

March Brave Boys There's No Retreating

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March Brave Boys There's No Retreating

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Summary

Borderline personalities in the Outmarches. Relaxing with a cup of intrigue. Sneaking around, then caught. Making use of the intelligence. A price is paid.

Meeting of the Minds

Ava Fonseca waits by the transporter platform as the sole representative of the crew of the good ship *Starlight*. With so many possible borderline personalities boarding, D'Shaya, as the captain since they were well in Romulan space, had decided that she and Francis would stay behind the scenes until things sorted themselves out.

Ava had kept her own counsel about that. One, they were assuming that she wasn't one of the borderline personalities, and two, she wasn't sure that she didn't feel like she was a sacrificial lamb in this whole thing.

She sees the blinking light on the old transporter console that signals a transfer from another ship's transporter system. She hits the enable button, as she doesn't trust this piece of shit beyond basic operations.

Sometimes that's a stretch.

Two figures shimmer into existence.

The first is a human male, dressed in what looks like Romulan civilian clothes. He is of medium height, with short gray hair on his head and what suggests that it might be the original color of auburn and gold on his chin and around his lips. She lets other parts of her brain than the tactical part survey his body; she notices that he is in shape, with at least a perceived ability to take care of himself in a fight.

The other, a Romulan woman, who has that timeless look of Vulcanoids, gazes at her with intense serenity. She is short, around Ava's own height, with dark curly hair tied back from her face. There is a blank expression on her face, the usual Romulan poker-faced-somewhere-strategically look.

Until you look into her dark eyes. There are so many different expressions in there, but the primarily one, the one that Ava notices the most is the wry humor. She is clad in the usual Romulan military breeches and boots and an open white civilian shirt.

She steps down and bows to her. "I'm Ael," she says in an almost-musical voice. Her hand, extended in human fashion is warm to the touch.

Ava looks at the human. "I'm Covenant," he says simply.

Another signal and another two figures complete the transport process. A much younger Romulan woman and one who appears to be a mix of Romulan and Orion step down. The younger full-Romulan steps over and salutes Ael. Ael returns it, then pulls the younger woman into a tight embrace. When she is released, she looks at the human male.

Both of them exchange smirks; Ael looks at them, then rolls her eyes. The Romulan-Orion, who appears to be slightly older than the young full Romulan, appraises Covenant—that had to be a codename—with dark eyes set into her light green features.

It is the young Romulan's turn to roll her eyes as the two exchange searching looks.

One more person enters the ship. A tall human woman with golden-tan skin beams in, dressed in a Starfleet working rig. She grins when she sees Ava, as Ava recognizes her from a time before.

She wears a full Lieutenant's insignia on her delta. "Commander," she says to Ava. She turns and looks at the others. If she is taken aback by

the number of Romulans and near-Romulans, she hides it well. Her eyes narrow when they fall on Covenant, however.

"I didn't know I would be working with a deserter," she says.

Ava keeps her expression even, as she recalls a vague Starfleet bulletin.

He keeps his expression even, then gives a crooked grin. He looks down and to his left, then back up at the Starfleet officer. "Things ain't what they appear, darlin'," he says in a slight accent that appears to have at least a couple of origins on earth.

"My name ain't 'darlin', darlin'," she replies. "It's Lieutenant Willa Torbert, asshole. Of the *Crusader*." She looks at the others. "The boat that saved all of your asses, I might add."

"We figured you would add that," Covenant says. "The compensation that all those torpedoes provides is always apparent in a boomer-pogue."

He stares at her blankly, with a slight devilment under the innocent expression. Torbert stares at him, her feet locked to the deck, with her arms drawn across her chest.

Finally Ael says, "Children, could we put them away please? I'm old. I don't have time to measure."

Ava manages to keep her expression even, without the laughter that she feels at the two combatant's expressions.

Torbert says nothing, but moves out of the compartment. Ava manages to catch up, to move them into the main common space.

When they are all seated, all but the Romulan-Orion and Covenant, who lean against opposite bulkheads, Ael says, "I'm assuming that the deuterium carrier was similar to what attacked your base? Along with fighters or gunboats of some kind?"

"Yes, Commander," Torbert says after a moment. "Almost identical."

"Except for the gunboats," Ava says. "We think the previous deuterium carrier acted as a mothership for them."

"We couldn't tell about this one. They never deployed."

"They didn't get a chance to, before someone hit them with a bellyful of torpedoes," Covenant says.

Ava brings out her PADD, before Torbert can reply. "There's something else. Chandra's security officer just got his report done, from the analysis of the remains of the previous carrier and the gunboats we were able to destroy. I just got it."

The rest of them wait. "And?" Covenant says.

Ava stares at him, suddenly thinking that Torbert might be on the right side of this version of the ancient game of 'Am I the Asshole.' She lets herself calm, rather than start the game up again. She sees Ael and the younger officer look at each other and smirk, if she knows her Romulan expressions.

"There were no remnants of organic material on the deuterium carrier. They only found the material in the wreckage of the gunboats."

All of them are silent, digesting this.

The half-Orion speaks for them all. "So we're no closer to finding out who these attackers are," she says. "I'm so glad we got all these high-powered intelligence and tactical officers on the job."

She grins. "I'm Targsbane, by the way. Just a humble pirate. One who's got some more information on your dadat-rope.

"For a price."

Ava sees a certain expression come over Covenant's face at the price. A slight, crooked grin, followed by a glance down and to his right.

The Link-easy

Sol III (Terra)
San Francisco, California
Mission District
Strands

Issaandrine et MacKenzie é Soturnal, known as Issa, a Link-Mistress of the Prelanka'n, but with another, more secretive occupation, sits at a table drinking water in her restaurant. She glances out the picture window at the Starfleet Academy bell tower. There is a brief burst of pain and grief, before she tears her eyes away from the familiar landmark.

She is able to stifle a release of her Link, so that the patrons of Strands don't feel that grief that this view always gives her.

Even though the place itself gives her hope, mixed in with that grief.

Hope that there is good in the galaxy. Hope that she doesn't always see in her 'other' occupation. The one that her dinner guest manifests. Probably the most serious manifestation of that occupation.

But also one who fights the same darkness that she tries to.

As Issa waits, she sees the face that is missing. The smiling face, with hope still in his eyes. Standing in the gray-blue uniform of a quarter-

century ago. The orange patch of Sciences under his delta, with the brand new single dashed silver and gold stripe of a lieutenant junior grade.

Jaket, she thinks

Jak.

She'd never seen him again after this vision. No family member of his starship had seen their loved ones again, after a mission to the Crain Expanse.

Klingon ships had been seen in the area, but Starfleet couldn't prove anything.

It had been a few months after his death that a man had approached her. An older man, dressed in a Starfleet captain's uniform. He'd offered a chance.

A lifeline, to be honest.

A chance to do something worthwhile for the promise of the Federation. A chance to make a difference in the lives of others who explore and protect for the Federation. And all that she had to do was do what she did as a Link-Mistress.

In San Francisco.

She'd refused at first, but the idea had intrigued her. Six months later, she had accepted his offer, on her own terms.

Issa had refused to work for Jameson McCall and Starfleet Intelligence. She'd offered her services to the Protectors' Guild on her world. A certain section of that organization that dealt in information.

The Dai'has'set. A secretive organization, whose name translated as roughly, the 'Knowledge-Seekers.'

She had picked her own location. One that was in view of Starfleet Academy, at least from its elevation. To serve as a reminder of why she still did this. A few years later, when she had married and her Prelanka-na, a human woman named Alexa MacKenzie, had joined her in the restaurant and the attached Link-club. Along with several staff, all volunteers from various intelligence agencies. She'd finally been at peace, where the grief's edge was lessened.

But always present.

She looks up as she sees her wife walking towards her, a human woman in tow. The apparent stranger is in her middle years, dressed in the business suit that Issa recognizes as her armor. She rises as C comes closer. C turns and takes Alexa's hands in hers, then kisses her on the cheek. Alexa smiles at her, then turns and gives Issa her usual grin reserved just for her one. One mixed with equal parts concern, devilment, and something else.

A touch of promise, for later.

C watches their byplay, a warm smile on her slightly rounded face. Issa envelops her into a tight hug, then kisses her ear just under the dark bob.

They sit. Their drinks come immediately, based on C's past preferences. She sips the neat bourbon appreciatively as Issa watches, her Deltan brandy untouched.

"So you have something for me?" C asks, as they finish their meals. They'd eaten in silence, except for inconsequential conversation, never mixing business with pleasure.

At least not this type of pleasure, that the Link-club is known for.

Issa smiles. "I may. As you said, your target came in here a couple of nights ago. She did move into the Link-joint. She enjoyed several of our specialties."

C listens intently, waiting for the punchline.

"Your suspicions were correct. She isn't human, born in Los Angeles of English-Polish extraction."

C leans back, her expression one that shows her concern. After a moment, she nods.

"Are you going to give this information to McCall and Starfleet? Or Starfleet Security?"

C gives a quick shake of her head. "I don't know. I'm leaning towards not. I think that we need to let this play out. On both ends."

Issa feels her features go hard. "This is exactly the kind of bullshit that I get tired of, C," she says. "We have a Romulan, who seems to have infiltrated Starfleet, in Section 31 no less. You're taking a goddamned serious risk with the Federation's primary defense and exploration entity."

She calms her anger, then reaches out and touches C's hands. "This could take out Section 31 for you and the Prince."

"You're not wrong Issa," C says after a moment. She takes another sip of the wine that had come with her dinner. "But 31 is still too compartmentalized. We want to roll it all up and prove that it is a rogue organization. The fact that they let a Romulan in, only proves they're incompetent, rather than malevolent."

Issa breathes out. She doesn't think that she will win this argument. For a moment, she considers letting McCall know. He might take a dim

view of this information and how it is being used.

But a schism between the three organizations now—hers included—could inflict even more danger to the delicate balance of what they are doing in Romulan space.

Along with the health of the several officers and the agents they are running.

She sidelines the thoughts for the moment. There might be opportunity in the next few hours. She pulls out a small jeweled token and places it between C's hands. "Come," she says, "let's go to the find some *different* entertainment. The Link-Mistress' treat."

C raises an eyebrow, then lifts the token. She touches it in a certain way.

A field of distortion comes over her face, masking it effectively. She deactivates the field, then nods.

She rises and follows Issa to the back of the restaurant.

Sneaky Francis

Francis feels himself reassemble at the junction of two passageways. He looks down at himself, clad in a tight black jumpsuit; he smirks under the mask covering all but his eyes. A touch of a button on his wrist and he feels a shimmer move over his body, masking it further. There is another silent burst of energy beside him as another figure rematerializes beside him. He focuses on the dark eyes in the slit of the mask. Both of them stare back at him, then slowly cross. He can just see the beginning of the upswept eyebrows, along with the telltale smattering of freckles on the part of her nose that is visible.

The slim body is recognizable in the jumpsuit as well, just before the shimmer of the masking field activates.

Francis wonders how Targsbane will take to the fact that they had decided to relieve her of the information that she had offered to sell. The woman next to him had come up with this scheme, apparently willing to test the limits of an Outmarch pirate's goodwill.

"Come on, Francis," D'Shaya says in his earpiece. "Pull your finger out. Let's get going before all of those assholes on our boat stop arguing and realize that our pet Starfleet turd has sent us on a wild varek-chase." She starts down the passageway, checking her tricorder. "And stop looking at my ass."

Francis obeys, at least the part about following her. He looks at his surroundings. For a pirate ship, the ship is remarkably well-kept and cleaner than he would've thought. They duck into an alcove as they hear voices. An Orion male and female walk past them. He smirks as he sees that the male follows the woman a step or so behind, looking almost obedient.

Stank-whipped, he thinks to himself. *She's got him by the balls. Or somebody does.*

As he follows D'Shaya down the corridor, he is struck by the fact that he seems to be following her at the same subservient distance as the Orion does. He increases his speed until he is beside her.

He can feel her smirk, even masked, even foot or so away.

As they approach their objective, they have to duck into hiding places more and more as they see the melting-pot that is Targsbane's crew.

Until they are just outside their objective. There are two Arcturians standing outside. They have the very identical faces and builds of the Warborn—the genetically constructed and enhanced former soldiers whose existence and attempted entry into Starfleet Academy had caused a ruckus several years ago.

Around the same time Francis had been kicked out of that institution.

He is about to ask D'Shaya what the plan is when another black-clad figure, a muscular one with a feminine shape steps out from the other side and rams the butt of what looks like a two-handed sword into certain spots behind the ears of the Warborn, one right after the other.

Both collapse like sacks of rice. When he is apparently tasked with disposing of their unconscious bodies, he glances at the slit on the woman's mask, recognizing the amber eyes of the t'Lemaska, the Romulan executioner.

"Why is she here?" he asks D'Shaya.

The woman—he searches for her name, but can't find it in his brain—answers. "Somebody had to make sure that your chestnuts stay out of the fire, Francis."

He looks at both of his companions sourly, then moves up to the lockplate. He pulls his PADD out, then starts to manipulate controls on a particular program contained on it. A program that he had purloined many years ago.

When the current captain of this ship was barely a teenager.

The door slides open. He makes an 'after you' gesture to the women, but only D'Shaya moves into the compartment. The t'Lemaska takes up a position outside. His eyes widen as he sees her shimmer and take on the appearance of one of the Arcturians.

He stares at D'Shaya, who reaches down and touches another button on her wrist. She instantly assumes the appearance of another guard.

"How come I didn't get one of those?" he asks. He doesn't receive an answer.

He looks around him at the blinking computer servers of the mainframe. They had grown in number since the last time he was here.

D'Shaya pulls her own PADD out and slides it into a small slot. He watches the screen as she attempts to break into the computer.

His eyes lock on a particular area of space, as script in a slightly familiar language appears. His eyes light on a particular symbol in the corner.

A multicolored trefoil, embedded in another icon. He realizes that she is sending it to another location, even before the progress bar is filled.

He can't tell where that location is, only that the data appears to be traveling to multiple locations.

"I should've known," says a female voice. He closes his eyes as he senses a presence behind him. He turns and holds up his hands. There is a flash of light behind him in the area of where D'Shaya had been. A similar flash of light can be seen outside.

He moves his hands to his chest, realizing that he has been left alone. Even the t'Lemaska is gone.

He stares into the dark eyes of the young Orion-Romulan woman. The Orion couple that he had seen earlier hold older model Starfleet phasers on him.

Targsbane moves to her tiptoes and yanks his hood off.

He smiles sheepishly. "Hello, A'lanna," he says. "Long time no see."

She sighs. "Not long enough, Aayansh," she says. He manages not to grit his teeth at the use of what passes for the closest thing to a real name that he has. "Tell me why I shouldn't space you," she says.

"Old times?"

Her eyes harden. "You weren't that good in bed."

Chandra's Decision

Chandra reads the encrypted text on her PADD. She recognizes the source, but she can't think about that now. Next to her at the wardroom table, Siobhan watches and waits. Chandra exhales in unison with her subordinate.

"Well, we've got the first lead we've had on our mysterious attackers," Chandra says. She hands the PADD to Siobhan.

"The Triangle?"

"Yeah. Not exactly the best lead, but something to look into."

"I've never been in the Triangle, even though FOB Merlin isn't that far," Siobhan observes. "Always wanted to go."

"I bet you have," Chandra says with a grin. "Not a great amount of law and order there. I think there's only a sector Chief Deputy Marshal keeping the peace, if that."

"Along with a Klingon and a Romulan counterpart," Siobhan adds. She brings her hand to her chin, looking thoughtful. "I don't recognize that root word," she says. "Is it Klin, or is it Rihan?"

Chandra rubs her forehead. "I don't know either."

Siobhan snaps her fingers. "I bet I got someone here that might know. Somebody with a doctorate in Romulan cultural anthropology."

A few minutes later, Sara Quigley stands in front of them, self-conscious with the single black circle of her new rank on the crewmember's delta pinned to her workshirt. Chandra smiles at the perpetually raised right eyebrow and messy curls of hair that had been described to her.

"So what do you think, Crewman?" Chandra asks, giving the universal term for anyone who doesn't have any other title and ranking below a Chief.

She looks at the word below Chandra's finger. Her eyes narrow as she takes it in, but her eyebrow somehow remains halfway up her forehead.

"It's an old Rihan word. It means 'discommendation'. Which isn't a Romulan term."

"It's Klingon," Chandra says. "Meaning someone who's been kicked out of a House."

Quigley nods absently, then belatedly says, "Yes, Captain," at Siobhan's prompting.

"Don't we know someone who has some contacts in the Triangle?" Siobhan muses. She gives Chandra a pointed look.

Chandra returns it with a pained version. "Yeah. We do. I think he might have some contacts with some of the more shiftless Klingons."

"You know he's going to be insufferable after we ask him for help."

"Nothing to be done for it, Shiv," Chandra says. She looks at Quigley. "Read through more of that, Sara. I'd appreciate your insight in how the Roms might be affiliated with a Klingon House. One that might not be affiliated with the Empire again."

Quigley brings her brows together. "The Klingon Free Systems?"

Chandra nods. "Yeah. It's just a hunch, seeing that we've had some history with one of those Houses."

Quigley comes to attention, then turns and is gone.

“So how are we going to get Agon to the Triangle? The *Starlight*’s still MIA,” Siobhan says.

“I’m tempted to make him hitch a ride there, but I won’t, now.” She is thoughtful for a moment.

“Let Decker take him in the *Aerfen*. Then let her look around those mysterious coordinates in the intel we got from Ava. It’s a bit close to the Klingon side of things, but she’s got a good head on her shoulders.”

Enemy Contact

The Triangle

Two days later

Decker Sinclair watches the viewscreen as the *Aerfen* sits concealed on an asteroid. She had dropped Agon off on one of the fringe worlds of the Triangle, the small stretch of space between three empires.

She closes her eyes, hoping that her crew doesn’t notice that she blushes at what she and Agon had done to pass the time in transit. She knows that she hadn’t done anything that would betray Theelia, his wife and bar-partner, as she had been open like most Deltans are about Agon.

Especially since Decker recalls her watching with interest from an earlier time above the bar.

She shouldn’t have given in to her baser needs. She is the captain and must set a certain example.

She can almost feel Siobhan’s eyeroll in her head at that. *Do you listen to yourself, twit? You think that stopped Chandra when she and Jaiggur Grasp blew out the entire ship’s company when they made the beast with two backs?*

Somehow, that doesn’t make her feel better.

Eileen Madison breaks into her reverie. Her XO stares at her, her light green eyes even, though there is a hint of an upturned cant to one side of her mouth.

“What, Number One?”

“We’re getting strange signals on the Cohort system, Captain,” she says.

Decker comes alert. “What kind of signals?”

Madison shakes her head. “We’re not sure. They seem to be tight-beam subspace signals.”

Decker feels her eyebrow raise. “So, short range?”

“Yes, Captain.” She taps her earpiece, then looks at the Cohort officer. “There are three of them, now,” she adds. “Each one in a different direction.”

Decker exhales. “Yellow alert. Raise shields,” she says.

The alert tone comes over the speakers. A few more crewmembers come in and staff the Cohort table in the pit.

Madison moves down as well. Decker sees her look at the display. She touches a button. “Tactical display on your screen, Captain. Port watch at battle stations.”

“Very well,” Decker says. She looks at the helm. “Raise ship from the asteroid.” She does quick calculations in her head. “Come to course 320 mark 45. All ahead three-quarters impulse power.”

“320 mark 45, Three-quarters impulse power ahead.”

“Captain, the three signals are coalescing. At one point.” Madison says.

“Where?”

“Directly in front of us.”

“Hard right rudder,” Decker says. She comes up and out of her seat. “Sound General Quarters.”

Her eyes lock on the screen. Three shapes pull from around a larger asteroid.

Shapes that look strangely like three deuterium carriers.

“Large warp displacement right in our path!” Eileen Madison shouts.

“Sound collision,” Decker says. “Full impulse power astern.”

The wailing up-and-down scream of the collision alarm cuts through her senses as a large green shape materializes.

There is a flash of light in front of her, where the Cohort pit is. The ship—her ship—heels over sickeningly. She feels an eruption of heat behind her.

“Send out the log buoy,” she hears someone say. She realizes it is her voice. “All hands abandon ship!”

Another flash of light and there is nothing.

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