-3109 (USS *Reykjavík*)

Trujillo had resumed her seat on the bridge, displacing Davula, as *Reykjavík* struggled in vain to catch up to the faster *Repulse*, currently racing towards certain destruction by the oncoming Gorn fleet.

The zone of communication and sensor interference behind them continued to spread as *Harken's* drones and comms-relays expanded further into Gorn territory.

"Sir, sensor readings from *Repulse* indicate a growing imbalance in their warp nacelles," Garrett observed from the Science station. "If it continues, we could be looking at an emergency shutdown of their warp propulsion or a feedback wave that could result in a core breach."

"This is due to them overtaxing their engines?" Trujillo asked.

Garrett appeared unconvinced. "It's possible, sir, but this issue doesn't appear to originate with the nacelles themselves. This looks more like an injector issue in the core."

Trujillo absorbed this while running mathematical calculations in her head. "If they drop out of warp soon, is there a chance of reaching them before the Gorn squadron?"

Garrett's voice rose an octave. "Now reading a plasma stream in their wake. They appear to be venting drive plasma from the emergency outflow ports, sir!"

"Trying to save their nacelles," Trujillo whispered to herself.

Davula turned from her station to address the commodore's unanswered query. "If *Repulse* drops out of warp in the next five minutes, we'd reach her fourteen minutes before the Gorn do, sir."

The turbolift doors parted to admit Lt. Commander Kura-Ka to the bridge. The Zaranite's face was obscured behind a protective mask that fed him a steady stream of his homeworld's fluorine-rich atmosphere. The Chief Engineer relieved the duty warrant officer at the Engineering station, seating himself and accessing the current scans of *Repulse*.

"Put *Repulse* up on screen, computer enhancement at maximum magnification."

Just as Shukla complied with Trujillo's order and an image of *Repulse* appeared on the viewer, the ship veered suddenly, dropping out of warp as the vessel tumbled wildly.

"She's dropped to sub-light and—" Shukla began.

"Reading massive torsional stresses on her spaceframe, Commodore," Kura-Ka cut him off mid-sentence, an almost unheard of breach of decorum on Trujillo's disciplined bridge.

Two smaller craft flashed free from *Repulse*'s aft shuttlebay as the bridge crew watched in fascinated horror as the larger ship continued to tumble out of control as she decelerated.

"Two shuttles away," Shukla began again, only to see both craft accelerate to warp on divergent courses. "Both craft are Type Five shuttles and have just jumped to warp, though one appears to have suffered some engine damage in her launch maneuver."

"Still reading hundreds of life-signs aboard *Repulse*, sir," Garrett added.

"Hail the shuttles," Trujillo ordered.

Shukla acknowledged the order, but after a pregnant pause, he glanced back at her. "Sorry, sir. *Repulse*'s rapid and... unorthodox deceleration maneuver appears to have created some localized subspace interference. I'm having difficulty punching a signal through to them. We'll have to wait until they've put some distance between themselves and the ship."

"Can we hail *Repulse*?" she asked.

"No sir, same problem, only more of it. We'll have to wait until we get closer or some of the subspace chop settles down."

Trujillo fought the urge to stand and pace around the bridge. She was anxious, both about the condition of the ship and crew on the viewer, as well as the approaching Gorn. She sat back in her seat and closed her eyes briefly, practicing slow, regulated breathing.

"I've managed to raise one of the shuttles, sir," Shukla announced.

Trujillo opened her eyes, toggling the channel open on her armrest. "*Reykjavík* to shuttlecraft, we are on approach at high warp. Say your situation."

A relieved voice replied over the speakers, "*Reykjavik, this is Shuttle One. Lieutenant, jay-gee, Guilla Vazen, here.*" A pause, then, "*We're roughly seven hours from the border at present speed. Say your position, please?*"

Trujillo relayed their coordinates, telling them, "We're heading to evacuate *Repulse*'s remaining crew. Remain on course and we'll swing by and pick you up on our way back."

"*Fuck that, whoever you are,*" said a new voice. "*I'm altering our course to rendezvous. Hold your speed and have them open the doors, we'll be there in less than five minutes. We have vital information and are chock full of non-essentials and one prisoner.*"

Guilla sighed audibly. "*Apologies, Reykjavik. That was our pilot-in-command, Ensign Timm.*"

Trujillo frowned. "Please inform Ensign Timm that she's speaking to *Reykjavík*-actual, Commodore Trujillo, and that we will not drop out of warp until we reach *Repulse*. If you want to return to the ship's location, we can bring you into our shuttlebay as we're beaming the survivors over, but we only have a fourteen minute window between when we reach *Repulse* and when the Gorn get to her."

Timm's voice spoke up once more, though far less cavalier than before. *"Begging Actual's pardon, Commodore, sir. I only need thirty seconds to land this bird on your deck. If you slow to sublight on approach to Repulse, that's all I need. We're already in your wake, now."*

"Acknowledged. As soon as we assume station-keeping alongside Repulse, we'll open the doors and give you the green light to land."

She turned to Davula. "Commander, tell the deck gang to clear enough space for those two shuttles and to make ready for bringing them aboard. We'll try to grab the other one on our way out." As that order was being acknowledged, Trujillo looked to Shukla. "Ops, any luck raising *Repulse*?"

"Not as yet, sir. Still a lot of interference in that area. I'm still trying."

"Commodore," Kura-Ka said through the vocoder in his mask, "*Repulse* has lost all primary and secondary power. It appears someone's shut the entire ship down and is trying to reboot the computer cores."

"Commodore," Garrett called out, "we're approaching the area of disturbed subspace. Recommend we decelerate from warp as we approach, it's going to be rough."

"How much time is that going to cost us?" Trujillo asked pointedly.

Garrett ran the calculations quickly. "Four minutes, eighteen seconds, sir."

"Damn," Trujillo murmured. "Okay, do it. We can't rescue them and escape the Gorn if we damage ourselves in the process."

Lieutenant JG Naifeh glanced up from his position at the helm. "Prepare to begin deceleration maneuver in five minutes... mark."

"Weaps, raise our shields for deceleration. Hopefully that'll spare us some of the chop or at least a fewer number of fried isolinear processors."

"Aye, sir," the towering Helvia replied soberly from the Tactical station.

Trujillo opened the intra-ship. "This is the commodore. All hands, we will begin emergency transport evacuation of all *Repulse* personnel in just a few minutes. Stand ready to move their personnel out of the transporter rooms as quickly as possible to make way for the next groups. Escort their crew to all of our crew lounges and recreation areas, using whatever other larger compartments are needed. Sickbay, stand ready to receive casualties from their sudden deceleration."

"*Repulse*'s systems are starting to come back online, sir. They appear to have regained helm control and have stopped the ship's roll and yaw," Garrett advised.

Kura-Ka noted, "Reading significant damage to their nacelle support pylons and structural weakening in several areas of their secondary hull."

"Still not able to drive a signal through to them, sir," Shukla noted with a touch of frustration. "I've also been unable to raise the second shuttle. We're broadcasting, but they're not receiving. They may have damaged their transceiver array along with their nacelle when they launched."

"I'd really like to tell them what we're about to do before we just start beaming people off their decks, but time is of the essence."

"Approaching deceleration boundary, sir," Naifeh said.

"All hands, brace for subspace shear," Trujillo called over the intra-ship.

"Decelerating from warp in five, four, three, two... now."

The deck-plates rattled and the officers and crew on the bridge shuddered in their seats as the shielded *Reykjavík* shouldered its way through the roiling eddies of subspace upset by their fellow ship's tumultuous passing mere minutes earlier.

"We're safely out of warp, sir."

"Full impulse, Mister Naifeh. All stop five kilometers from *Repulse*."

A few tense moments later, *Reykjavík* slowed to a stop beside the battered Excelsior-class.

"Shuttle is on final approach to our landing threshold," Ops called.

"Lower shields for transport and shuttle recovery. Initiate transporter evacuation of that ship, and get me a direct comms laser-link with *Repulse*," Trujillo commanded.

* * *

Chapter 15

* * *

In *Repulse's* observation lounge on deck two, adjacent to the captain's ready room, Leo found himself at the head of the elongated table, his eyes wide with disbelief. "We're still incapable of warp speed?"

O'Brien's face was a mask of regret. "The XO's workaround for the subspace field coil damage worked flawlessly. But..." He faltered, as if the truth he carried was too heavy to voice.

"Underestimation of the torsional damage to the nacelle struts is our downfall, Captain," T'Rel filled in the silence with her usual Vulcan stoicism. "Without an accurate comprehension of our velocity when we were violently jettisoned from warp--"

"More like punted out," O'Brien interjected under his breath.

T'Rel gave a slight nod in agreement, her stoic demeanor unbroken. "Indeed. The Excelsior-class starship struts are fortified for high-warp stressors, yet it seems whoever set us on this trajectory did so at maximum emergency speed."

O'Brien let out a sigh that echoed through the room. "My engines had to endure warp fourteen throughout." His lament quickly morphed into fury. "If I ever lay my hands on that imbecile who did this--"

The Vulcan's throat-clearing cut through O'Brien's heated words. "Regardless of your sentiments, we cannot risk further FTL stresses on our nacelles without causing irreparable harm."

Leo exhaled deeply, his mind grappling with their predicament. "Even at low warp?"

A shared glance passed between the chief engineer and executive officer before she answered. "Chief Mazer and her damage control teams are currently conducting a thorough assessment based on preliminary scans from internal sensors."

"Is there any chance Chief Mazer could shore up enough of the damage for us to cross back over the border?" Leo questioned, his voice steady despite the rising tide of concern within him.

O'Brien's response was hesitant. "At this moment, it's uncertain, sir. At best, we might manage a short hop to a nearby star system and lay low." The room fell silent as the gravity of their situation hung heavy in the air.

Lieutenant Commander Vara, the ship's operations officer, absorbed the conversation with a visible expression of dread. Her azure-skinned countenance, normally composed, now reflected her inner turmoil. "What's our next move?" she asked in a voice tinged with resignation. "The Gorn are closing in."

Leo rose from his chair, his eyes gleaming with determination. "Vara, I need you and S'ran to scour the nearby star systems for viable hideouts while the Chief and her teams work their magic," he instructed. "We might not be able to warp out at full speed, but if we can find a safe haven until reinforcements arrive... and hope for the best."

Turning towards T'Rel, the Vulcan executive officer whose stoic demeanor remained unbroken even amidst chaos, he commanded: "XO, get ready to evacuate the secondary hull and prepare for saucer separation if necessary." As she nodded her understanding, his gaze then shifted to O'Brien. "And Mister O'Brien," he continued, "perhaps we can use the warp core as a deterrent if push comes to shove."

O'Brien grimaced at the thought but nodded his agreement. "Aye, sir. Better that than end up as incubators for those bloody reptiles."

Ha-Vatoreii's voice crackled over the intercom system, "*Bridge to Captain. We have laser-comms with Reykjavik. It's Commodore Trujillo calling, sir.*"

Leo's lips spread into a wide grin. "Put her through, Lieutenant. Thank you."

The viewer came to life depicting *Reykjavik's* bridge with Trujillo seated in the center. "Commander, we've just pulled alongside. The Gorn are ten minutes out, and we're starting transporter evacuation of the ship. Please order your personnel to stop moving and stand by for emergency beaming. This is going to be damned close."

"Aye, sir," Leo replied quickly. Slapping his combadge, he spoke, "All hands, this is Verde. Emergency transporter protocol alpha, all decks. The next compartment you'll see will be aboard *Reykjavik*. Verde, out." He nodded to the screen. "Ready whenever you are."

Everyone around the table rose, preparing to be beamed aboard the other vessel. Under the transport protocol, everyone aboard *Repulse* came to a halt or to their feet, depending. Within seconds, transporter beams began ferrying the doomed ship's survivors in energy form to their rescuer's starship.

* * *

Reykjavik's four standard transporter rooms as well as the ship's cargo transporters began beaming personnel aboard as quickly as the complex devices could cycle. Crew guided the newcomers out of the way, taking them to any area large enough to hold groups of people as *Repulse's*

crew of roughly seven-hundred was added to *Reykjavík's* own three-hundred and fifty.

Things became crowded rather quickly.

Trujillo ordered Verde to the bridge as soon as he came aboard, figuring that the man would likely demand to be the last off the ship.

* * *

"Position of the Gorn fleet," Trujillo asked, eyeing the displays on her swing-arm console that was currently positioned over her lap as she monitored the progress of the evacuation.

"Six minutes, nine seconds until arrival," Shukla briefed. "They're coming in at full speed, so the same subspace chop that gave us issues will be tenfold worse for them unless they decelerate soon."

"Thank heavens for small favors," she responded dryly.

Garrett announced, "Evacuation progressing, and *Repulse's* shuttle is aboard. We're tracking the progress of the second shuttle, but she's taking a course some thirty degrees off that set originally by the other shuttle. And... she's only making half the speed. I'm detecting radiation leakage in her wake, likely from one of her nacelles, sir."

"Understood," Trujillo answered, still engrossed in her displays.

An alarm sounded at the Ops and Science panels simultaneously, but Shukla was the first to say, "Sensor contact... Gorn hunter-class attack ship, bearing one-two-seven-mark-two-four-nine." He turned half-way in his seat to fix a concerned look on Trujillo. "Sir, it's on a direct intercept course with the shuttle."

Trujillo's head snapped up from the console in her lap. "Why didn't we detect them earlier?"

Shukla gestured helplessly. "I'm not sure, sir. The craft are built for stealth, and with all the subspace disruption and sensor interference..."

"ETA to intercept with the shuttle?"

"Five minutes, thirty-eight seconds."

From behind the tactical station, Leo exited the turbolift and stepped onto the bridge. "Sir, *Repulse's* computer is locked down." He reached into his jacket and pulled out his display device. "Here's the new prefix code for you," he said while holding the display for her eyes.

Trujillo waved off the tablet, pointing to an auxiliary console. "Set her to destruct, Commander. We're going to have to time this just right." She glanced back toward the viewer. "And you still have one damaged shuttle out there with a hunter bearing down on it."

With a quick nod, Leo replaced the device. "Aye, sir. How long do you want me to set the interval for?"

She looked to Garrett. "How long until we've got everyone aboard?"

"Another thirty seconds, sir," the younger woman replied.

Trujillo turned back to Leo. "Set it for forty-five seconds."

Leo slipped into the auxiliary station and began tapping in a series of commands. "*Repulse*. This is Verde. Emergency override, authorization: Verde-four-four-eight-one-alpha."

The computer aboard *Repulse* replied quickly. "*Override authorized. Input command.*"

He muted the input and swiveled around to ask, "Commodore, you want a big boom or a little boom?"

"The bigger the better," she answered. "Anything to slow them down or blind them."

"Aye, sir." He keyed the input open once more. "Code Zero-Zero-Zero, Destruct Three. Set interval for forty-five seconds, silent countdown."

"*Destruct sequence activated. Forty-five seconds to auto-destruct. There will be no further warnings.*"

Leo sighed. With a reverent nod of his head and closed eyes, he said, "Thank you, *Repulse*. Verde, out." He rose from the station and turned back to Trujillo. "Shortest command stint in Starfleet history, eh?"

"The candle that burns half as long burns twice as bright, Rally," she answered with a hint of a smirk.

He folded his arms and offered a weak smile. "As you say, sir." Leo took a step forward and addressed the next concern. "What's Shuttle Two's location? Do we have comms?"

Trujillo gestured to Shukla and then to the viewer, the lieutenant obediently throwing a two-dimensional course plot for the shuttle and the pursuing hunter up onto the screen. "That's their location, and so far we've been unable to speak with them. They appear to have suffered

damage during their launch procedure.”

“Commodore, we have the last of *Repulse*’s crew aboard.”

“Plot a course for the shuttle, engage at emergency speed. Execute.”

Reykjavik leapt to warp, the ship juddering as it muscled its way through the subspace shear, clawing to escape the onrushing Gorn flotilla.

* * *

As Shuttle One pierced the permeable forcefield erected over the open maw of *Reykjavik*’s shuttle bay, the craft settled down in a textbook landing, unaided by the bay’s tractor emitters.

The chief of the deck, Senior Chief Wund’rund, thought it a damned fine piece of flying. He tapped his combadge to announce, “Bridge, Shuttle One is safely aboard and secured.”

Dr. Bennett and a team of medics approached the shuttle’s hatch, loaded for bear with all manner of life-support and trauma equipment, most of which rode atop the anti-grav gurney accompanying them.

Deck crew swarmed the shuttle, anchoring the larger-than-average craft to magnetic grapples to affix it to the deck for safety should *Reykjavik* experience turbulence.

Both hatches opened seconds later; the large rear door folded down to form a ramp, while a smaller door on the starboard side slid open once a set of steps pushed out to allow passengers to step over the nacelle safely.

A corpsman wearing the Starfleet Caduceus on his upper arm carried a passenger out of the rear door. "I need a little help, here!" He called attention to his patient. "Lost consciousness as soon as we left the ship," he explained to the nearest medical team.

Bennett and two of his medics hurried over to assist the corpsman with placing the unconscious crewmember atop the gurney as the others cleared it of equipment. Bennett began scanning the male human, running the sensor module of his medical tricorder over the man.

The sensor wand tracked up to the man’s head and lingered there near his left ear. “Looks like benign paroxysmal positional vertigo.” Bennett looked at the corpsman. “Was your launch from *Repulse* a little hot?”

The question elicited a brief chuckle in response. "Definitely. But, non-responsive, so I made sure he was first off the shuttle," the corpsman explained his decision.

Behind them, stepping down from the ramp were three Master-at-Arms holding a Starfleet captain by his elbows to secure him closely. The leader of the guard detail, a chief petty officer, scanned the vicinity to find anyone that shared his role aboard *Reykjavik*. Within seconds, a security detail joined them. The sight alarming their charge.

"This is outrageous!" Captain Keller twisted within the grip of the muscular guards. "I demand to speak to the officer of the deck, immediately!"

Ensign Timm and Lieutenant Guilla followed shortly after. The former muttering with a shake of her head, "Complained the entire damn trip."

Bennett nodded to the corpsman. “You did the right thing, of course. He’s just very space-sick. We don’t tend to see this very often anymore with our advances in inertial dampening.” He looked around. “Is this your only casualty?”

A junior lieutenant stepped forward from behind a nearby standing workstation in response to Keller’s eruption. “I’m Lieutenant Cambrio, Captain. Officer of the Deck. What seems to be the problem?”

The chief of the detail responded quickly, "Lieutenant, I'm Chief Primmon, USS *Repulse*. Captain Keller is our prisoner, under close arrest by the order of Captain Verde."

"Absurd!" Keller exploded, again fruitlessly twisting against the grasp of the two guards at his sides. "He's no more a captain than that woman is a commodore! I'm surrounded by morons! Release me, at once!"

Cambrio raised an eyebrow in silent rebuke. “Well, I was going to recommend seeing him to guest quarters and securing him there, but if he wants to insult the commodore on the deck of her own ship...” he jerked a thumb towards the main hatch in the fore bulkhead. “Turbolift’s to the left. Brig’s on Deck Six. Be my guest.”

"Lieutenant, I am a line officer and a captain in Starfleet," Keller growled. "You *will* order them to release me, this instant. I am ordering you, in case you've forgotten how rank works in this fleet!" He fixed Cambrio with a hard stare as he spoke, utilizing every bit of his will against the man.

Guilla added her perspective to the discussion. From his rear, she told Keller, "You're a captain and you should know better, sir." She stepped forward and turned to the chief, "Do as the lieutenant says and take him to the brig. Let him sit there and think about why it's not a good idea to insult the CO of the ship he's standing on."

Cambrio held Keller’s contemptuous gaze for a moment, then shook his head with a disbelieving expulsion of breath before turning his back

on the captain. "Please remove *his eminence* from my deck."

Primmon smirked, then snapped his head back to his detail. "Aye, sir. You heard the officers: Deck six, straight away."

All eyes on the deck watched as the guards literally dragged Keller to the lifts while he bellowed his displeasure. "I will report you all to the admiral, I promise you!" Seconds later, the lift doors closed and a calmer atmosphere settled over the flight deck.

Timm joined the group and sighed. "Remind me to send something nice to your brig team, sir," she said out of the corner of her mouth to Cambrio.

Cambrio shook his head sadly. "That's your captain, Ensign? You have my sympathies." He looked her up and down. "Was that you on the stick in there?" he asked, gesturing to the shuttle.

Timm scoffed. "He's not my captain. Captain Verde is our commanding officer, now."

As the ensign used a borderline tone with a superior officer, Guilla quickly replied, "Ensign Timm was pilot-in-command, sir. She's one of our best next to Commander Dini, our department head."

"Damn fine piece of flying, Ensign. Innovative approach vector, and a deft hand on the stick as you popped the field and set her down," Cambrio said with genuine admiration.

Guilla's hands folded behind her back at the base of her spine as Cambrio spoke. "Ensign Timm graduated top of her flight class at the Academy, sir. Unfortunately, she was absent the day they taught protocol and table manners, so she flies and speaks at full impulse."

Timm folded her arms across her chest. "Well, *thank you*, Lieutenant, sir," she pointedly addressed her comment to Cambrio, ignoring Guilla's words. "It is most gratifying to be recognized for one's skills rather than kissing the ring or etiquette or curtsying or whatever it is you do up in the captain's mess." Though her eyes were on Cambrio, the appeal of Guilla's eyes toward the upper bulkhead expressed the beleaguered and long-standing argument between the two.

Guilla wordlessly brought a hand to her forehead.

Cambrio smiled impishly. "I'm not looking to get in the middle of whatever this is, Ensign," he said, gesturing between Timm and Guilla. "Specialist Gaffney will see your people to the rec deck. Make sure you settle in there, as things might get a bit rough in the next few minutes. Word has it they're setting *Repulse* to self-destruct and we're going to have the Gorn on our ass the whole way back to the border."

"Sir," Timm said, her tone losing its joviality. "Any word on Shuttle Two? Commander Dini should've been on my six."

He shook his head. "Not yet. They're not here, and I've not been told to stand ready to take another shuttle aboard. Hopefully they'll have more info for you when you reach the rec deck." He gestured toward the exit where the rest of those aboard the shuttle were being herded by *Reykjavik* personnel.

Guilla shot a worried glance at Timm before responding, "Aye, sir. Thank you." With a quick gesture, she said, "C'mon, Kim."

Timm nodded, and as she passed by Cambrio, uttered her own, "Thank you, sir."

* * *

Chapter 16

* * *

Commander D. Davis Dini wiped the itching drip of blood from his forehead before it fell below his left eyebrow and threatened to obscure his vision. A quick glance over to his deceased co-pilot's console showed the proximity of the Gorn Hunter; a corvette sized ship.

As he maneuvered the damaged shuttle away from the Hunter at low warp, he angled the bow toward the nearest star system. He fervently wished that he had not delayed his departure as he had. The rapid rotation of *Repulse* caused Shuttle Two to ricochet against the starship's hull. The impact damaged the port nacelle and ripped a breach open in the passenger compartment. He didn't know precisely how many people died, but as only four remained alive, the math weighed heavily on his heart.

"Hang on back there," Dini called out over the intercom. "We're going to try to make a run. Strap in, folks." He closed the circuit and banked the shuttle toward the outermost planet. He scanned ahead to figure the best departure angle from subspace to make the poles and obscure the shuttle from the Gorn's ability to track them accurately.

The computer warned him, "*Core damage at fifty-eight percent. Recommend immediate reduction to sublight speeds and effect repairs.*"

With a scowl, Dini spat, "Understood." The planet loomed large on the sensor display, and he waited until the last possible second to drop from warp over the pole. Eyeballing the numbers as they sped by, he used his years of experience to kill the warp drive and watched as the shuttle's impulse drive flared to life to reduce their speed to zero.

Although he did not necessarily believe in any specific deity or pantheon, Dini whispered a plea to whomever might be listening that the Gorn would lose sight and pass them by.

* * *

Lieutenant Shukla eyed his sensor returns, reporting, "One third of the Gorn fleet is slowing as they approach *Repulse*, sir."

"Not too close, I hope," Trujillo said with genuine concern.

She toggled open a comms channel, in the clear. "Gorn vessels, that starship you're approaching is set to self-destruct. I suggest you keep your distance." She spared a glance at Leo. "I'm still holding out hope we can get out of here without sparking a war."

"Ten seconds until detonation," Garrett advised.

Leo offered his judgment. "I believe your warning to the Gorn would satisfy The Powers That Be, sir."

She held up a hand with fingers crossed. "Aft view, computer enhancement of *Repulse's* position."

The screen obliged, and the image shifted just in time to display a bright flash as the Excelsior-class starship exploded in a cataclysmic joining of matter and anti-matter.

The bridge was silent for a moment. It was never easy to witness a starship meet its end, regardless of the circumstances.

"Well, sir," Garrett spoke up as she eyed her sensor returns, "I'd avoid that patch of space for the next millennia or two. That explosion has only worsened the subspace deformation created by *Repulse's* deceleration maneuver."

Trujillo nodded her acknowledgement and returned to her chair. "Status of the Gorn fleet."

"Their other ships avoided the detonation, the ones that maintained pursuit are falling behind, but only gradually. The gap will widen as we approach our space."

"Position and status of the other shuttle?"

Garrett reported, "Shuttle Two has just entered the Legreus system at warp with the Gorn in pursuit." She looked back from her console, features taut with anxiety at the implications of Starfleet personnel falling into the hands... claws... of the Gorn. "The shuttle's leaving a substantial warp trail, littered with radioactive particles. She must have taken damage at some point after launching from *Repulse*. I didn't even need her IFF transponder to locate her, she's practically blazing like a comet."

"Position of the hunter trailing her?" Trujillo asked.

"Just about to enter the system as well, sir. A blind Tiberian bat could pick up that signature."

"ETA?"

"Twelve minutes, eighteen seconds until Legreus system boundary, sir," Naifeh provided from the helm.

"Shuttle deck to Commodore Truillo. The *Repulse* personnel have been medically screened, and one has been moved to Sickbay. The others

are being escorted to the rec deck, with the exception of Captain Keller, who's on his way to the brig under escort."

Trujillo glanced over at Davula, and the two women shared a brief concerned look at this development before the commodore replied.

"Understood, Mister Cambrio. Be advised that we may have to execute a dynamic recovery of a damaged shuttle. Best you and your people erect the crash barrier and clear the deck."

"Aye, sir," Cambrio acknowledged before closing the channel.

Trujillo turned in her chair to fix her gaze on Helvia. "How long can our shuttle last against that hunter?"

Helvia's grim demeanor turned even more taciturn. "Not long, sir, especially if they've already taken damage. For what it's worth, the Gorn will try to take them alive, if possible."

Trujillo nodded and tried to force her stomach back up into her torso from where it had settled somewhere in her feet.

She turned back to face the viewer. "Helm, accelerate to warp twelve-point-seven."

* * *

Minimal environmental power along with passive sensors helped Shuttle Two maintain its subterfuge. With their warp core at nominal output to provide that small quantity of power, Dini stood over the shoulder of the third class petty officer working to repair the damage as best she could.

"How long do we have before we could reach warp six?" Dini wondered.

Steward Third Class Odette McDougal sighed. "Sir, I'm not a damage control tech," she admitted as her tricorder scanned the repairs she effected so far. "I took a correspondence course on power systems when I thought I would strike for the rating. I could be doing more damage at this point."

Dini looked back at the other three. Two of which were civilians that worked in the galley, and the last one was the single surviving corpsman making the other two comfortable given their injuries. "I doubt that very much," he said with a shrug. "Just... do what you can."

She turned back around and waved a tool at the damaged main energizer. "I know enough to know that we can't sustain high warp on the backup unit, Commander. You did right by rerouting power through the secondaries, but they're already showing signs of damage. Whatever the hell hit us on the way out, pulled no punches."

He let out a ragged sigh as the memory replayed in his mind. "Try not to think about that, right now," he said to her, though his words were as much for himself. "We might have to hightail it out of here at a moment's notice, so get ready to close it all up and strap in. Can't lose our best engineer, okay?" He said that last as he walked back to the cockpit to monitor the sensor outputs.

McDougal groused under her breath, "I'm your only engineer, sir." She continued with her scans and followed the exposed power conduit to find and patch weakened stretches. Before she could do so, the shuttle rocked beneath her.

"Shit," she spat, dropping the tools back into the kit and securing it to the bulkhead. She called to the others, "Strap in!" The moment she locked herself in her seat, the shuttle lurched once more, this time with more force than before.

* * *

"The shuttle has taken up a polar orbital position, and appears to be using the planet's magnetic field to mask their signature," Garrett alerted.

Trujillo nodded her approval of this tactic. "Is the hunter ship still following?"

"Yes, sir. They're a few minutes behind. We'll see how good Gorn sensors are."

Trujillo called over her shoulder to Helvia at the Tactical station. "Weaps, how do we measure up against a hunter-class corsair?"

"They're more maneuverable, sir, but we have a significant advantage in firepower and shield strength. Their best bet is fast strafing attacks, ours is to stand-off and whittle them down with sustained fire."

The commodore checked her armrest display for an updated ETA, and was still dissatisfied with how long it would take to catch up to the hunter and its prey.

"Helm, drop us out of warp in-system."

Naifeh threw a glance back, on the cusp of saying something but Trujillo raised a hand.

"I'm well aware of the risks, Lieutenant. We don't have an extra twenty minutes to saunter in from the edge of the system at impulse. We have to get to that shuttle before they do, otherwise I'm going to be forced to fire on the hunter and if we aren't already at war, that would seal the deal."

At Operations, Shulka's attention was drawn to a blinking icon on his display. "Sir, I'm getting a comms-link notice on my board. I believe we may finally have a secure channel with Shuttle Two."

"Will talking with them give away their position to the Gorn?" Trujillo asked.

"No, sir. It's encrypted, and the wavelength is broad enough the Gorn won't be able to use it to—"

"Gorn vessel has opened fire, sir," Helvia noted, cutting off Shukla's report. "They appear to be firing in a predetermined pattern, likely hoping for a lucky hit."

Standing behind Trujillo, Leo gasped, "If one of those hits lands..."

Trujillo looked at Verde and dipped her chin, acknowledging his fears.

"Commander Dini was pilot-in-command," Leo offered. "Hopefully, he still is." His sanguine eyes drifted over to Shukla's seated position.

Davula caught his expression and gestured to an empty auxiliary console. "Why don't you see if you can raise them..." she eyed the rank insignia on Leo's shoulder flash, "...Captain?"

Needing no further encouragement, Leo ignored Davula's confusion and slid into the offered auxiliary station. His fingers danced over the controls as he reconfigured it for communications. He grabbed the earpiece and wore it as he called out to them, "Verde to Shuttle Two." Within seconds, the response returned. "Sir," he twisted his head towards Trujillo, "we're getting a visual reply."

"On screen," Trujillo instructed.

The viewscreen blinked over to show a tight closeup of Commander Dini's bloodied face. "Captain!" his elated tones carried over the bridge speakers, conveyed with a toothy grin. "You're on another ship?" he added in confusion.

"Dini," Leo replied in greeting. "I'm aboard *Reykjavik*. *Repulse* was too damaged; we had to scuttle her." He paused to let that sink in and asked, "Say your status."

A quick explanation brought everyone up to speed. "I've only got four passengers of the forty-three we took on from *Repulse*," Dini said, allowing his guilt to color his voice. As she spoke, Gorn-directed fire came close enough to shake the screen. "Damn, that one was too close!"

"We're on our way, but we're still minutes behind the Gorn. If you can't maintain your position, can you go atmospheric?" Trujillo asked.

"Negative, we've sustained too much damage to survive the transition to atmo," Dini said curtly. "Doing some evasives using thrusters only, if I burn too much they'll spot us for sure."

Trujillo shot a look tight with concern at Leo as she muted the channel. "That tears it, we'll have to open fire on the hunter. I won't allow them to destroy the shuttle or worse yet, capture the survivors."

"That'll mean war, for sure," Leo noted, though his tone was disappointment rather than chastisement.

"Yes, but we haven't any alternatives in this situation." She opened the channel again. "Commander Dini, when I give the order, initiate a Z+ five thousand meters evasive course. We'll be bracketing the hunter with torpedoes then strafing them with phasers on our approach."

Dini called out, "Negative, sir, I refuse your order." He paused, then said, "Wait one." The circuit cut out. The screen showed the enhanced shot of the Hunter conducting burst fire as before. Minutes later, a long streak of atmospheric disturbance showed as a lazy line being drawn at a distance.

"-the hell?" Leo wondered aloud, his eyes tracing over the scene before snapping a glance at Trujillo.

"Sir," Shulka called, a hint of alarm creeping into his usually imperturbable voice, "the shuttle's ejecting objects... people... in EVA suits."

"*Reykjavik* to Shuttle Two, what are you doing?" Trujillo asked, her tone hardening.

Dini's voice replied over the audio circuit only. "*I can't let you fire on the Gorn, sir. I've evacuated all my passengers and am leading them away. Court-martial me, later.*"

"Dini, you don't have to do this," Leo cautioned, though it was moot since the Hunter began moving off, responding to Dini's strategy as he desired.

"*I do, Captain*," Dini replied, his tone softer than before. "*My ship was responsible for this mess, I botched the launch and ended up killing most of my passengers. I owe it to you and them to put an end to this, if I can.*"

Loath to interrupt, Naifeh turned a regretful expression towards Trujillo. "Crossing the system boundary, sir. We'll be dropping out of warp within the gravity well of the planet in eight seconds... mark."

She toggled the intra-ship in response. "Trujillo to all hands, brace for a rough deceleration."

Around the bridge safety harnesses snapped closed and the torso support frames rose from the deck for those personnel at standing stations.

“Helm, as soon as we drop to sub-light, make a beeline for those EVA suits. Ops, have transporters standing by to beam those personnel aboard the moment they’re in range.” Trujillo lowered her voice for Leo’s ears only. “If that crazy bastard survives this I’m going to pin a medal on him, insubordination or no.”

Leo coughed and nodded. "I'll hold him down for you, sir." His eyes never left the screen, however, watching as the Gorn vessel throttled to full impulse power in pursuit of the crippled craft. "Oh, no..." he breathed, allowing his anxiety to surface.

Reykjavik came to a crashing halt, the ship’s deceleration curve running headlong into the concrete reality of the planet’s gravity well. The vessel’s reinforced shields absorbed much of the impact, but system overloads forced automated cut-overs, lights flickered, and personnel were thrown hard against their restraints.

The ship lurched forward again as Naifeh kicked in the ship’s almost comically large impulse engines, setting *Reykjavik* on a corkscrewing course designed to pick up the free-floating survivors in the shortest amount of time.

Over the speakers, the sounds of impacts could be heard from Shuttle Two. Dini's grunts under fire were unmistakable. Upon the screen, a tractor beam lanced out and arrested the shuttle's progress once and for all. "I'm not letting these bastards take me alive!" he promised as he raised his voice over the din. "I'm engaging warp engines in five seconds. I'll see you on the other side, Cap'n."

Leo spoke quickly, "It was an honor to serve with you, Commander." He closed his fists tight enough to whiten his knuckles. Then, he relaxed his grips and stood at attention, knowing what was to come next.

“Helm and Ops, mind your stations,” Trujillo called out. “Everyone else, stand to render honors.”

The bridge crew unfastened their restraints and rose to their feet, coming to attention. It was a hasty gesture in the heat of the moment, and lacked coordination or elegance, but it was absolutely genuine in its raw intensity. They were about to watch a good man die in defense of others.

Trujillo nodded to Leo, extending the honor of the last words to him. She looked at the captain’s rank insignia on his shoulder flash. “Your ship, your crewman, Captain.”

As the bright flash of Shuttle Two's warp entry began, Leo decided on a paraphrased quote from memory, "'To the endless expanse, embracing the last full measure of devotion, he is a beacon of sacrifice lighting the path of salvation and peace for his comrades.'" On the last of his words, the strain of the damaged shuttle's hull reached critical stress and succumbed to the shearing forces of FTL speeds against the tractor, and disintegrated before *Reykjavik* and the Gorn.

“Gone too soon,” Trujillo murmured, before turning back to face her crew. “Stations, please.”

“The last of the survivors is safely aboard, sir. They’re being taken to Sickbay as a precaution,” Shukla advised in a low tone, unwilling to upset the hush that had fallen over the compartment with Dini’s passing.

“Mister Naifeh, get us the hell out of here. Best speed out of this system and back to the border.” She resumed her seat and turned to engage Helvia at Tactical. “Weaps, I want all of our decoys, sensor scramblers, and EM-jammers dropped at irregular intervals behind us as we egress the area. Whatever we can do to slow the Gorn without provoking them further with overt violence.”

She reached out a hand to grasp Verde gently by the forearm. “I’m sorry for your loss, Leo.”

"Thank you, sir," Leo said solemnly. He let out a ragged sigh and returned to the auxiliary station.

“Two-D tactical plot on the viewer,” Trujillo ordered.

On the screen, a silhouette of *Reykjavik* departed the star system at warp, trailed by dozens of Gorn vessels of various classes.

“Now we find out how badly the Gorn want a war,” she said to no one in particular.

And how badly Starfleet Command does... she thought silently to herself.

* * *

Chapter 17

* * *

Trujillo, Davula, and Captain Tarrant stood in *Reykjavík's* CIC watching the Gorn flotilla opposing them across their mutual border. The tactical plot map seemed to mock Trujillo, displaying a potent fleet that her combined task forces would be lucky to turn away, and not without heavy casualties. The Gorn had stopped their pursuit at the border and had not yet attempted to cross, likely unsure of what awaited them thanks to *Harken's* artificially imposed sensor-clouding dead zone that still persisted.

“Why aren’t they attacking?” Trujillo wondered aloud. “It’s not as if we haven’t given them ample provocation.”

“They might be awaiting reinforcements, sir,” Tarrant offered. “Though, between all the interference that white hole is kicking off and the jamming field *Harken's* maintaining, they’re effectively blind.”

“Would you go jumping over the neighbor’s fence without knowing what was waiting for you on the other side?” Davula asked rhetorically.

“Still, though, this isn’t like them,” Trujillo pressed. “They’re *Gorn*. They shouldn’t give a damn if they can see across our border or not. They’ve always been highly territorial, and they’ve never been much for negotiating, at least not with beings they regard as mere prey animals.”

Davula cocked her head to one side, the Bolian equivalent of a shrug. “We have a full diplomatic team on the way, hopefully the Gorn will stay put until they arrive.”

“I don’t hope, Commander, I plan,” Trujillo countered with a wry grin. “At the very least it keeps my mind occupied and prevents me from fretting.”

Davula returned the reticent smile. “How’s Leo, sir?”

Trujillo’s expression grew somber. “Physically and mentally exhausted. It was bad enough having to come face-to-face with Keller again, but with the computer override and *Repulse's* charge into Gorn space... let’s just say he’s had a very eventful twenty-four hours.”

The XO shook her head in acknowledgement of Verde’s burdens.

“Dr. Bennett ordered him to twelve hours of uninterrupted sleep. If he didn’t set an alarm, I’m not going to wake him.” Trujillo took a last look at the Gorn positions before turning to face Davula. “Status of the *Repulse* survivors?”

“We’ve offloaded most of them to other ships in the task force, sir. There are still eight of them in our Sickbay, and in deference to Commander Verde, I’ve assigned *Repulse's* senior officers guest quarters aboard. I got the feeling they didn’t want to be too far from him given all that’s happened.”

Trujillo nodded fractionally. “Yes, I think they’ve adopted him.”

“Oh,” Tarrant said, just remembering an important update, “*Gol's* systems have been restored. She was towed back to the task force. Commander Glal was, shall we say, somewhat vexed at his ship having been disabled.”

“I can only imagine,” Trujillo said, mustering a grin at the thought.

Davula inclined her head towards the exit. “If there’s nothing further, Commodore, I’d best return to the bridge.”

“Actually, I was just heading topside myself. I think it’s time I met Captain Keller.”

* * *

The door chimed and Trujillo sat forward to deactivate the terminal where she had been reviewing the service record of one Theodore Keller.

Commander Davula entered and stepped to the side, admitting Captain Keller to the compartment, trailed by two security specialists outfitted in armored vests and helmets.

Davula made the introductions. “Commodore Nandi Trujillo, Captain Theodore Keller.”

Trujillo stood. “Thank you, Commander.” She gestured to her XO and the security detail with a nod. “You’re dismissed.”

After they had exited and the doors hissed closed, Trujillo reached across the desk to offer her hand. “Captain.”

Keller stepped forward and accepted the hand briefly. He wondered aloud, “Am I? I’ve been treated more like a criminal, especially by your *best friend*, Commander Verde.”

Trujillo gestured to the chair facing her desk and resumed her seat, saying, “Commander Verde was assigned by Command, Captain. As for our being old friends, Leo defended me against charges earlier in my career. He’s a capable litigator.”

With a not-so-subtle growl emanating from his lips, Keller took the seat and leaned as far back as he could. "Maybe he is. Under my command, he skirted the lines of insubordination and nigh mutinous acts. He is lucky he is the son of two heroic admirals, else I'm sure his commission would have been cashiered following my evaluation of his... *service*."

"I can't speak to any of that, Captain, as it's not within my remit and is irrelevant to my current mission. My assignment was to track *Repulse* down and discover the reasons behind your ship's attack on the Gorn. The circumstances surrounding that attack are still under investigation, and you've not been charged in relation to that inquiry. You *have* been charged with disobedience of a direct order of a superior and conduct unbecoming for your alleged refusal to follow the lawful instructions of Commander Glal upon reestablishing contact with Starfleet."

Keller scoffed loudly, his eyes shifting away from Trujillo as he did so. "*Lawful*, you say. Let me tell you that I find your entire operation highly suspect. You presume to approach my mission with lofty, trumped-up authority. You jump to the worst possible conclusion absent the facts surrounding my operations behind enemy lines, then you move to have me relieved, remanded, and confined by my juniors in absolute disgraceful conduct. Then, as the coup de grace, you destroy my command without the ability or opportunity to allow me to gather evidence necessary to defend myself against your charges. You sit there, safe in your rank and role, judging me? I am outraged by this entire exercise."

Trujillo took a moment to call something up on a data-slate, before sliding it across her desk towards Keller. "These are my orders from Starfleet Command, Captain, which I have carried out. Would you care to show me yours?"

"How can I? My evidence was aboard *Repulse*." Keller angrily rejoined. "All I can say, at this juncture, is upon my word as a Starfleet officer, I had legal orders to operate within Gorn territory. I and my executive officer, Commander T'Rel, were briefed by a four-star admiral, issued written directives, and obeyed those orders to our understanding." His eyes narrowed as the heat of his statement rose. "I am not a rogue officer. I follow orders and trust in the chain of command."

"To that point, Commander Verde located potential evidence aboard *Repulse* that may well absolve you and your XO of any wrongdoing. That information will be provided to Command and your legal counsel in the ensuing inquiry and any potential subsequent courts-martial that might result. As to the destruction of your ship, it had been hijacked by means of your prefix codes and was barreling into Gorn territory towards one of their battle fleets. I encroached into Gorn space in pursuit of *Repulse*, and when Verde and your crew were able to shut down the engines, we were on hand to rescue you and your crew from certain death at the hands of the Gorn."

She sat back in her chair, favoring Keller with an analytical gaze. "And while you appear to cherish the prerogatives of your rank and authority, you take every opportunity to demean and discount mine, and that of my subordinates. I had issued a directive to Commander Glal to allow you to retain command of your ship upon your return here, but you refused to comply with his very reasonable instructions and thwarted his attempts to board *Repulse* to investigate your actions."

Brow furrowing even deeper as Trujillo's words reached him, Keller raised an accusatory finger in her direction. "'Demeaned and discounted?' From where I sit, *Commodore*, I held orders to maintain radio silence. It was expressed to me that my mission was of vital and critical importance to the security of the Federation and its citizens! Were you in my place, under those operational conditions, you are telling me that an officer of lesser rank comes along and attempts to assert their authority over that of an admiral's - a *full* admiral, no less - you would violate your orders to tend to that distraction while Starfleet Command awaited the successful completion under the penalties of disobedience?! For all I knew, it might have been an enemy trick. Were it not for the use of the Starfleet Emergency frequency, I would not have given it a moment's notice. How dare you question my loyalty." His frown communicated his extreme distaste at the idea. "I welcome the opportunity to explain my actions, with or without the assistance of that idiot Leo Verde. I did what was asked of me."

"Yes, you did, Captain. Without question," Trujillo said, her expression darkening. "You violated the sovereign territory of a foreign power, attacked their research installation and several of their vessels without asking further questions about the legitimacy or advisability of orders originating from an admiral you'd never heard of, because he doesn't exist." She held Keller's angry retort at bay with a raised hand. "It appears you were duped, Captain. And as a result of your actions, we're now in a standoff with the Gorn along the border, one trigger-pull away from all-out war."

Keller's lips thinned as he listened. "So, this conversation is to be a salve to your conscience? Your opportunity to conduct a one-person drumhead trial in the safety of your ready room? Shall I remain mute to your charges and allow you to draw your conclusions absent a full accounting of what actually happened?" He placed his hands on his thighs and ran them over the dark material of his uniform's trousers, back and forth. "You may exercise *your* rank and *your* authority that you seem to cherish enough to carry out this theatrical exchange, and I'll sit here and allow you to do so until you give me your leave. And then, I'll return to the brig for the duration of this flight." With a casual wave of his hand, he looked away toward the bulkhead to his right and told her, "Please proceed."

Trujillo's expression tightened. "Nothing said in here will appear in any inquiries or courts-martial. I called you here to take some measure of the man who's brought us to the brink of war. I've spoken to your crew, and I have found that they're good people, better than their personnel evaluations would have me believe. I've also discovered that they fear you, your mercurial disposition, and your tendency to lash out at anyone who dares to offer advice in any situation. You have their fear, Captain, not their respect, and certainly not their loyalty. I believe that whoever is ultimately behind this misadventure into Gorn space chose you and your crew for this task because they knew your people were so brow-beaten and fearful that they wouldn't dare ask questions or balk at your questionable orders. Your arrogance and venom made you and your crew the perfect patsies for an illegal and ill-advised attack on the Hegemony."

"You and Verde..." Keller shook his head in disgust. "You're both soft. You would seek a captain who's more concerned with being pals with their subordinate officers than understanding the true nature of leadership. In a crisis situation, I don't need friendship from my officers. I need them to obey me without question." He paused briefly. "I learned command in the field from some of the best, but my mentor was the brilliant Admiral Lawrence H. Styles. I served under him on three separate occasions, and he held his command similarly and to great effect. But, to your point, if I don't coddle my people, then I'm *mercurial* and a tyrant." He rose from his seat to stare down at Trujillo. "Verde made the same accusation of me just before I beached his ass for disloyalty, for his inability to understand the demands of starship command. It's funny that

you use some of the same phrasing; almost as though you coordinated your messaging." He nodded slowly. "Yes... you did say you were old friends, didn't you..."

Trujillo followed suit, rising to her feet. She fixed him with the same look she saved for those in the sights of her ship's weapons. "I've never been accused of coddling my people before, Captain. I find the allegation... quaint. For the record, I believe you stand a good chance of surviving the inquiries to come with your career intact. However, following my report to Command on the psychological and emotional state of your subordinates due to your toxic command style, I seriously doubt that you will ever be granted the privilege of a command again. Welcome to the Yellow Squadron, Captain Keller."

Rage colored his face as a red-tinge purple complexion overcame his normal skin coloring. "How *dare* you! My crew, as you call them, were perfectly fine until your best pal stepped aboard and started throwing his vaunted JAG authority around!" Keller leaned forward, his palms slapping hard against the edge of Trujillo's desk, "*You* sent that ship to interfere with my mission! *You* sent Verde! And, by the bye, he could not *wait* to leap into my chair the second he arrested and confined me to quarters! I am insulted by the fact that that *person* is walking around wearing a rank insignia he didn't *earn*." He pushed off from the desk and folded his arms across his chest, his eyes shifting away from her. "You allowed all of this to happen. Be it on your head when the bill comes due, *sir!* Count on that!"

Trujillo touched the LCARS interface on her desk, issuing a summons. "If that's the case, Captain, I'll stand tall before the flag to answer for my actions, as I have before. Oh, and that captain's insignia that you're so upset about was a gift from your former crew to Mister Verde, a symbol of their loyalty and faith in him under circumstances which appeared to be an almost certain death sentence."

Upon hearing that information, Keller's face went ashen. "They *what?*"

The ready room doors parted for Davula and the security detail, who stepped silently into the compartment behind Keller.

"It's amazing how a crew will perform for a good leader, don't you think?" Trujillo's smile had turned predatory and her eyes had assumed a flinty cast that hadn't been there when he'd entered the room.

Trujillo looked at Davula. "Commander, please show Captain Keller to guest quarters, where he will remain until I receive further orders regarding his disposition from Command. Standard isolation protocol on ship's systems access, and no visitors except his legal counsel."

As he followed the security detail out of the ready room, Keller paused to make one more comment: "I hope this discussion brought you the appropriate amount of joy, *Commodore*." Without waiting for her to respond, he departed for the corridor.

After they had departed, Trujillo shook her head sadly before opening a channel to the bridge. "Mister Shukla, please get me Starfleet Command and patch it through in here."

* * *

Chapter 18

* * *

Leo was awakened from his deep sleep by the gentle chime of the door announcement system. With a lazy effort, he opened his eyes and experienced the stiffness and soreness in his muscles as he tried to stand up from the bunk in his stateroom on *Reykjavík*. He sniffled deeply and cleared his throat as soon as the second chime sounded. Afterwards, his voice, raspy from sleep, inquired, "Who is it?"

The reply came through the intercom, "*Chief Zenn, sir.*"

"Enter," he said automatically. Zenn had traveled with him on multiple investigations in the past and had seen him in states worse than this. When she walked in through the door, he strained his eyes to see her amidst the glaring light from the ship's corridor. He mustered a short greeting of "Morning."

With triteness, she informed him of his sleep duration of over eleven hours. "The team grew concerned."

"The team." His use of her words came with a pointed tone behind them. "I guess I should not expect your personal concern," Leo noted with amusement.

Zenn shook her head. "No, sir. My concern is limited to ensuring that you attend to your duty, and nothing more." She faced away from him, but he could see that her words did not match her body language.

He smirked. "Understood, Chief." He got to his feet and reached upward to stretch out his muscles. His chosen sleepwear consisted of the Greenwood Royal Naval Academy t-shirt and boxer briefs that were given to him by the Queen. He twisted his midsection back and forth to alleviate the discomfort from a prolonged period of rest. While he did that, he observed her moving about his stateroom and commencing her usual organizing routine, which they often did when working together.

The memories of the previous day flooded his mind. He lost his energy and his joviality vanished.

"Lara?" he called to her softly.

The mention of her given name broke through her professional facade. "Leo?" she replied, concerned. "What's wrong?"

He sighed. "While I was on *Repulse*, Maria decided to break up with me. I read the message right before I crashed."

Zenn moved closer and wrapped him in a tight embrace. "I'm sorry," she said. "Did she say why?"

Leo nodded. "She, uh... found someone else. Her last assignment took her to a colony world and one of the agricultural administrators there caught her eye. To say that the feeling was mutual is an understatement. I guess she's really smitten because she's talking about moving there to head up their news service."

She glanced at him and inquired, "Didn't you have plans to meet up later?"

"After the conference. However, we got sidetracked here, and she ended up being assigned a new feature. She shipped out when I told her I wouldn't make our planned trip to Pacifica," he explained as they parted. "Them's the breaks, I guess."

Zenn offered lamely, "Bex always says that absence makes the heart grow fonder... for someone else."

He snorted. "Bex is a cynical person by nature. But... in this case, I guess she nailed it."

"She is a woman of rare talents," she noted. "So... do you need anything?"

Leo shook his head. "I'm a big boy."

"Um... are you going to reply to her in any way?"

After contemplating for a few minutes, he settled on the words, "I will wish her all the best and hope for her happiness."

She peered at him, wordlessly pressing him for more.

"The fact is that if Maria's found someone that she feels so strongly about that she'll upend her life to be with..." As he completed his sentence, his tone took on a resigned quality.

"Yeah, that part of the story really caught me off guard."

He chuckled while nodding. "Yeah."

Zenn noted, "It stings like hell, though."

"It does. I would never have asked her to sacrifice her career for me, but..."

"It hurts to hear that she did it so easily for this other person," she finished the thought for him.

He responded with a silent nod. He lifted his index finger in the air, a clear sign of his emphatic agreement with Zenn's assessment. In the dimly lit stateroom, they sat in silence.

"Would you take an order from me, sir?" she asked him.

He smiled. "In all our time together, I've always taken orders from you."

She giggled at that. "Go clean up, Leo. You stink. And you've got a meeting with the Commodore later."

Leo lifted his arm and sniffed to confirm his odor after almost half a day in bed. He gave a wince before nodding. "Aye, aye, Chief."

* * *

Trujillo, Leo, and Captain Tarrant from Starfleet Intelligence sat in her ready room, each of them with a glass of whiskey in hand.

The commodore raised her glass in a toast, "To the starship *Repulse* and all her crew who fell in Gorn space."

Raising his glass, Leo closed his eyes for a moment before knocking it back in one motion. When he recovered, he nodded. "To *Repulse*."

Trujillo gave him a sympathetic look. "It's never easy to lose people, Leo. It doesn't matter if you were only in command for a little while, it was your ship and they were your crew. I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you, sir," Leo replied in a soft tone. He set the empty shot glass down on the desk and wrapped his arms around himself.

Tarrant cast a glance towards the narrow viewport, the transparent aluminum and composite window three times thicker than aboard most other starships. "So, does anyone in Command know if we're at war with the Gorn or not?"

Trujillo shook her head with evident distaste. "Nobody seems to know. They're still gathered along the border, but damned if I know why they haven't attacked yet. We've got a full diplomatic team on their way with Vice-Admiral Abwao, who's taking command of the combined fleet they're assembling from Task Forces Lacertus and Truancy, along with another five ships the admiral's bringing. *Reykjavik* is being re-tasked to take Keller to the nearest starbase, after which... who knows? I just hate leaving this whole mess unresolved; it offends my sense of order."

She refilled her glass from the bottle of cask-aged New Scotland Single Malt, produced on Alpha Centauri. "I wish we knew who or what was responsible for hijacking *Repulse* and *Gol*. The fact that anyone, let alone a potential foreign power could exert that kind of control over our ships of the line is absolutely terrifying."

Tarrant dipped his head, appearing pained for a brief moment, before raising his gaze to meet Trujillo's eyes. "Sir, I've been giving that some thought. I must reluctantly admit this may have been an inside job."

Leo shot Tarrant a look, but said nothing.

Her eyes widened. "Intel you mean?"

"Not... precisely," he said, followed by a reluctant sigh. "Once upon a time, there was an agency, an adjunct of Starfleet Intelligence, that used to specialize in just this sort of thing. Skulduggery and dirty tricks were their *raison d'être*. They reportedly went rogue sometime in the late 2250's and were supposed to have been shut down, but rumors persist to this day that they're still out there, somewhere, plying their trade in fanatical defense of the Federation."

Trujillo took a long sip from her drink before being struck by a proverbial lightening bolt of realization. . "Wait... you're talking about Section 31, aren't you? That's a real thing? That was always the sort of bullshit midshipman's tales we passed around at the academy, ghost stories about a super-secret black-ops intel outfit that ran around the quadrant assassinating people and blowing things up."

"Back on Starbase Eight, the very first case I got involved in there was some kind of... conspiracy," Leo told them, though his gaze settled on the far bulkhead. "It was an odd case, but I know that when I started digging deep, my suspect went from having none-to-weak evidence to strong evidence in the course of hours. It dropped right into our laps without any effort. It felt almost like a frame job. Janeera and I got him to agree to an administrative discharge, because we both felt there was something more that we didn't see." He added, "He ended up dead in his hotel room on Risa later in the week."

Trujillo looked from Tarrant to Leo and back again. "I hope to hell you're both joking, but I know you're not. Something like this actually exists? An organization that can send a starship on a suicide mission into enemy territory under false and completely fabricated pretenses?"

"The mechanism clearly exists, though you and I both know that the prefix code is supposed to be a fail-safe against enemy capture," Leo intoned, now looking at Trujillo. "The entire system was subverted for a specific goal. That cannot happen without access."

She pinched the bridge of her nose, fighting back a headache fueled by utter disbelief and dismay. "Good God, how do we defend against something like that? If that's who was behind this, they clearly had no compunction about sacrificing an entire starship crew to destroy that Gorn weapons facility, not to mention the likelihood of starting a war between our two governments."

"That was supposedly their mission statement, Commodore," Tarrant offered. "They would do what had to be done, regardless of the cost in lives or treasure, to defend the Federation against threats both foreign and domestic."

"How the hell do I sell that to Command as a possible explanation for this whole fiasco? Sorry, folks, it looks like a covert intel cabal that hasn't been seen or heard from in sixty years decided to blow up the Gorn isolytic weapons station by playing Captain Keller for a fool. When that plot fell apart after the fact, they attempted to destroy the ship and the evidence of their crimes by hacking its prefix codes and driving it headlong into a Gorn fleet."

"You don't," Leo said with a start. "Do what I did. Write two reports."

Trujillo's confused expression begged elaboration.

Leo tossed a quick look to Tarrant before explaining. "My official report had nothing but the facts; dry, hard evidence to support the conclusions that he violated the civil rights of his prisoners based on what they framed him with. He was a bad guy, either way. I didn't lose sleep over this conviction." He paused, then continued, "I wrote a second report, same evidence, but I also included all the hinky stuff that happened during the investigation. Janeera has a copy of that report in her private archives, so if anything happens to me..." He trailed off, leaving the rest unsaid. "As far as our antagonists are concerned, we know nothing officially."

Her expression hardened. "You really think they'd kill line officers to protect their secrets?"

"Almost certainly, sir," Tarrant replied guiltily, looking morose.

"They already have," Leo added quickly. "They most definitely killed my suspect. No way he died in his sleep. He was a healthy marine company-grade officer."

"Goddamn it," Trujillo seethed. "Very well, then. I guess I'll be writing two reports, one for Command's general consumption, and one for Admiral Saavik."

Leo nodded in approval. "Yes. If there's any admiral I would trust, it's her." Then, a quick, sheepish amendment, "I mean, outside of my parents..."

"Damn it," she said again, this time with less heat. "This isn't the way Starfleet or the Federation are supposed to function."

Tarrant reached out to pour himself another glass, then raised it towards the others. "Here's to living up to our ideals, an increasingly risky proposition these days."

"I will, reluctantly, have to drink to that, Captain," Nandi said, topping off her own glass.

Leo allowed her to top him off, and he raised his glass before downing his shot. "*Salud.*"

* * *

Chapter 19

* * *

Trujillo pressed the annunciator, chiming Leo's cabin.

"Enter," Leo shouted from within. "Though, I'll be changing addresses in the next fifteen minutes!"

She stepped across the threshold, smiling wistfully. "Your chariot awaits, Leo. *Hathaway's* just come alongside."

Patting a packed duffle on the chair's seat next to the table, Leo nervously grinned and told her, "Ready to go. Hey, did all of the *Repulse* folks make it on board, okay?"

"They did, and I was assured that *Hathaway's* carrying three trauma counselors to assist with the crew's adjustment after the loss of their ship. The same will be afforded them at the starbase."

He agreed with a chuckle. "The therapists on base are some of the best," he assured her. "I'm sure some of them are heading back to Earth for new assignments, though, right?"

"Most of them, or so I've heard, after a generous spell of shoreleave."

Leo sighed. "I'm a bit concerned for the bridge crew. Commander Vara, especially. She seemed to be struggling once we beamed off of the ship. I was planning on talking with her on the long trip back to the base."

"Everyone handles stress and trauma differently. I'm sure talking with her might be helpful, but it's also a good bet she could use a bit of professional assistance."

"I started therapy, myself," he admitted. "Four years ago, when I got back from Sigma Serpentis - Greenwood. I, uh... it was a traumatic mission. And after this, I'm pretty sure I'll be visiting him frequently."

"Greenwood?" Trujillo suddenly remembered. "Oh, God... the Kzinti, wasn't it?"

"Yeah," he nodded solemnly. "Task Force Seventeen, Operation Castle Wall. I was an exchange officer on one of the Royal Navy ships when we got boarded. A lot of people died, including this young midshipman who had her whole future in front of her. I, uh... had a lot of baggage after that. But the talking's help a lot."

She nodded empathetically. "I've had... similar experiences. Fortunately, I've availed myself of counseling services as well. I think that's the only way any of us can last in this career until retirement."

On top of the table next to him, sat his captain's rank insignia. "Speaking of lasting to retirement," he said, picking it up and handing it to her. "I should give this back. My career as a captain is over."

Trujillo took a moment to examine the rank pin in the palm of her hand. "Not so fast, Mister Verde." She cleared her throat dramatically. "Attention to orders."

The Pavlovian response to the order reflected immediately in Leo's straightened posture. He waited wordlessly for the next drill order, as he had since entering the Academy.

She stepped forward reaching up to unclasp his shoulder flash, replacing the commander's insignia with the captain's pin. "By order of Commodore Trujillo, you are hereby awarded the brevet promotion to captain as of this time, stardate blah-blah-blah. It's official, by the way, I processed the orders with Command two hours ago." She re-fastened the clasp, smoothing it out and stepping back to look at him. "You get to keep these until the promotion is confirmed as permanent or someone of a higher rank than me decides otherwise. Seeing as I've written a very complimentary letter about you to Admiral Saavik, I say the chances of the latter are slim to none."

He balked, though respectful in tone, "Sir, I failed. I got so many people killed. Keller was right..."

She blinked, genuinely surprised at his admission. "Leo, give me your eyes."

Leo met her gaze without hesitation. "Yes, sir."

"You took a shattered crew, a crew that Keller had beaten and scolded into submission, and you provided them both leadership and hope in their moments of greatest need. Your plans were the best that anyone could have come up with given the circumstances, especially since you had no idea that *Reykjavik* was in pursuit. The freak accident that damaged the second shuttle isn't your fault, it was just... bad luck." She gestured in the general direction of *Hathaway*. "Those people over there gave you that pin because you earned it. Despite everything going on, you stepped into the power vacuum on that ship and you saved as many of them as you could. That's why they're waiting for you right now. Captain Sheinbaum says the *Repulse* survivors have formed an honor guard outside the transporter room."

He blinked silently at the mention of an honor guard. Finally, he found his voice, though at a high pitch, commented, "*Honor guard?*" Leo sputtered, "I.. er, uh... I didn't do anything special..." He sighed loudly, a blush settling on his cheeks at the news. "Can I be honest with you?"

he asked flatly.

“Always.”

"When I was on that bridge and everything went sideways... I asked myself what you would do in my place," Leo admitted, dropping his eyes to the deck.

She smiled. "I'm flattered. I still do that myself. Ask myself what Captain Bryce or Captain Vosluk would have done in whatever situation I'm facing. Usually, after it's all over, I hear one of them in the back of my head saying, 'Holy shit, Nandi, I'd never have tried that in a thousand years!'"

Leo chuckled. "Well, thankfully, the Nandi in my head seemed to be in lockstep with me. Which was great, until it wasn't. When we were watching Commander Dini on that screen, my muscle tension was so high, I thought I might break my bones just from standing up."

"Watching when there's nothing you can do to affect the situation is the worst part," she confirmed. "It's one of the sacrifices the captain's chair demands of us."

A slow realization of the truth altered Leo's expression to one of understanding. "I'm... yes. That's a painful lesson to learn. I can't imagine how much worse it gets when you take a flag rank and have to watch from a great distance."

A shadow seemed to cross Trujillo's features, a darkness comprised of dozens of ships, thousands of lives. "Exponentially worse," she murmured.

Leo stole a quick glance at his shoulder before returning to meet her eyes. "Well, for what it's worth, sir, you've literally been an inspiration. And I appreciate you taking the time to set me straight. Part of me wishes that I could stick around and learn more, but I'm sure my boss wants me back."

"Your boss, and those people over on the *Hathaway*," Trujillo replied, pulling herself out of her dark reverie. She gestured towards the door. "Shall we?"

Grabbing his duffle and slinging it over his right shoulder, Leo nodded. "Yes, sir." He preceded her out the door and into the corridor.

* * *

Starbase 8, in geosynchronous orbit of Memory Alpha

Seeing the seal of the Starbase Operations branch of Starfleet on the inner airlock's far bulkhead set Leo at ease as he returned to his home of five years. The starship *Hathaway* conveyed him and his team from *Reykjavik* back to the core worlds of the Federation, along with the rest of *Repulse's* surviving crew. Upon their return to Earth, they would potentially transfer the survivors to other assignments.

"So," Lieutenant Alejandro Martinez placed a hand on Leo's shoulder as he followed him through. "What's next, *jefe*? The next case on the docket?"

Leo sighed. "Yep," he replied, turning his head halfway toward the younger man.

Sergeant Angela Torres and her investigative partner, First Lieutenant Marie Collins, held up short to allow the two officers to hold their discussion in private.

Martinez nodded toward Leo's shoulder. "You keeping that on?"

"I tried to give it to Commodore Trujillo, but she told me to keep it," Leo explained softly. "I guess now that I'm back, I shouldn't wear the insignia of a rank I haven't truly earned."

Torres stepped forward and shook her head. "I think you've definitely earned it, Leo."

Collins agreed. "No doubt."

"Hey!" Chief Lara Zenn's voice called from inside the airlock. "Who's holding up the damn gangplank? Some of us have to report back in, you know?"

Everyone stepped clear and allowed the NCO to step through until she came up to Leo. Handing over a PADD to him, Zenn said, "Read through and sign this, *Captain*. It's the final draft report for the boss." With nothing further or waiting for a dismissal, she proceeded past the inner doors and disappeared around the corner.

Leo looked down at the PADD's screen and noted that she had finished putting together the team's final report for them. He deactivated the screen and saw his reflection. He brought the face of the device against his maroon chest and asked, "Should we get back to the office?"

Following Zenn's lead back to the turbolift, the discussion between the long-serving team fell silent. Leo glanced around, assuring everyone he was fine. The smiles he received were just as convincing as his own.

* * *

Leo found himself seated before the ornate desk of Captain Janeera Ch'charhat, who held the positions of both his Commanding Officer and the Sector Judge Advocate. She held a PADD in her hand and scanned the contents of the file, breezing through the entire report within minutes. He waited serenely as she enlightened herself with the facts of the case, before she could sign it and send it to the Judge Advocate General, herself, Rear Admiral Devereaux.

After fifteen minutes, Janeera made eye contact with him. "I see you had yourself another adventure out there, didn't you?" she asked in a neutral tone, but her eyes twinkled to convey it wasn't an interrogation. She added, shaking her head, "You have a knack for attracting trouble."

Leo audibly cleared his throat. "I suppose that my natural curiosity does land me in those circumstances."

She giggled melodically. "Just so."

"Um, I have to hand over this rank insignia to you," Leo stammered, reaching for his shoulder flash. "I am no longer authorized to have it on."

She signaled him to pause by holding up her hand. "Hold on a second."

He was perplexed as he explained that Commodore Trujillo had assured him that this was only a temporary promotion granted during an emergency. "Those conditions are no longer in force."

Janeera leaned in, clasping her hands and intertwining her fingers in her usual manner. "Be that as it may... I think there is something you should be aware of." She reached for another PADD, activated it, located the appropriate file, and then handed it to him.

Leo took the PADD in hand. The text reoriented itself for his comfort, rotating to make reading easier. His eyes followed the lines of the message, which was sent to him through his commanding officer.

"You wouldn't mind reading aloud from the third graph on down, would you?"

He glanced up at her and shot her a smirk. "No." He held up the PADD and read, "'Effective immediately, you are hereby authorized to assume the insignia and responsibilities commensurate with the rank of Captain. This directive, known as 'frocking,' allows you to undertake the duties and bear the privileges associated with this higher rank pending the formalization of your promotion. The formal ceremony and issuance of orders will follow in due course.'

"'In your capacity as Captain and as an Unrestricted Line Officer, you are expected to exemplify the highest standards of leadership, integrity, and professionalism that Starfleet holds in esteem. Your new responsibilities will demand the utmost diligence and commitment.'

"'Your performance while seconded to Task Force Lacertus aboard starship USS *Repulse* has demonstrated your ability to lead under pressure and has been a testament to your tactical acumen and courage. These qualities have not gone unnoticed by your superiors and peers alike.'

"'As you embark on this new chapter of your career, know that Starfleet Command has full confidence in your abilities and judgment. You are entrusted with the welfare of your subordinates and direct report, along with the success of your missions, and it is anticipated that you will continue to uphold the distinguished traditions of Starfleet.'

"'Signed, Admiral S. Heisenberg, Chief of Starfleet Operations.'"

Janeera grinned through his reading of the memorandum from headquarters. "So, as you can plainly see, Leo, you're still within regulation."

A deep sigh escaped him as he shook his head. "I don't know what to say."

Standing up, she circled her desk and extended her hand to him. "Let me be the first to congratulate you on a well-deserved promotion, Captain Verde. Well-deserved."

Leo stood up to take her hand and held it softly. "Thank you very much."

"Admirals Saavik and Devereux also wanted me to pass on their regards," she mentioned, joining him in the neighboring seat. "Also, a couple of possibilities for you to contemplate."

Leo settled into his seat and questioned, "What?""

"Well, you're a captain now, Leo. There are other opportunities out there for someone with your rank and experience. You've ranked out of your current billet."

In a soft tone, he confessed that he hadn't expected that. "I thought that I might be able to stay on here and continue as your XO."

She made a dismissive gesture with her hand. "It's the same situation as though you were aboard a starship."

"Okay," he accepted. "So, what exactly are we talking about?"

Placing her hands on her left knee, she crossed her legs. "You are being offered the position of Sector Judge Advocate on Starbase Ten by the JAG. My friend Commodore al-Adel has agreed to take on a new role and is in transit back to Earth, leaving the billet vacant."

Blinking in surprise, Leo reacted to that unexpected opportunity. Starbase Ten would position him near the Rihannsu Neutral Zone. Similar to his present position, it would place him in the heart of Border Service operations, drawing on his professional background to guide his decisions on cases. "That would be a great opportunity to take advantage of."

"I concur. But, before you go making a decision, you should hear what Admiral Saavik has in store for you." She reached for yet another PADD and pulled it closer to her. "On the strong recommendation of Commodore Trujillo, Saavik would like to offer you command of a new ship: USS *Musashi*. She's still at Utopia Planitia, under the final phases of construction where the pre-commissioning unit is forming."

Stunned by the second offer, Leo felt his vision blur as the memories of commanding *Repulse* came rushing back to him. He descended into a spiral until he remembered his encounter with Trujillo, and her words struck a chord at the perfect time. As he pulled himself out, he let go of his breath and turned his focus to Janeera, who had a concerned look on her face.

"Are you all right?" she inquired, her tone laced with concern.

"I-uh... I never thought I would be offered the chance to command a ship," he confessed, his eyes shifting to the deck. "Trujillo and I had a disagreement about the assessment of my performance on *Repulse*."

Janeera offered a faint smile and gave a nod. "You've always been very tough on yourself."

His gaze quickly returned to meet hers. "I feel that therapy has been helpful in my journey."

"It has." She reassured him, with a serious demeanor, that it was noticeable. "In my years as a civilian attorney, I can confidently say that no lawyer in my firm would have endured the same demanding conditions as you have in the service. Compared to most fleet-serving officers, you and Bex have seen a lot of action."

"Hah! You're probably right. Who would have thought that JAG work could be so dangerous?"

Janeera laughed along. "Maybe a transfer back to the fleet would be safer." She continued, "However, I think if you accepted the Sector Judge Advocate role, you would be chained to your desk, much as I am."

"Desk duty is what I expected when I accepted your offer," Leo replied with a grin.

After his admission, there was a prolonged and uncomfortable silence where neither of them spoke. Janeera interrupted the moment with a suggestion, "Give it some consideration. You don't need to decide right now. There's a chance that tomorrow you'll come across a third option that you'll like better."

Leo disagreed by shaking his head. "I don't need time to think. I believe I know what I want. And, maybe... for the first time in my career, it shall be my honest desire instead of trying to please my parents."

She widened her eyes as he spoke. "Very well. Would you be willing to tell me what you're thinking?"

He smiled widely as he took a deep breath. "Absolutely. You've been the most supportive CO I've encountered in Starfleet. It's the least I can do."

Under the praise from her soon-to-be-former XO, Janeera's high cheekbones took on a purple hue against her blue complexion. "I'm honored, Leo. And if you'll permit me to return the gesture... you've been an exceptional executive officer. I believe you will achieve great success as a CO."

Leo looked into Janeera's eyes once again, this time with an evident display of affection. He nodded in acceptance before revealing his decision to her.

* * *

THE END

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