

The Comet

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The Comet

by [Beatrice Otter](#)

Summary

Starfleet has found a comet, just outside the Trill system, that promises interesting knowledge. But less than two years after Vulcan's destruction, everyone is thinking in terms of worst-case-scenarios.

Notes

I am ignoring the Worlds of Deep Space Nine novel *Trill: Unjoined*, in which the ancient Trill had a colony on the planet Kurl. This story draws heavily on the anthology *Lives of Dax*, especially the stories about Audrid and Lela, though the story about Audrid is drastically different because of changes in the timeline. You shouldn't need to know anything about that anthology to enjoy this story.

Written for shopfront in Star Trek Holidays 2020
Betaed by TexasDreamer01

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

"I wish I could have been there to see her off," Audrid said. It was the first time Neema, their oldest, would be away from home overnight. Meanwhile, Audrid was stuck here in her office at the Symbiosis Commission waiting for a Starfleet call, and had taken a break from the mountain of paperwork and crucial decisions and planning she was buried under to call home.

Her husband, Jayvin Vod, shrugged. "Neema'll be fine, and if she's not, they'll call us right away. And I took enough pictures for you. I don't know that Gran's even noticed his big sister is gone. I just wish you didn't have to spend most of the night in the office."

"I could lean on my position and demand they install a priority, secured subspace communications link for their house so I could work from home when planetary time differences required meetings outside of normal business hours," Audrid said wistfully.

"I think you should," Jayvin said. "I've already said so, many times."

She sighed. "I still don't think the extra convenience to me is worth the battle over funding and use of government resources." Almost everybody agreed with the need for at least one colony; Vulcan's destruction had shown how hideously vulnerable a species was that had no colonies. And Trill had not one but *two* sentient species so vulnerable. But not everybody liked Audrid's plans for accomplishing it, and some had joined the ones who wanted Trill to turn inward rather than outward in the common cause of fighting over every scrap of money spent on the project. Adding in something that might be considered a personal indulgence, however small and useful for her work ... she shuddered.

Jayvin spread his hands. "You're the politician." Vod was an oddity in that, despite being joined to his sixth host, he had never once been a member of the Ruling Council or the Symbiosis Commission.

Audrid was listening to music when the call finally came through. It was unlike Admiral Pike to be late, but since the reason had been classified the one time it had happened before, she didn't waste time asking about it.

"Ah, Admiral! So nice to see you," she said. "Has there been any word on a suitable planet?" This was the major bone of contention, among those who recognized the need for a colony: the involvement of Starfleet in the search for it. The insistence that Trill should find their *own* planet to colonize (instead of depending on aliens) was arrogant stupidity; their space force was practically non-existent. How were they supposed to find and survey such a planet without ships of their own to do it? And, once a suitable planet was found, how would they maintain their claim to it? Trill was *far* from the only world in this corner of the galaxy now scrambling for a backup homeworld.

Pike shrugged. "There is one, but it's a lot further out than you were hoping. It's much closer to some of the other worlds we're scouting for, in fact. If you want it, there'll have to be some serious negotiations. We're still looking in areas closer to you, though, if you want to wait; I'll send you all the data for your people to look at."

"Thank you," Audrid said. She was mostly worried about the competition. As to location ... further away would be more inconvenient for practical purposes, but it would also make things safer if someone showed up in the Trill system with a planet-killer.

"But there's actually something more pressing to talk about this morning," Pike said. Audrid still had much to learn about reading alien expressions, but he looked far graver than she was used to seeing him.

She steeled herself. "What is it?" It couldn't be worse than the news that Vulcan, one of the oldest and most influential planets in the known galaxy, was gone.

"You know that we've been keeping a much closer eye on all the space in and around Federation and allied worlds, lately?"

"Of course," Audrid said. Space was large; it was easy to hide things in it. If the Federation had paid more attention to places thought empty, perhaps the planet-killer might have been caught before reaching Vulcan. Trill itself had vastly stepped up its watch on the local area, and even now there were plans in the works for a whole web of automated sensor platforms to be deployed around the system and in the interstellar space between them and their nearest neighbors. "What have you found?"

"There's a comet headed toward Trill; at least, it looks like a comet on the outside. It's got some funky composition that we're not sure about, so we're going to send a team to investigate. It doesn't have any life signs that we recognize as such, but it does have a bioelectric signature that our scientists think looks like something you might recognize. I'm sending you the data now."

Audrid found herself looking at a set of data that looked intimately familiar. A few keystrokes were enough to convert it from Federation units of measurement to Trill ones, and that confirmed it.

She sat back and thought, furiously. They had their own probes and ships, of course, but none were as robust as Starfleet ships tended to be, and the time it would take to coordinate and launch such a mission....

"I'll need to consult with our scientists and the rest of the Commission. Possibly even the Ruling Council," Audrid said. "But I believe we will wish to join your team."

"You do recognize it, then," Pike said. "What is it?"

Audrid spread her hands in an uncertainty that was only partly feigned. "A tiny minority of Trill," *those who were Joined with symbionts*, "have that bioelectric signature, as your scientists no doubt are aware. But I've never seen that signature apart from a Trill." Symbionts in their pools used such signals, but only when communicating with Walkers, that is, hominid Trill. Among themselves, symbionts communicated ... differently. "Your scans show none of the other signs one would associate with a Trill or any other large hominid. Nor do they show any of the signs of the machinery that would be necessary to make a comet habitable to Trill life. Without a closer look, there's no way of knowing."

"Right," Pike said, though she didn't know if he believed her words or merely thought he couldn't get any more detail from her. They'd clashed before over her reticence to share the reasons behind some of the non-negotiable criteria for any Trill colony world. (She couldn't, of course, tell him that symbiont breeding pools required conditions that were notoriously difficult to synthesize.)

He leaned back in his chair. "Any chance this is the remnant of some long-lost Trill space program?"

"No," Audrid said. "We've never bothered with comets, nor with much beyond our solar system, which is the whole reason we need your help finding a new world to settle on."

"No chance there was some sort of disastrous mission that got classified?"

"Nothing that would be classified from *me*," Audrid said. "The history of our space program isn't *that* extensive, and I have clearance for everything. Whatever it is, *we* didn't put it out there."

Pike nodded seriously. "Okay. I'll send you any more information as it develops. You'll be notified immediately of any course or velocity changes."

"Thank you."

There were a few more details to take care of on the call, and she endeavored to stay focused on them, difficult though it was.

As soon as Pike hung up, she called the system spaceflight center and gave them the coordinates of the comet to watch. Then she called home—priority one.

"Hello?" Jayvin said, sleep blurring his voice. He'd answered audio-only.

"Jayvin, call your team," Audrid said. Jayvin was the Deputy Head of Xenobiology at the Kem'Alta Institute; his team were undoubtedly the best on Trill to decipher the meaning of those bioelectric signals. "They're to come to the Commission labs immediately."

"To the Commission? Why? Audrid, it's the middle of the night, can't this wait?"

"No, Jayvin, it can't," Audrid said. "Call a carer for Gran, I won't be making it home tonight."

There was a short silence on the other end of the call. "Okay, but I hope you can at least explain to me once I get there."

"You'll get all the information I have," Audrid said. "But this can't go over an unsecured line."

"You *should* have gotten that secured line installed at the house, after all," Jayvin said.

"I guess," Audrid admitted. "I love you. See you in a bit."

She ended the call and started figuring out who else would need to be there.

Instead of briefing them one by one, she waited until there was a critical mass of people from both Jayvin's team and the Commission's own research division, along with key members of the Commission leadership.

She told them about the Starfleet data, and gave it to them. A few swore as they studied it.

"I hope the significance of this is obvious to you," she said. "In the best case scenario, it is evidence for symbionts from beyond our system, and could be of incalculable scientific and cultural value. Not to mention if it really *is* a symbiont of the Trill type—a whole new symbiont!"

"Worst case scenario," said Nisro Proix grimly, "it's some nutcase from the future with a nonsensical vendetta, and we end up going the same way Vulcan did." He was in charge of the emergency planning for how to evacuate the symbionts from the Caves of Mak'ala, should a planetary extinction threat appear.

"Hopefully, in that case, Starfleet has caught it early enough to protect us," Audrid said. "A comet is far less threatening than an enormous unidentified ship. In the medium-case scenario, whatever is on this comet does *not* provide a serious threat, but Starfleet's scientists learn about symbionts and our secret gets out."

The assembled scientists exchanged sober looks. If other species, particularly one of the great powers of the quadrant, decided they wanted to possess symbionts for the chance of practical immortality and great wisdom they brought, Trill would not be able to fight them off. And once they established a colony, they would be doubly vulnerable, at least until the colony was established and secure.

Audrid continued. "I will be briefing select members of the Ruling Council in the morning, and I need three things: first, a detailed examination of the readings Starfleet has given us and any other readings our own sensors can provide. Second, a list of possible outcomes and how likely they are—" she raised her hand at the murmurs through the group. "I am a scientist myself, I know the inherent unreliability of forecasts based on incomplete data. But the politicians will need them. Third, at least the outlines of contingency plans for each scenario. Assume that we will be sending a team along with the Starfleet team."

Only Lela's long years of experience as a politician kept Audrid's face still as she realized what she had forgotten. She only hoped the delay wouldn't prove critical. She assigned people into groups focused on different aspects of the problem they faced, and went to call the Ministry of Planetary Defense.

The representatives of the Ruling Council heard her briefing the next morning with stone faces.

"Why didn't you wake us last night as soon as you heard?" Narrur asked.

Audrid shrugged. "It's travelling at sublight speed, on a ballistic course. It has minimal power signs. Unless something drastically changes, it will take almost forty years to reach the edges of our system, and our homeworld will be on the opposite side of our sun for the time it takes the comet to pass through our system. We have time to deal with it, and this way we had much more nuanced analyses to show you. Both the System Spaceflight Center and the Planetary Defense Center are tracking it and agree that the threat level is low."

"Who are you planning on sending with the Starfleet expedition?" Sihjor Lazil asked. He was one of the prime movers in the Ruling Council, and one of those who opposed her proposals even though he supported the need for colonies.

"I don't want a panic, and we already have quite a number of people looking at this," Audrid said. "They all know not to talk, of course, but the more people who know, the harder it is to keep it quiet. Jayvin Vod and I are the two greatest experts in symbiote biology of the people available, so we'll be leading the team. We'll also need a few junior scientists as well. General Kirrix of the Ministry of Planetary Defense has agreed to provide our team with armored spacesuits, and will have his command standing at the ready in case it turns out to be anything dangerous."

"I notice how quick you were to involve your husband, Dax," Lazil said. "Nepotism?"

"He's the Deputy Head of Xenobiology at the Kem'Alta institute," Audrid said coolly. "And his superior is nearing retirement and has given over most of the practical work in running the department on to his shoulders. Who else should I have called?"

"Did you have to call anyone outside the Commission?" Lazil sounded like he were sucking on sour fruit.

Audrid raised her eyebrows. "The Commission is hardly the premier research institution on the planet," she said. "Our focus is on caring for the Symbionts and selecting and training the best candidates for joining. Vod's department is larger and better funded than our own research department, and focused on general research into symbionts. The Commission's research department is largely focused on medical issues that symbionts and joined Trill may contract. Given the possibility of an unknown symbiont, his team will be far better equipped to study it than our own."

Lazil harrumphed and subsided.

Vriji Dol, one of Audrid's allies on the Ruling Council, rubbed at her temples. "And I suppose there's *no* way to get an expedition of our own out there before the Starfleet ship arrives?"

"I wish we could, it would be a lot easier if there is indeed something related to symbionts on that comet," Audrid said. "But both of our research vessels are out scouting for possible colony locations, and neither could get back here before the Starfleet ship arrives. The military has ships that could reach it, of course, but ... unless we want to destroy the comet, they wouldn't be much use once there. Or, of course, we could tow it in closer to our research facilities, but that would put our planet at greater risk if it turns out to be hostile."

Lazil made a snide comment about all the money spent on exploration and nothing to show for it, which Audrid ignored. From there the briefing went, not *smoothly* (for there was a great deal to discuss) but with fewer open challenges to her authority as head of the Symbiosis Commission at least.

Audrid waited until the meeting had dispersed and sought out Lazil as he walked to his office.

"Dax," he said.

"Lazil," she returned. "This is far from the first time we've clashed, and I was wondering if there was anything I could do improve our working relationship—I would so hate for any conflicts of personality to impede our progress in these difficult times." Lazil hadn't been hostile until after she'd been made the head of the Commission and started working on colonization plans. She'd thought his objections were based on disagreeing with her proposals, but today's meeting hadn't been about that at all, and still he had been hostile.

He snorted. "There's nothing you can do, except *possibly* try not to make everything about you and your personal political gain."

"I don't," Audrid said.

He made a face.

"No, really, I don't! I am genuinely committed to what is best for Trill and the Symbiosis Commission, and I am trying to be as open and transparent and fair as possible in my leadership through this difficult time." She hesitated, but she'd tried more subtle methods of asking what his problem was, and none of them had worked. All that was left was a direct ask. She made her voice as gentle as possible. "What I *don't* understand is why you are so determined to think the worst of me or any plan I come up with."

Lazil stared at her. "We are in the most critical period we have seen in *centuries*. More change will happen in this one single generation than in all of my lives previous combined. And who is at the helm of our society's most important institution during this crisis? Who is leading us? A child of only four lives, whose current host isn't even *forty*, yet. Who somehow managed to maneuver her way into the job over the heads of several senior and very respected Trill. I don't know how you did it, but I remember Lela Dax. Now *there* was a manipulator—in the Ruling Council on her *first life*, and managed to turn some random alien ship wandering by into a wedge to change our entire relationship to the rest of the galaxy. And here we are again."

Audrid stared at him, firmly holding back the first ten things she wanted to say. All of them were true—he'd just spouted the worst pile of nonsense she'd ever heard in her life—but none of them were likely to be helpful. Lazil hadn't been in the Council, or anywhere in the government, in fact, when Lela had been a legislator; he was taking the worst of the gossip about the L'Dira incident as if it were unvarnished truth, and filtering everything she said and did through that lens.

"You should talk to my predecessor," she said at last. "Or any of the Trill on the Commission. I was promoted so quickly because *none* of them were willing to lead the Commission at this time."

Lazil scoffed.

"When one of our kind stumbles—or is *perceived* as having stumbled—it's a mistake that lasts forever, that every future host must carry," Audrid said. "In normal times, all you have to do to avoid that is to be ... normal. Guided by the wisdom and precedent of our society. But we are, as you say, in a time of crisis, a time when precedent and normalcy are of precious little use. The risk of stumbling is far greater. Especially in a leadership role. I was the only one willing to accept the appointment to head of the Commission, and I had to *beg* several of the Commissioners to stay on even in auxiliary roles because we *needed* their experience and perspective."

She could see that he didn't believe her, and she shook her head, exhausted. "Just ... talk to them, and ask them why I was chosen to head the Commission."

It was such a relief when it was time to set politics aside and take the shuttle to meet the Starfleet vessel. It wasn't quite a vacation—and she wasn't happy about leaving Neema and Gran for so long, they were both so young—but it was as close to a vacation as she'd had in the year and a half since they'd gotten the news of Vulcan's destruction. It was a cramped fit with four of them plus their equipment, but the conversation was pleasant. They all knew each other. Jayvin had worked with Doctor Gremem for years, and Audrid had hand-picked Vrode Kegaur to take over her old position as head of Research when she was promoted to head the Commission.

"It is nice to have at least *some* compensation at last for not being eligible to even apply to be joined," Kegaur said with a smirk, interrupting Jayvin as he lectured them—again—on the necessity of recording *every* detail. "Clearly, if the Council hadn't declared it too dangerously unknown to risk a joined Trill on the actual mission itself, I wouldn't be here."

"Do you *really* think there's going to be any danger?" Gremem asked, skeptically. "I mean, there's no power and no life support. It's probably just some sort of microbial residue. And Planetary Defense gave us armored spacesuits, in case there's any sort of problem. But in my book, the biggest threat will be tripping over a particularly sharp rock."

Audrid sighed and shrugged. "Chances are, it's perfectly safe. But I'd rather not waste political capital arguing about it, so ... the second wave of research will have to be good enough for me."

"Speak for yourself," Jayvin muttered. Audrid kicked him. Kegaur laughed.

Admiral Pike was waiting to meet their shuttle. "Commissioner Dax," he said, "welcome to the *Tereshkova*. I was surprised to hear that you would be joining us in person." Behind him stood three more officers; Audrid hadn't learned to decode Starfleet uniforms, but two of them were in blue, one in red. Two were human, and the third was an Andorian with blue skin that clashed with his blue uniform.

Audrid smiled. "I am a biologist by training, and my primary focus was research until I was promoted and had to leave it behind for politics. When an opportunity arose to do some science again, I took it."

"I hope you'll find it interesting," Pike said.

Jayvin stepped out of the shuttle and came up beside her. "This is my husband, Doctor Jayvin Vod," she said. "He's the Deputy Head of Xenobiology at the Kem'Alta Institute and will be the one actually leading the science parts."

"Doctor, it's good to meet you," Pike said, holding out his hand in the human greeting gesture. It had been part of the briefing, so Jayvin knew what to do.

"Likewise," Jayvin said.

"And these are our fellow researchers, Doctors Gremem and Kegaur," Audrid said, introducing her people. "They'll be in the first shuttle over to the comet."

Pike gestured to the Starfleet officers behind him. "Lieutenant Commander Etith," the Andorian, "will be leading the team; he's an astrophysicist. Lieutenant Jones is a xenobiologist. Ensign Panganiban is a pilot and security officer."

"Hello," Jayvin said. "Nice to meet you all. How long until we're close enough to the comet to get decent readings?"

"An hour or so," Pike said with a smile. "Just long enough to get your equipment settled in and make sure everyone is on the same page."

"Excellent," Jayvin said.

"If you'll follow me, I'll escort you to the lab," Pike said, pivoting his wheelchair and heading off.

The lab that they were going to use as a headquarters was very well appointed, and the Starfleet technicians who had configured it to interface with Trill equipment had done a good job. "Thank you, Admiral, this will do very nicely," Audrid said.

Everyone on both the Starfleet side and the Trill side was very professional, but it took longer to establish clear roles and lines of command to everyone's satisfaction than the trip to the comet itself took.

At last things were sorted out and they were ready to go. Audrid, Jayvin, and Pike escorted the away team back to the shuttle bay to watch them go. The meteor had just enough kelbonite to inhibit the transporters.

"You know, before I was injured, I would have been leading a team like that," Pike said as they returned to the lab to wait for reports. "And with the promotion, even if they do manage to completely repair the damage, I wouldn't be able to go on many away missions. I will never get used to sending other people off and leading from behind."

"I would prefer to be on the team, myself," Audrid said.

"Too menial for one of the leaders of your planet?" Pike asked.

"Something like that," Jayvin said.

"You know, one of these days you're going to have to tell me what exactly your Commission *does*," Pike said.

Audrid was spared having to answer by the first set of readings from the shuttle. Pike rolled over to one of the desk stations that didn't have a chair, and Audrid and Jayvin went to the station where their own equipment had been installed, this one at standing height because Jayvin liked to pace as he thought.

The Starfleet officers were chattering away about the physical composition of the comet and its tail, for while the shuttlecraft's sensors were less sensitive than *Tereshkova's*, they were much closer.

"*Why is it glowing?*" Panganiban asked.

"*Phosphorescence*," Etith said. "*Also, I'd like to divert the shuttle a bit to take a sample of the comet's trail; there's something in the hydroxyl radicals I can't identify.*"

Panganiban acknowledged and altered course.

Audrid sighed, listening to this, and Jayvin began to pace; the comet was so close! And there was unlikely to be anything interesting to them in the comet's *tail*; if there was something on board that was related to life on Trill, or even to symbionts, it would be inside the comet, somewhere protected. But Starfleet would find it interesting, and objectively of course once they'd gone to all this trouble to study the comet, they should study *everything* about it while they were here.

But at last the shuttle docked and the team debarked. Audrid and Jayvin watched like hawks as data from Gremem and Kegaur's plisagraphs started showing up on their monitor.

"*This place gives me the creeps*," Jones said over comms, and Kegaur agreed with him. Audrid spared a glance at the screen with the visual

feed coming from the teams' suit cameras and decided they were, if anything, underestimating things. The erratic yellow-green glowing lines seemed malevolent, somehow, even watching from behind a stream. Interesting, that both Human and Trill reacted to the stimuli the same way.

"Appearances can be deceiving," Pike said. "And distracting. Don't let them distract you from what you're there to do."

Jayvin tapped her hand to draw her attention without drawing Pike's, and Audrid looked back at her board. There! Gremem was scanning one of the lines, and there was liquid under the ice coating. A familiar liquid ... with a familiar electrical signal running faintly through it.

Audrid put a hand over her mouth to hide her grin. There was a symbiont—or something related to one—alive on that comet! And trying to communicate! The question was how to retrieve it and bring it back to Trill without Starfleet realizing what it was, but they had contingency plans for that. And besides, Starfleet was more interested in the comet itself than any potential occupants.

Audrid watched with growing glee as the team followed the lines into the center of the comet. Jayvin was practically vibrating out of his skin. They listened as the team spoke about their observations and discussed possible theories—none of which were close to what they hoped for, of course. There were some interesting observations about the biologies of Earth, Andor, and various other places the Starfleet officers had been, which normally Audrid would have found fascinating but which today she found almost annoying.

The two Trill were very good, which was why they had been chosen, but every so often Audrid or Jayvin sent a request for more detail via their plisagraphs. They kept their own comments to a minimum, both to avoid distracting the team and to lessen the chance of inadvertently giving anything away.

"You said this wasn't anything Trill," Pike said from behind them.

Startled, Audrid glanced at the display and saw that he had muted the comms from their end. They could hear the team, but the team couldn't hear them. She turned to face Pike, who was leaning back in his chair, studying them, face neutral.

"I said it isn't from any space expedition my planet has on record, and that is absolutely true," Audrid said. "I went through the records myself after our conversation, and double checked. There is nothing, even in the classified files, that could be connected to this."

"Which is what makes it so exciting," Jayvin said.

"Do you know what it is?" Pike asked.

Audrid considered how to respond. "We have ... hopes," she said at last, "which we are not free to discuss with aliens."

Pike nodded. "But it's nothing dangerous?"

"If it is what we *hope* for, there is not the slightest danger," Audrid said. "But ... we don't know what it is."

"And there are a lot of things out there in the heavens and the planets which are not dreamt of in our philosophy," Pike said. It had the flavor of a quote, but of course Audrid had no idea what it might be from.

"Exactly," Audrid said.

"Well, I don't know about your guys, but my people are prepared for just about everything," Pike said.

"Ours, too," Jayvin said.

Pike nodded and unmuted them.

Audrid and Jayvin exchanged glances and turned their attention back to the readings the team was sending them. On one level, Audrid wished they could tell Pike; she'd worked with him enough to know he had a deep wisdom she did not often see in those with only a single lifetime. And it would make this *substantially* easier, if there *was* a symbiont—or related species—somewhere on the comet. If Pike knew, and was sympathetic, he could simply order his people to let them take it and accept whatever story they gave.

But while she trusted that Pike, personally, had enough character and wisdom that he might be worthy of being trusted with their secret, he was a person under authority. Could all of his superiors be trusted with the knowledge? Could all the Federation officials who had access to Starfleet databases?

The wisdom of great age and the knowledge that you would live on for centuries after your death—it was something Audrid had yearned for all her life; most Trill did, at least those who were not mentally ill or antisocial. It was why being joined was such a great honor. There were not enough symbionts—not anywhere *near* enough symbionts—for even a fraction of the Trill population. Only long cultural discipline, the iron control of the Symbiosis Commission, and the fact that only a small percentage of the population even *could* bond with a symbiote kept them from becoming a commodity to be fought over. (It had happened in Trill's past; few symbionts survived from the last such period.)

And now they had to worry not just about what the *present* Federation might be like, but future centuries when some madman with a grudge might at any moment find a time machine and come back for bloody vengeance.

Audrid hoped that one day they might be able to trust other species enough to reveal some of their secrets, and share their wisdom as joined Trill should. But that day would not come in her lifetime. She sighed. Even here on this trip, politics followed her.

"I think this is the source of the biosignature," Kegaur said, and Audrid's attention snapped back to the displays.

The team had found a cavern from which the icy trails carrying the biosignature spread. Audrid and Jayvin shared a glance, and Jayvin made an archaic good-luck gesture. Audrid turned her eyes to the biosignature; now that there was more of it to analyze, it was *definitely* related to

the biochemical messages exchanged between host and symbiont. Not the same, of course, but ... very similar.

They hadn't brought any data about symbionts with them, of course, so Audrid was working off of memory, but there were a number of very interesting correlations—and even more interesting differences—in the data they were getting from the plisagraphs. Unsurprisingly, the tricorders missed most of the nuances.

Someone shrieked and the readings went wild. Audrid spared a glance at the screen with the video feed and her mouth dropped in shock.

There was something on Gremem's faceplate, about the size of a symbiont. But there the resemblance stopped. Instead of a blobby mass suitable for eeling its way through subterranean pools, it had six legs and two horns ... and it was using those horns to try and crack Gremem's faceplate open.

Beside her, Jayvin was intent on his readings, muttering something about conflicting data. Audrid grabbed his arm and pointed at the screen. The data would keep.

"What ... what *is* that?" Jayvin asked in bewilderment, and Audrid could only shake her head. It was like some sort of horror-tale to frighten children with.

They watched in silence as Panganiban levered it off of her, only to have it twist in his hands and go after *his* helmet. But it was weakening, and they were able to get it off Panganiban more quickly. It was knocked to the ground, and started scuttling towards Jones, who was closest to it. He shot it. It stopped, motionless.

"What was your phaser set to?" Etith asked.

"Heavy stun," Jones said. "But at close range, with something that small? It might be dead." He scanned it with his tricorder. "No life signs, no electrical signals."

Gremem was sitting on the cavern floor, staring at the ... thing. Kegaur looked at his plisagraph. "The electrical signals in the trails have stopped, too," he said.

Jayvin turned away from the vid screen to look at his board. "Looks like the signal stopped when that creature attacked," he said.

"Some sort of lure, maybe?" Jones mused.

"Dead or not, I'd feel a lot better if we had that thing in some sort of containment chamber," Panganiban said. "Is there one on the shuttle, or do we need to bring one from the ship?"

"And are there more where that thing came from?" Jones asked. He took a step towards a raised basin, about a meter across, filled with the same luminescent sludge that streaked through the comet. "I'm not reading any more life signs, so probably not."

"It almost got through my helmet," Gremem said.

"But it didn't, you're fine," Etith said in a soothing voice.

"My helmet isn't." Gremem's voice was tight with fear. "I'm getting warnings that there are hairline cracks and I'm slowly losing pressure. Does anyone have a patch kit, or anything that might help if it gives out before we get back to the shuttle?"

The team didn't stop to take readings as they hurried back to the shuttle. Audrid stood staring at the panel, empty of readouts, trying to gather her thoughts. In all her wildest imaginings—both dreams and nightmares—she'd never thought of *that*.

"I take it," Pike said coolly from his console, "that that wasn't what you were expecting."

Jayvin barked out a helpless laugh. "No."

"Do *you* have any idea what that thing was?" Audrid asked.

"No," Pike said, "but we'll see what we find when we get its remains back to the ship for analysis."

Audrid opened her mouth to stake a claim for the Commission, then paused. All their need for secrecy was based on the assumption that if the Federation investigated, it might lead them to the discovery of the symbionts.

But was the thing on that comet like symbionts in any way? It didn't look like them, and it didn't act like them; symbionts couldn't attack if they *wanted* to, they had no physical capacity to do so. They depended on walkers to protect them. It was what made them so vulnerable. As to the readings ... the biosignature and electrical signals *were* similar to symbionts, but that might be misleading.

Still, she had her clear duty to follow the instructions from the Ruling Council. "Our homeworld is closer than any Federation research base. We have excellent lab facilities, and I *deeply* want to know what that creature was and what it was trying to do."

"We've got good labs here on the ship," Pike countered, "and we were the ones who found it."

"For which we thank you," Audrid said. "But it's in *our* space."

"Outside your system," Pike said. "Outside your jurisdiction."

"And yet, still within our sphere of influence," Audrid said.

"Your team would be part of any investigation Starfleet did," Pike said. "Could you say the same?"

"We would welcome a Starfleet research team," Audrid said with a straight face. It was true, as far as it went; they would be welcomed ... but only given *some* of the data.

"That thing might be dangerous," Pike said.

"I know," Audrid said. "It was *my* scientist who was attacked first. And it was headed towards *my* homeworld."

Pike studied her. He was leaning back in his chair, one arm draped casually over the back of it. "What was it you were hoping to find?" he asked.

"There has been speculation for centuries that some parts of the Trill biome may not be originally native to our homeworld," Jayvin said. "There are gaps in the evolutionary and fossil record that might simply be natural omissions of species that are less easily preserved, but might also be evidence of species appearing from elsewhere. It's a difficult question: when does absence of evidence become evidence of absence?"

Pike nodded. "And that biosignature that matches something occasionally found in Trill would seem to imply some sort of connection."

"I don't know of *any* species on Trill, current or extinct, that looks or acts like *that* thing, though," Audrid said. "Certainly not in the class of species whose evolutionary history we cannot fully trace."

"Neither do I," Jayvin said. "If there *is* a connection, it diverged a *long* time ago."

"Or was modified," Pike pointed out. "That thing didn't get on that comet by itself."

"I'm going to ask General Kirrix to track back along its path, see if there are any other comets like this one," Audrid said. "Or any other place a creature like that might be hiding."

"You know," Jayvin said, "when Kirrix gave us armored space suits to wear, I protested. I thought it was paranoia." He pressed himself against the wall and closed his eyes. Audrid walked over next to him and took his hand in hers. He squeezed it, and she squeezed back.

"What danger could there be on a comet? All it was going to do was make it harder to move around in, and harder to work our equipment. If I'd gotten my way, Gremem would be dead. It would have gotten through her helmet and they'd never have gotten her back to the shuttle in time."

"You couldn't have known, Doctor Vod," Pike said. "There was no particular indication of danger going into this mission. And beating yourself up over it won't help. She's alive, no harm done."

Audrid held Jayvin's hand in silence. She'd thought the armored spacesuits were overkill, too; if she hadn't been worried about getting on the Kirrix's bad side (and thus endangering his support of her colonization policies), she'd have joined Jayvin's protest, and then they really *wouldn't* have had the armored suits.

"I have to report in," she said.

"I thought you were the head of your commission," Pike said. "Who do you have to report to?"

"The Ruling Council," Audrid said. "And Planetary Defense can't give me orders, but it would be very inconvenient if General Kirrix decided he didn't like me, and he will *definitely* want to know about this."

"Isn't politics wonderful?" Pike said. "The downside of being promoted is you have to deal with more of it to ensure that *other* people have the freedom to do the work you wish *you* were doing."

"You speak the truth," Audrid said with a sigh.

The Trill shuttle had a secured com, so she went there to call home.

"*It did what?*" squawked Narrur as she finished her story. "*How could a symbiont attack anything? And why?*"

"I don't know what it was, but it wasn't a symbiont," Audrid said. "Not as we know it, anyway; I've already sent what data we have back to the Commission, and will continue to do so. But aside from the obvious differences in body shape, form, and color, no symbiont could survive in that comet any more than a walker could."

"*But you said the thing used symbiont electrical signals,*" Lazil said.

"It used something similar, not identical," Audrid said. "*How* similar, we won't know until we analyze the data and test samples of the medium it was using to transmit them."

"*You need to get all the samples under our control and send the Starfleet vessel away,*" Narrur said.

"I'm going to try, but I think the attack piqued their interest in the creature," Audrid said. "Before that, they were mostly interested in the comet itself."

"*If we can't get it away from them, we can at least destroy it,*" Lazil said. He turned to General Kirrix, who was standing off to the side of the committee members. "*Could you destroy the comet?*"

Kirrix shrugged. "*Yes, as long as Starfleet didn't intervene. But the question is, should we destroy it? I don't think so. I think we need Starfleet's*

goodwill in order for a colony to be a viable undertaking. And at this point, I think destroying the comet and any samples would lead to greater risk of exposure, not less."

"What do you mean?" Narrur asked.

"I'm no scientist, but nature loves repeating patterns, yes?" Kirrix said. "How many planets have hominids? And not only that, but how many sentient species are there in the galaxy that a Trill could pass for with only a few cosmetic changes—disguising the spots, and maybe a bit of plastic surgery on the ears or forehead. So this thing has a few similarities to us; so what?"

Kirrix paused, giving them all an innocent look that was deeply wrong on his craggy face. *"But! If we play innocent, and are pointedly puzzled by it, there's no reason for Starfleet to dig deeper looking for a possible connection. If we destroy the comet, if we take the data and samples and send them away, they might want to dig deeper to find out why we don't want them studying this thing. And if they do that, they'll hardly take our word for anything, will they? And then they might make connections we don't want them to make."*

"But if they do get suspicious, they'll have more information to figure things out with!" Narrur protested.

"We're already exposed," Lazil said. *"We have been since the moment they noticed Trill-seeming biosigns in that comet. If they want to dig, there is precious little we could do to stop them. Our Defense Force is no match for the might of Starfleet. Better that we pretend to be as uninteresting as possible so they do not wish to investigate any further than we allow."*

Audrid held her breath. Lazil was being overly pessimistic about Starfleet's will to find out by force, she thought, but she agreed with the basic premise that it was better to try and seem unremarkable than to raise further suspicions. But if she said that, Lazil might switch his opinion simply out of loathing for her. She listened to the Council members debate possible courses of action with General Kirrix.

"You're being quieter than usual, Dax," Lazil said at last, frowning at her.

Audrid shrugged. "My main interest in this was the hope that it would be a clue to missing pieces of the evolutionary puzzle. But since that is not the case, I just want to figure out the most expedient way of wrapping up this mission and getting home to my family and the main work of the Commission."

Lazil seemed to take that at face value, and continued with the debate. They went back and forth over the issue, but eventually the two Ruling Council members agreed to hold off on any orders until they knew more.

By the time Audrid made it back to the lab, the team had returned to the ship and Gremem was being checked over in Sickbay. Jayvin, Kegaur, Smith, and Etith were clustered around a console having an animated discussion about something. Pike was sitting off to the side, watching them. She walked over to join him.

"We're going to be sending a larger team down, in a bit," Pike told her. "More security people to make sure there aren't more any unpleasant surprises. Then we can get down to the business of studying it."

"We'll want a representative on that team," Audrid said. "If Kegaur doesn't feel comfortable going back, would you wait until we can get some more people here? The Ministry of Planetary Defense might send a ship to help secure the comet, it wouldn't take them long to get here."

"Of course," Pike said, as courteously as if this were one of their monthly subspace calls.

Kegaur shook his head vehemently. "You're not replacing me, I want to find out what that thing is. If it couldn't get through Gremem's suit, then in the unlikely event there's another one hiding somewhere, it won't be able to get through mine, either."

Watching the second trip to the comet was more nerve-racking than the first had been, but far less eventful; the creature had indeed been the only living thing there, and the team was able to take enough readings and samples to please even Jayvin. By that time Gremem was done with her exam and had joined them in the lab.

"So," Pike said as they listened to (thankfully) repetitive and boring reports from the away team, "do you guys have any idea what that electric signal in the goo trails are?"

Audrid hesitated. What should she say?

"Not really," Jayvin said. "That substance is weird. Do you have any ideas?"

Pike shrugged. "It could be a lot of things—control relays of some kind, an early warning system to find intruders, an attempt at communication, a lure to get us where it wanted us."

"If it was a lure, it worked perfectly," Gremem said sourly.

"Not perfectly," Audrid said. "It got us there, but we wanted to go there anyway. And whatever it was trying to do, it didn't succeed."

"Thanks be to the Ministry of Planetary Defense and armored spacesuits," Gremem said.

"Absolutely," Audrid said.

In the end, the more data they received, the less Trill-like the thing looked. There were some similarities in internal structure and neurology to symbionts and related animals, but there were *also* similarities to creatures from a whole host of other planets, none of which Audrid had ever heard of before. Lieutenant Jones ended up the one heading the investigation.

"We're fairly sure it's a neural parasite," Jones said, a diagram of the creature's anatomy on the screen behind him. "A creature that attaches itself to the brainstem of the host and uses that to control the host's own neurology, and possibly even overwrite it to some extent."

"There are creatures that can *do that*?" Audrid asked, appalled. *There* was nightmare fodder for, well, at least her own life and possibly all her symbiont's future lives.

Jayvin, she noted, was looking a little green. He and Jones were giving the summary, with the rest of the team (Trill and Starfleet both) gathered around to watch. "Unfortunately, yes. None on Trill, of course, but other worlds are not so fortunate. This is very speculative, you understand—without seeing it live and studying it in action, so to speak, we can't be certain. But there's a very good possibility that Trill would be more vulnerable than other species. Our neurology and biochemistry is *just* close enough to the creature to make things easy for it. There are a few other species that would also be especially vulnerable, and I've highlighted them in my report."

"We think it burrows into the neck and attaches like so," Jones said, showing a diagram of a humanoid with the creature wrapped around its spinal cord. "The two horns might protrude through the back of the skin. They might be an avenue for nutrients or oxygen; this thing can siphon energy from the neural system, but it's not hooked into the vascular system very efficiently. There might be some absorption of nutrients from the host's blood, but probably not enough to sustain it."

"And while the comet didn't have any communications equipment, the signals through those bioluminescent trails would seem to suggest that the creature is capable of communicating over decent distances even without a host," Jayvin said. "I wonder what we could have learned if we'd spent more time analyzing those signals as possible communication before getting in a range that it could attack?"

"We'll never know," Audrid said, although she didn't think a creature that attacked preemptively and was designed to take over its hosts rather than communicate with them was anything she particularly wanted to communicate with.

"How intelligent was it?" Pike asked. He was in the front of the group, of course, both in deference to his rank and so he could see.

Jayvin shrugged. "With the caveat that intelligence is difficult to measure at the best of times, especially across species ... at the very least, it was sapient. It had an *extremely* high proportion of neural tissue for its size."

Audrid kept her face carefully neutral. That was, in fact, the way in which it was most similar to symbionts. There were very few species where neural tissue took up most of their internal volume.

"So, to sum up, we don't know where it was from or if there are more out there," Pike said. "We don't know what level of technology it has, but it is fairly intelligent. We're pretty sure it can take over most hominid species in the Federation. We have no idea what it wanted ... but it was headed to the homeworld of one of the species most vulnerable to it, in a form that could easily have let it slip through unnoticed."

"Believe me, my people have noticed that last part," Audrid said. "We were already working on increasing our watch on the local area, but *that* will be a priority."

"I'll need a simulation of what it would probably look like in a host, so we can set alerts for it in our security systems and in our transporters," Pike said. "But at least now we know and can be on the lookout for more of them."

The day after that final meeting, the Trill team boarded their shuttle to return home. A Defence ship had already towed the comet off to a secure base for further testing, and the corpse of the creature was in stasis in the cargo area. They were a much quieter group, this trip.

Audrid and Jayvin sat, curled together, on the bench in the back portion of the shuttle. "I want a vacation," Jayvin said, quietly.

"So do I," Audrid said. "This last year has been a *nightmare*." Being thrown into that quagmire of politics, in an unprecedented situation where they needed to engage more with the outside galaxy than ever before, their planet's strongest ally in the galaxy simply ... gone. And then this hellish mission, all their hopes crushed.

"I can clear my schedule," Jayvin said. "It's already cleared, actually, since we didn't know how long this mission and associated research would last."

Audrid made a face. "I wish I could," she said, "but I can't get away until after the Ruling Council makes a decision on a possible colonization prospect Starfleet has found for us ... and possibly not even then; we might not be the only world interested in it, and since I'm the primary contact with the Federation ..." she trailed off with a sigh.

She'd been thinking about the problem of Lazil, and wondered if there was some subtle way to connect him with Odan or some of Lela Dax's other allies in such a way that he would hear a different, truer version of that story. If she was *too* blatant about it, he might not trust their word.

"I hope I *never* end up as the head of the Commission," Jayvin said. "Your job is *terrible*."

"I don't think it's usually this bad," Audrid said. "I'm just unlucky, to be the person who couldn't duck fast enough when everything changed."

"Or perhaps, it's that our world was *lucky*, that you were the one who ended up in charge of the Commission in this difficult time," Jayvin said. "It's hard on us and the kids, but you're doing important work, and I think better at it than most of the other candidates could have."

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