

## Catalyst, Part One

By Scott Andrew Fack

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### The Entrance to the Krakonian Cave System, Near Starbase Expanse 4

Dripping sounds staccatoed throughout the caves, but Dakota Caldwell didn't notice. The ebbing purple glowing from within, beckoning the tour party deeper into the cave system, enthralled him more.

The tour guide, a colonist from Starbase Expanse 4, stopped, gliding her yellow hand over the rock face. "My grandfather was one of the first people in modern times to explore this cave system." Ambrose Wong gestured towards the radiating beyond them. "He called the shade of violet the caves emanate 'Peking Purple'." She smiled, inconspicuously peeling her sweat soaked singlet from her stomach – a subconscious reminder of a typically hot and humid day

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on this planet. “Now, if you’d follow me,” she continued as she beckoned the small group of visitors deeper into the caves, “I’ll show you the as-yet fully untranslated wall paintings left by the long extinct inhabitants of this planet. Even the best Federation linguists haven’t cracked them...” Wong moved deeper into the cave, the rock floor appearing to swallow her bit by bit, the others following behind her.

“Is that why you are here?” The soft female voice from behind him sounded Vulcan, logical and as cool as the cave’s interior, and Dakota Caldwell, Starfleet lieutenant between assignments, stopped and turned around, half expecting to see a pointy-eared, green-blooded...

But she wasn’t Vulcan. She didn’t appear to be of any race he’d encountered – and since his mother’d been a Starfleet captain, that was a lot. Two dark eyes gazed out from her coffee-and-cream face, her deep, shiny black hair pulled back into a pony tail. Several small ridges ran parallel above her eyebrows, but he only noticed them after the third time scanning her face. Holding her hands behind her back, the alien (nearly human-looking) woman in bland civilian clothes broke the uncomfortable silence, adding, “To attempt to translate the wall paintings, Lieutenant. To go down in the annals of Federation history as the person who translated the elusive Krakonian wall paintings?”

Her soothing voice distracted his train of thought. “Yes,” he nodded absentmindedly as sweat dripped from his forehead, more as a response from memory than actual heat. The young officer lifted his pale blue tee-shirt and wiped the sweat from his face. “Yes. How did you know?” He rubbed his hands on his cream-colored light cotton pants.

The alien woman moved down deeper, to the same level as Caldwell, amused by his wide blue eyes. “Word travels quickly around a small starbase, Lieutenant. Your cultural exchange assignment on Lelar Prime sent ripples through Starfleet, as has your aptitude for translating languages.” She extended her right hand. “My name is Yh’ahni. Lieutenant Yh’ahni of the *Starship Marsh*.”

He shook her hand, noticing its coolness. She observed his subtle reaction, justifying, “Heat doesn’t affect me as much as it affects humans.”

“Ah.” Caldwell retracted his hand, planting his hands on his hips. “I’m not familiar with your race, Lieutenant.”

Yh’ahni cleared her throat and broke eye contact, surveying the rock wall. “I...” She exhaled. “I’m not either. My adopted parents found...”

A low rumbling sounded from the distance, and small rocks dropped from above them. Yh’ahni’s hands slapped against the rock wall as Caldwell’s feet slipped underneath him during the first shockwave, the rumbling growing louder. Dakota’s legs ached from the deep reverberations. Screams echoed from deeper within the cave, when the second shockwave struck, the dislodged rocks klacking against the floor and walls, cascading to build up into a wall between the two officers and the others on the tour.

As the rumbling resided, small rocks still clacking against the floor, Yh’ahni waved her hand to disperse the dust clouds in front of her. “Lieutenant Caldwell,” she called as she searched the cave. His coughing led her to his shuddering, dust covered body, and she wrapped her hand around his elbow, helping him to his feet. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” he managed between sputters, covering his mouth with one hand and brushing himself off with the other. “You?”

“Perplexed but unscathed.” Yh’ahni moved to the newly formed wall, her hand passing across its length and width. Her shoulders slumped slightly as she peered over her shoulder at Caldwell. “There’s nothing we can do.” Her voice sounded so soft he strained to hear it. “We need a transporter or some heavy removal equipment to free the others.”

"You can tell that from just... waving your hand over the rocks?" Caldwell joined her at the newly formed wall.

She nodded. "No air coming through," the alien woman explained as she turned her back to the wall. "We need to raise the alarm to render assistance. The starbase may know what caused those shockwaves." Yh'ahni pulled her way up towards the sunlight, gesturing for Caldwell to join her.

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### **The *Runabout Avon's* Cockpit**

"Report!" Commander Scott Fack drew his hand away from the dead officer's neck, the sticky blood drying on his fingers.

The helmswoman's light chocolate hands danced across her station aboard the *Runabout Avon*. She turned briefly towards him, the light beige spots running down either side of her face and neck, a bifurcated ridge splitting her face. Her wide, dark eyes glanced down at the dead officer's body, then at Fack. "I'm taking evasive action, sir, but we're too close."

"Then get us farther away, Ensign Killan." Commander Fack steadied himself against another blast and pulled himself around behind the tactical station. "Commander Singh?"

Lieutenant Commander Elizabeth Singh tucked renegade black hairs behind her ear, her French roll coming loose at the back. "Shields at 47..." The runabout shuddered again, Singh clutching the corner of her forward station as her petite body rose out of her chair and slammed down into it. "Make that 39 percent. The starboard nacelle is venting plasma, and I'm not sure our distress call is getting through."

"Torpedoes away," Fack confirmed as a sensor alert sounded at Singh's station. "What is it, Commander?"

"An incoming ship, sir..."

"But?"

Lieutenant Commander Singh shook her head as her tan hands pushed at different areas of her operations station. "There's too much interference. Whether it's friend or foe... I can't tell."

Commander Fack pointed at the helm. "Killan: Program several escape vectors into the flight control station."

Liz Singh looked up from her station, her dark brown eyes scanning the darkness ahead of them. "The other craft is dropping out of warp..."

The trio braced themselves against their stations, searching the stars, and the hybrid Ensign Tawana Killan held one trembling hand above her control station.

One star swooped into view, growing exponentially larger as each nanosecond passed. The light rushed above the runabout, solidifying, taking the form of a Federation starship. Killan sighed and turned towards Fack at the aft station, a large smile on her face. "It's the *Koru*, sir."

"*Koru to Runabout Avon: Prepare to dock at the main shuttlebay.*"

Commander Scott Fack exhaled. "Thank God you've arrived, *Koru*. We've got what we've come for..."

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### **Captain's Arboretum, The *Starship Cantabrian***

He could tell they were winning this battle. Noel Turner sighed, his mud-caked fists resting on his hips, as he surveyed the damage. The toll for one side grew higher by the minute, the battlefield littered with their limp bodies contorted at odd angles: the dying wilting, the dead pale, and all he could do was smile.

*Weeds certainly got the better of my arboretum while I was busy*, he thought. Turner raised a hand to liven up his sweat-dampened medium brown hair, but as his hand passed before his face, the commanding officer sighed again, plopping his hand against his thigh. *Just a few more seconds rest.*

Turner lifted his right arm again, bending the elbow at a wide enough angle out to wipe the sweat from his brow, as he squatted down to survey the dahlias. He picked at a few small weeds, flicking them down to dry out and wilt to die.

"Captain," a familiar voice called out.

Slapping the clumps of dirt from his hands, Turner rose to his feet, rolling his gloves off, his gaze meeting Lieutenant Commander Antonio Ramirez's deep, dark brown eyes. The Brazilian-Italian second officer stood several centimeters taller than Turner's average 1.83 meters, his black hair slicked back straight, neatly. Clearing his throat, Ramirez planted his hands behind his back, his neatly pressed mustard Starfleet uniform tight against his lean body, his comm.-badge and pips reflecting the artificially generated sunlight.

Ramirez smirked as he gazed down at Turner's hunter green gardening gloves, but Turner raised an eyebrow, justifying, "It's my way of relaxing, Lieutenant Commander." The smirk faded as the operations manager – acting temporarily as first officer until the new XO embarked at Starbase Expanse 4 – cleared his throat again.

"So," the commanding officer continued, "what's so important that you've interrupted me during my off-duty time in my personal arboretum?"

"I apologize, Captain, but we attempted to raise you on internal communications..." Ramirez's voice faded. Turner's eyes widened, and he nodded for the *Cantabrian's* second officer to continue. "We've lost communication with Starbase Expanse 4 and several other Federation outposts and colonies around the Typhon Expanse."

Noel Turner frowned. "The communications array?"

Tony Ramirez shrugged, his eyes wandering to the green gauge tree then back to his commanding officer's sharp grey-blue stare. "We're running diagnostics on it at the moment, but initial reports aren't showing anything out of the ordinary."

Dusting his hands absentmindedly, Turner ordered, "Keep the diagnostics running." He sighed. "How long until we arrive at SE4?"

"At our current speed, about five hours."

"Very well," the captain said. "Try to raise someone on subspace. Starfleet transports, starbases, a Wthaire warcruiser, I don't care." Brushing past Ramirez and heading towards the egress, he called out behind him. "In the meantime, go to maximum warp and report to me with any updates. I'll be in Engineering if anyone needs me."

"Yes sir," the Brazilian responded, but Captain Turner was well out of sight by then, the door sliding closed behind him.

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**Captain's Log, Stardate 49537.0**

*Captain's Log, Stardate 49537.0: En route to Starbase Expanse 4, I've decided to stop in on Main Engineering to speak with our chief engineer, Ethan Arden, and his engineers about the communications problems we are having at present. I'm also having a proper look at Main Engineering: my first look since we left Utopia Planitia.*

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**Main Engineering, The Starship Cantabrian**

The cadet bumped into Captain Turner, nearly knocking him off his feet. She fell backwards as he staggered, her PADD clattering on the deck. "Captain," she sputtered, crawling backwards slightly as she blushed. "I'm sorry."

Noel Turner extended his right hand; the cadet uneasily took it. "That's okay, Cadet Oh," he said as he pulled Cadet Lisa Oh back to her feet. "How are you finding the *Cantabrian* as your first field assignment?"

She picked up her PADD with a concerned look on her face, but a smile soon emerged as she absorbed the question. "It's amazing, Captain. At the Academy, we hear horror stories about cadets being assigned to cargo ships, but this..." Oh glanced up at the warp core, the blue pulse reflecting off her shiny black hair, and sighed. "This is a dream come true."

Turner smiled as he patted the cadet on her arm. "Good to hear it, Cadet."

"Thank you, Captain, for giving me the opportunity." She smiled lightly, absent-mindedly turning her PADD end-on-end in her hands. "Now if you'll excuse me, sir, I think I'm needed..."

Captain Noel Turner gestured for Oh to continue on her way, and she darted towards the chief engineer's station.

The warp core's steady rhythm reminded Turner of a heart beating: the harder one pushed one's body, the faster the heart beat. His hands met behind his back as he stepped around the core and into the *Cantabrian's* newly refurbished Main Engineering compartment. Engineers and other Starfleet officers rushed from station to station, comparing data and exchanging light conversation. Main Engineering reminded him of its equivalent aboard an early *Intrepid*-class starship like the *Intrepid* or the missing *Voyager*; the only visible differences being more computer stations – the *Cantabrian* being an *Excelsior*-class starship needed more engineers and hence more stations, including the additional stations opposite the wall stations, facing the main access way to the warp core – and a wider engineering compartment (to accommodate all those extra stations near the middle). Also, more access to this Main Engineering existed, including large doors behind the warp core on both lower and upper decks – the ones on the lower deck where he'd come through only to collide with Cadet Oh – to corridors following the feed lines to the warp nacelles.

He made his way to the core itself when he noticed his chief engineer approaching, PADD in hand, sleeves rolled up. Lieutenant Commander Ethan Arden's short medium brown hair had started to grey around the temples, but his sparkling grey-blue eyes betrayed his youthful spirit. He smiled at his commanding officer.

"G'day, Cap'n." Arden's smooth Australian accent with his approachable nature would put any one at ease. "Come down to have a gander?"

Turner nodded his head, adjusting his Starfleet tunic. "Definitely have, Commander. She's running beautifully, thanks to you."

"No worries, mate." Arden peered up at warp core housing, the flow coursing down into the reaction chamber. "I'm just glad to be back aboard a starship again."

Captain Turner scratched his head, smiling mischievously. "Yes. Well, the head of the Corps of Engineers at Utopia Planitia didn't seem too enthralled to lose one of her top engineers." He moved towards the core, the chief engineer close behind. "I had a lot of explaining to do and fill out several request forms to get you aboard, Commander."

"Ethan," Arden interjected as he leaned back against the safety rail guarding the core, crossing his arms. "You can call me by my Christian name, sir; I don't mind."

"Okay," Captain Turner smiled uneasily. "Ethan it is." He nudged the conversation back to the ship and pulled up schematics at the station in front of the intermix chamber. Pointing at the detail, the commanding officer started, "We've lost communication with several stations, ships and colonies around the Typhon Expanse, but your engineers assure me it's not a problem with our equipment. Is there any chance we can attempt to boost the signal gain to receive weaker subspace signals?"

Ethan Arden squinted as he leaned up against the rail next to the intermix station. He licked his lips. "I don't see why we couldn't..."

*"Bridge to Captain Turner."*

Noel Turner glanced over at Ethan Arden as he tapped his comm.-badge. "Captain Turner here, Commander Ramirez; go ahead."

*"We're receiving a weak transmission from the Starship Koru for assistance; they've engaged a hostile ship attacking one of their runabouts."*

"Analysis, Commander?"

*"An ion storm close in proximity to the starbase and other starships may be causing the loss of contact." The Brazilian-Italian lieutenant commander paused. "The Koru is currently in unclaimed space approximately 8 light years from the Myhr'an border."*

"The Myhr'an?" Commander Arden squinted as he looked over at his commanding officer. "They're quite reclusive if I remember rightly."

*"You remember correctly, Commander. The Koru's supplied no data on who their attackers may be, but we appear to be the closest starship."*

"Lay in an intercept course and engage at maximum warp, Commander Ramirez." Turner pushed away from the intermix console and stormed towards Main Engineering's exit. "I'm on my way. Turner, out."

"I'll keep on this," Ethan Arden called out behind his commanding officer.

---

#### **On the Outskirts of Starbase Expanse 4**

The words somersaulted in his mouth like rocks in a stream: his mouth open, no sound escaped.

"Yh'ahni to *Marsh*."

The crater in front of them steamed, a large dust plume rising into an increasingly angry sky. Debris surviving the blast danced a livid waltz in the darkening brown clouds mushrooming overhead.

"Yh'ahni to *Ruapehu*." Her voice sounded increasingly irritated.

His mouth shut, almost snapping like a fish's when out of water. Absolutely *nothing* was left.

"Yh'ahni to any Starfleet officer in range. Please respond."

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Lieutenant Dakota Caldwell stuttered for the third time in his life. Too many words fought for their place on his tongue, and his sentences didn't make any sense.

Lieutenant Yh'ahni stood near the cliff edge overlooking the expansive plains below, the heat and wind from the blast blowing her sleek black ponytail back in a nearly straight line, her hands planted firmly behind her back. Her eyes darted from area to area, absorbing what Dakota assumed was various information about the scene. "It would appear," she rose her voice, controlled, over the rumbling of the dust clouds gathering in the atmosphere above them, "the starbase, the *Marsh*, and the *Ruapehu* have been destroyed."

"By..." Caldwell gulped, struggling for words. "By who?" He watched the remaining debris swirling in the dust clouds above like a baby watching a mobile.

"That," the alien officer said as she turned to view the now-pale lieutenant, "remains a mystery. But whatever weapon they used... It must be stopped."

His eyes wide, swinging his arms and clapping them together when they met in front of him, the young lieutenant swallowed again, carefully letting the right words fall into place. "Should we... search for survivors?" Looking at the start of a large crater in front of him, he realized the absurdity of his question.

Yh'ahni nodded, slightly bowing her head. "I don't believe there will be any, Lieutenant. The destruction's too great."

Dakota Caldwell dropped to the ground, sitting Indian-style, planting his head in his hands. "All... those poor people..." He looked up at the calm alien woman he'd only met over an hour ago; she remained still, surveying the crater emerging from the dust cloud. "What must've they felt as they saw the explosions heading their way?" Caldwell started to sob. "Those poor people..."

Yh'ahni's cool hand caressed Caldwell's back. "There, there, Lieutenant." She lied. "I don't believe they knew what hit them."

Heat lightning forked across the sky, a slight crackling noise accompanying the display. Yh'ahni's head jerked upwards to study the sky. Another thunderclap, this time louder, made Dakota jump. "Lieutenant: I suggest we head back to the cave complex for shelter."

Lieutenant Caldwell pushed himself to his feet, smearing the tears into his soot-covered face and wiping his nose with the back of his hand. "Right," he said, exhaling. "You're right." A bang made Dakota take two quick steps backwards. "Maybe the caves would be the best option until help arrives." He broke into a slow jog towards the low hills behind them, the brown clouds hiding the hilltops.

An uneasy smile crept across Yh'ahni's face as she took one quick final look at what remained of Starbase Expanse 4, turned around and started a quick jog after Caldwell.

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### **Aboard the *Starship Koru***

Liz Singh heaved the dead ensign's body away from the bulkhead and pried open the dented emergency locker. The ebbing red klaxon lights made her squint as her hand groped around inside the locker. *Rations. No. Emergency medical kit. Maybe. Compression rifle. Definitely.*

"I found some!" She powered up the compression rifle, slinging the strap over her shoulder. The *U.S.S. Koru* shuddered again, and her hand slammed against the corridor's wall to steady herself. Singh pushed a clump of black, curly stray hair behind her tan ear; the rest of her hair now sat in a ponytail.

"There you are." Commander Scott Fack stumbled around the junction corner, a slight cut bleeding on his forehead, Tawana Killan close behind him. "That last blast was worse. Shields must be down."

Singh detached another compression rifle and tossed it to the Special Services officer, then grabbed one for the hybrid Killan and threw it to her. "The internal sensors that *are* working report intruder teams throughout the *Koru*."

Fack caught the rifle mid-air and activated it. "The shuttlebay?"

The first officer of the *Starship Koru* nodded as she activated the searchlight on her rifle. "Still secure. Transporter inhibitors functioning, and the two recorder markers we picked up are in the runabout's cargo containers."

"What about the bridge?" Killan clutched her rifle firmly to stop shaking.

"Still no word from them," Singh responded. She scanned the darkened corridors with the searchlight on her rifle, and the light swayed slightly as another shudder gripped the *Koru*. "We must assume, at minimum, communications are down."

"If we want to be paranoid," Commander Fack added, glancing over at the young ensign, balancing himself against the bulkhead, "we surmise the bridge crew have been incapacitated." Fack nodded at Singh to proceed, aiming his searchlight beyond her.

"Incapacitated?" Killan whispered as the trio crept down the corridor littered with damage and the occasional Starfleet officer's body. The silence of the other two officers made her uneasy, and she decided to break it. "Have either one of you seen a Myhr'an?"

"Not me." Singh sounded slightly irritated at the ensign's attempt at small talk. "Borg, Romulans, Tzenkethi and the occasional suited-up Breen, yes. Myhr'an, no."

"What about you?" Killan glanced briefly over at Fack, now sweeping his searchlight behind the trio. "Ever seen a Myhr'an, Commander?"

"Only composites from witness accounts, Ensign, and those are *very* few and far between." He licked his bottom lip and then bit down on it for a few seconds. "The Myhr'an are a very brutal yet secluded race. Officially, only a mutual 'understanding' remains between the Federation and the Myhr'an on borders; there are no diplomatic channels between us and them."

The young ensign's eyes opened wider. "I've heard that..."

"Halt!" Singh raised her rifle up and aimed at a corridor junction.

"Don't!" A voice cried from around the corner. "Don't shoot!" A human hand and wide, blinking eyes under dark brown hair poked around the corner. His eyes squinted against the three searchlights aimed at him, and he stepped out in full view. "Commander Singh? Is that you?"

"Angus!" Lieutenant Commander Liz Singh lowered her rifle as she approached the chief engineer of the *Koru*, wrapping her hand around his tricep. "Angus, are you okay?"

He shuddered slightly, and Singh attempted to steady him. The chief engineer shook his head slowly, building it into a definite no. "Everyone... most of the crew are dead. The bridge and forward sections of decks two and three are gone..."

"What about Engineering?" Her rifle aimed downwards, the shoulder strap carrying its weight, Liz Singh planted her other hand on the engineer's other arm. "Is Engineering okay?"

His pink eyes searched her face. “I saw the torpedo on sensors heading right towards them. No shields to protect us, and...” Angus cleared his throat and looked at the deck. “The boarding parties raided right after the screams died away.” Shaking his head, “Ferris, Captain Staerke, Yokehama... they’re all dead. If I only could’ve kept shields...”

Fack barged forward, leaning his head down to whisper to Singh. “This isn’t getting us anywhere.” He moved further down the corridor to a flickering computer access point. Pushing several buttons, the computer only responded with a negative tone. “Computers are down.” He headed back to the others at the corridor junction, clutching his rifle against his chest. “Damage is pretty extensive. I’d say we should head back to the *Avon* and make a run for it; this ship isn’t going anywhere.”

“I’ll head over to Engineering and sound the evacuation alert.” Liz Singh readied her rifle and readjusted the shoulder strap. “Lieutenant Ladd, I think you should accompany Commander Fack back to the shuttlebay. Killan, you’re with me.”

Scott Fack firmly grasped Ladd’s upper arm and coaxed him towards the shuttlebay as Singh aimed her rifle down the Engineering corridor and crept into the darkness, Killan glancing wide-eyed over her shoulder, back to the corridor junction, as she followed the executive officer of the *Koru*.

---

### **The Bridge, The *Starship Cantabrian***

“Report.” Captain Noel Turner wedged himself between the opening turbolift doors, gliding down the steps between the bridge tactical and counselor’s stations and into the command circle.

Lieutenant Commander Antonio Ramirez rose from the captain’s chair and stepped aside. The lean Brazilian-Italian hybrid placed his hands behind his back, his dark eyes following the commanding officer standing opposite him. “We’re *en route* to the *Koru*’s last reported coordinates at maximum warp. We should arrive in eight minutes.”

“What can you tell me about the *Koru*?” Turner folded his arms.

Ramirez raised his pointing finger. “This would be an ideal opportunity to try the experimental HOLIE system we’ve installed.”

“Are you certain,” the commanding officer arched an eyebrow, “that the HOLIE system – the embodiment of our ship’s computer with a holographic personality template – should be employed?” He elaborated, “I’ve read the test results; I’m not terribly impressed with the way the trial system worked.”

The operations manager cleared his throat as he took over at the operations station at the forward port side of the bridge. “The Corp fixed the problems.” Ramirez turned slightly, talking over his shoulder towards the captain. “If it makes you feel better, Captain, I can switch her over to information mode only. She won’t be integrated to control any of the ship’s main functions that way.”

Captain Noel Turner sank slowly into the command chair, still with one eyebrow raised. His fingers tapped the small consoles either side of his station. He broke the silence with a whisper. “We’ll give it a go.”

Tony Ramirez smiled lightly as he cleared his voice again. “Computer: Activate the HOLIE system.”

An alcove to Ramirez’s left buzzed to life, and a woman wearing a Starfleet uniform materialized on the pad. Her pale skin glittered slightly under the bridge lights, and she smiled lightly. “Please state your query.”

"HOLIE," Tony Ramirez requested confidently, his eyes wandering back towards Turner, "present information on the *Federation Starship Koru*."

"Federation Starship Koru," she repeated, her pure white, pupil-less eyes shifting from side to side as she accessed the information. "U.S.S. Koru, Nova-class starship, Starfleet Registry Number NCC-59563, primarily a science vessel, commissioned on Stardate 48992.3 at Utopia Planitia. Commanded by Captain Guenther Staerke, executive officer Lieutenant Commander Elizabeth Singh with a crew complement of 82. Armed with moderate offensive and defensive capabilities. Current mission: classified."

"Classified?" Captain Turner shifted in his chair, setting his arm on his left console as he leaned forward. "By whom?"

"That information," HOLIE reported smugly, "is also classified."

"Now, I've seen everything," a female voice sounded from the aft bridge.

HOLIE cocked her head slightly, the smug smile still draped across her face, as Noel Turner leaned his head around his chair. "I'm sorry?"

A female Starfleet officer stepped down into the command circle, resting her chocolate-colored hand around the metal support of the tactical station. She planted her other hand on her hip as she surveyed the hologram. Her lieutenant commander pips reflected the high-powered bridge lights, and her serious manner gave way to a breaking smile full of white teeth, contrasting her very short jet black hair, contouring the shape of her head. She looked down at Turner, the smile fading like a flashlight with low batteries, and her hands smoothed down her Starfleet jumpsuit quickly before she said, "Sorry, sir. Doctor Marie Bourget, Chief Medical Officer of the *Cantabrian*."

"Doctor," Turner apologized as he stood. "I've been meaning to visit you in Sickbay, but..."

"No apologies, required, Captain; we've been extremely busy." Bourget clasped her hands in front of her. "I've come to tell you face-to-face that Sickbay's ready to respond to any emergency." She nodded at the viewscreen. "Including this one."

"That's very reassuring to know, Doctor."

Their attention shifted to the beep sounding from the operations station. Ramirez tapped several times and turned to face Turner and the doctor. "I've..."

"*Captain, we're approaching the co-ordinates.*" HOLIE remained motionless on her platform like a porcelain doll in a display case.

The operations manager punched at his station, muttering, "As I was about to say..."

Captain Turner focused on the main viewscreen, the doctor stepping up behind him. "Helm: take us out of warp, full impulse. Red alert."

The lighting on the bridge dimmed, the red alert lights ebbing throughout the command centre. HOLIE provided some illumination, her platform glowing white.

The Trill at tactical confirmed the captain's orders, her pale and slender hands dashing across her station as her ice-blue eyes glanced at the viewscreen. "Phasers and photons ready, sir."

Turner raised his hand to shoulder-level. "Don't arm them just yet, Lieutenant Commander Jonar." A curious gleam twinkled in Turner's eyes; the viewscreen showed only a large gas giant the *Cantabrian* approached. "Sensors, Tony?"

"Radiation from the J-Class planet is interfering with sensors, but I can deduce the Koru is severely damaged." HOLIE's pale eyes unfocused as she reported. "A ship alien in

*configuration remains stationed near the Koru, although I cannot detect any weapon fire.*" HOLIE stood to attention. "Captain: may I construe..."

The commanding officer rested his hand on Ramirez's shoulder. "Shut that bloody thing off."

Mid sentence, HOLIE disappeared, her platform softening to a light glow. Doctor Bourget stepped up to Turner's side. "Thank God." She smiled lightly at her commanding officer.

"You're right, Doctor," Turner assumed. "That thing *is* annoying."

Two starships approximately the same size peeked over the planet's curvature on the viewscreen. A plume of plasma hemorrhaged from one ship's nacelle, the top of the same ship appearing to glow red-hot from molten metal. The second ship veered around the first and headed towards the *Cantabrian*, a red glow increasing in intensity from an area below the forward compartments.

"Sir?" Ulitania Jonar leaned forward from the tactical station behind the command chair. "The alien ship is charging weapons and has set an intercept course."

The hostile ship, shaped like a sleek shark, approached aggressively, building up speed. Several panels on its silver frame slid back, weapon turrets and other armaments gliding out and locking sights on the *Cantabrian*.

"You might want to take a seat, Doctor." Captain Noel Turner brushed past Bourget, planting himself into his station, his hands wrapping around his armrests. "This might be a bumpy ride. Jonar: open hailing frequencies."

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### **Shuttlebay, The Starship Koru**

Commander Scott Fack clutched the survivors by their uniform tops – one cranberry, one mustard – and pushed them into the runabout's airlock. His eyes surveyed the *Koru's* darkened shuttle hanger for any sign of alien activity: none. The light illuminating the shuttlebay, other than from the runabout's own systems, trickled in faintly from the open double door leading into the corridor. Glancing over his shoulder, the force field still intact, Fack noticed the stars slowly moving from the lower right to the upper left corner of the hangar doorframe, the ship starting to creak and groan. *The Koru's listing.*

The evacuation klaxon startled him, and the compression rifle nearly left his hands. His mind flipped through all the nasty aliens he'd encountered before, and, for some reason, he pictured the Myhr'an as seven foot high lizard monsters who ate their prisoners of war. *Gotta get your mind off of such things, Scott.* "Ladd," he nodded to the *Koru's* engineer, wrapped in a silver foil anti-shock blanket and seated at the operations station. "Are all the survivors accounted for?"

The chief engineer shook his head. "No. We're still waiting for Commander Singh, Ensign Killan, and..."

Weapons fire interrupted Ladd mid-sentence. Fack's attention returned to the corridor where white balls of light pulsed from the left and light green rays streamed from the right. The commander raised his compression rifle, the power humming, to the ready.

Two humanoid figures, merely moving shadows in the dark, stumbled through the doorway, one propping the other one up, as the exchange in weapons fire continued. "It's us, sir," Ensign Killan's voice echoed as she towed the other officer. "Commander Singh and Chief Brody are right behind us."

The sweat beads on Killan's forehead reflected the scarce light. She smiled nervously at Fack as she helped the injured officer into the cockpit.

Another humanoid figure somersaulted into the hanger. She rolled up onto one knee to support her weight and fired her compression rifle into the corridor. Rising to her feet, the figure sprinted towards Fack, calling out over her shoulder. "Brody: Come on! Let's go!"

Brody moved into view, firing a compression rifle intermittently between her phaser's fire with her other hand. Liz Singh joined Fack's side, both with their rifles aimed to cover Brody, but as the chief let her guard down, attempting to roll sideways into the shuttlebay, a green beam pierced her left shoulder, unidentifiable debris spraying outwards. Brody howled, fell to her knees as another blast tore through her abdomen, the force flattening her upper body to the deck plating, the thump reverberating throughout the shuttlebay.

Commander Fack stepped forward but Singh planted her hand on his chest. "Leave her be. She's already dead."

Large shadows moved across the doorway. The Myhr'an stood slightly taller than an average man, bulky equipment fastened to one of their arms. Fack squinted to make out any more details, and something deep within him ached to see more. Pushing past Singh – by now, her attention shifted behind her, and she stood immobile, her hand up as if still holding Fack back – the commander shortened the distance between him and the Myhr'an to about five meters.

The Myhr'an relaxed, their weapons at rest at their sides. The lead alien dropped to his knees – a move the other eight soon followed – and opened his arms, aiming his head upwards towards the ceiling. The nine Myhr'an soldiers looked like the silhouettes of nine arrows pointing upwards. A low grumbling reverberated throughout the shuttlebay.

The act entranced Commander Scott Fack; he couldn't move. Lieutenant Commander Singh rushed to his side, wrapping her hand around his elbow and pulling.

He didn't budge.

"Commander!" Her voice whispered low and fierce as the deck leaned slightly more. "We need to get out of here. Now!"

Her boots clacked against the deck plating as she ran to the runabout, and his mobility returned. One foot back behind the other, building up the slow backwards walk into a quicker backwards gait, Fack still focused on the alien ritual. Singh's arms reached out from the airlock, each hand tightly grabbing a part of Fack's Special Services uniform, and hauled him into the runabout.

The Myhr'an chorus vocalized louder and louder as the runabout's airlock door shut; the relative silence inside the cockpit rung in Liz Singh's ears. Her attention shifted to Commander Fack – he focused on the kneeling Myhr'an aliens – and back to the aliens in the forward viewports. Sparks rained down from the shuttlebay's ceiling, the occasional flicker illuminating the chanting aliens. Fireballs erupted from conduits and flooded the hanger's control tower.

"Commander?" Tawana's uneasy voice pierced the silence.

Scott Fack gaped at the aliens, his eyes paling slightly. The runabout shuddered as the deck plating before the runabout separated from the frame, flipping away from the breaches.

Liz Singh shook her left hand nervously before commenting. "The *Koru's* coming apart." She slid her right hand, steady, reassuring, on Killan's shoulder. "Ensign: Take us out."

"Aye, sir."

The forward view swept away from the crumbling shuttlebay, to the port shuttlebay wall, and finally to space. Exploding conduits interspersed with rupturing deck plating and plummeting debris, but Tawana Killan's expertise at flight control dodged them all. The runabout lurched

forward – several seconds lapsed before the artificial gravity caught up – and into the depths of space.

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### **The Bridge, The *Starship Cantabrian***

“Sir?” Tony Ramirez peered over his shoulder, his right eyebrow raised, as the ship shuddered again.

On the viewscreen in front of them, the hostile ship grew as it pursued the runabout, disruptor fire jumping forth towards the runabout and the *Cantabrian*. In the background, a large brown planet dominated the upper left hand corner, the *Koru* listing with a long plasma plume trailing spiraling from her port nacelle.

“You heard me, Mr. Ramirez.” Captain Turner lessened his grip on his arm rests, a pinkish color returning to his knuckles as he nodded at the viewscreen. “Helm: slot us between the hostile ship and the runabout, but don’t let them get a clear shot of us. There’s something or someone on that runabout that hostile ship wants, and we’re not going to let them have it.” Loose deck plating clattered as the next jolt struck the *Cantabrian*.

“Aye, sir.” The Vulcan ensign at the flight control station input the code, and the runabout disappeared off the viewscreen as it approached.

Another blast shook the *Cantabrian* violently. A ceiling panel clunked to the deck, sparks raining down as conduit and tubing bungeed out of the hole left. Turner looked up, briefly inspecting the damage.

“Impulse engines are down,” Antonio Ramirez chimed in. “We only have maneuvering thrusters available for sub-warp speeds.” He added over his shoulder, “Warp engines are still on-line.”

“Bridge to engineering.”

“*Engineering. Arden here, sir.*”

Turner glanced over at the chief medical officer – she looked quite pale as she clutched onto her station – and returned his attention to the viewscreen. “We need impulse engines back on-line as soon as possible.”

“*Already on it, Cap’n. Engineering out.*”

“Sir, I’d like to point out the closer we get to the J-class planet, the less precision our targeting scanners and sensors will have due to the magnetic interference.” Jonar scooted her stool closer to the tactical station directly behind the captain’s chair, her hands steady on her station. On screen, a hostile disruptor shot strafed the shields but missed.

“Noted, Lieutenant.” Turner shifted his weight. “I’m not planning on engaging the hostile, just covering the runabout until it can successfully dock. Then we’re out of here.” His grey-blue eyes met Tony’s as the ship shuddered again. More sparks showered from the ceiling as the ship rumbled. “I’m not taking any unnecessary risks; for all we know, this could be a distraction from a bigger problem at SE4. Understood?”

Ramirez nodded and returned his gaze to his station. The Vulcan helmsman remained quiet as he input various codes into the flight control station. Doctor Bourget steadied herself against the medical station on the far port side of the bridge.

Beeping sounded from the operations station. Commander Ramirez scanned his station then reported. “The *Koru*’s losing structural integrity.”

“The hostile ship is now training all weapons on us, sir,” Jonar chimed in.

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"Every action I take, sir, the hostile starship appears to compensate for." The helmsman's voice sounded calm and collected. "With maneuvering thrusters only, weapons lock may be difficult to avoid."

"Evasive action, Ensign. Do the best you can." All attention returned to the viewscreen as the *Koru* erupted into a bright white ball, expanding outwards. The viewscreen dimmed slightly, filtering out the fireball's brightness, as Turner added, tapping on his armrest, "Status of the runabout."

An orifice on the front of the hostile ship glowed bright red, the shape appearing like a dragon sneering before spewing fireballs towards a knight. "Sir, sensors are indicating – and they could be wrong with all the interference from the planet – the charge gathering on the hostile ship is enough to cause serious structural damage to the *Cantabrian*."

"Understood, Jonar." The commanding officer leaned forward. "Mr. Ramirez, status of the runabout."

"Sir." Jonar's voice wavered slightly. "The hostile ship is firing..."

Lieutenant Commander Ramirez glanced up at the viewscreen, the orange energy discharge moving off to the right of the screen slightly but still expanding as it hurtled towards the ship, but he quickly returned his attention to Ops. "The Main Shuttlebay reports the runabout is nearly docked."

"We cannot evade their fire, sir, if we do not engage warp engines within the next fourteen seconds." The Vulcan ensign remained unfazed even as the discharge's glow made his skin appear browner than usual.

"Prepare to jump to maximum warp, Ensign, back to SE 4 on my mark." The captain's knuckles turned white as he clasped his station harder.

The *Cantabrian's* second officer shouted over his shoulder, his hair appearing as orange as embers glowing on a cooling fire. "They're aboard!"

Captain Turner nearly fell off his chair as an orange hue ensconced the bridge. "Now, ensign!"

A curtain of streaking stars replaced the orange energy ball on the viewscreen. "We're now cruising towards SE4 at warp 9.92, sir."

"Status of the hostile ship?"

"Sensors indicate they are *not* in pursuit." Antonio Ramirez turned around and smiled lightly at his commanding officer, Noel returning the smile before something to his left on the upper platform caught his attention.

Doctor Marie Bourget, her forehead beaded with sweat, clasped her hands tightly. "If you won't be needing me, sir, I'd better head back to Sickbay."

Captain Noel Turner smiled, trying to disarm the doctor, and nodded his approval.

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#### **The Entrance to the Krakonian Cave System, Near Starbase Expanse 4**

The bottom quarter of his pant leg he'd ripped off covered his eyes and mouth as a dark dust cloud rushed by the cave entrance. "Tell me when it's over."

She heard his muffled voice over the fierce winds. "I will, Lieutenant."

Dakota Caldwell brushed the dust from his arms and leaned back against the cave wall. Her silence, in contrast to the shrieking wind outside, echoing through the cave, ached in his mind

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more. *Just say something.* He cleared his throat; one reason for his discontentment aboard the *Galaxy* was his shyness. “Um, I suppose you’ve got special eyelids or some anatomical specialties to stop the dust from getting in your eyes?” Caldwell closed his eyes and mouthed, “Good one, Dak.”

“My anatomy provides me the ability to adapt to various adverse conditions.” Her tone indicated the information was matter-of-fact and widely known.

“Oh. Lucky you.” *And enter the other foot into the mouth.*

“I do not believe I see the relevance of luck in my anatomical composition.”

*This, Dakota thought, is going to be a long, long, long wait for help to arrive.*

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### **Sickbay, The *Starship Cantabrian***

Groans and screams from severely wounded patients punctured the silence, with various medical staff rushing from station to station. In the middle of the commotion, a male nurse dropped his tricorder and gasped. “Doctor Bourget!”

Doctor Marie Bourget snatched a spare tricorder up from a trolley, swerving around one biobed and coming to the nurse’s side. “Yes?”

The nurse stuttered slightly before pointing at his patient’s back.

Bourget followed the finger down to a flesh flap with two folds tucked underneath, joining onto an otherwise normal human male back. “Whoa.” Her chocolate-colored hand lightly scanned the surrounding tissue. “What’s this?”

“You must be Doctor Bourget.” The patient remained facing away from her.

“Yes,” she said as she cocked her head slightly, then smiled uneasily at the male nurse beside her as she held the tricorder at the patient’s back. “I’m afraid I’m at a disadvantage here...”

“Commander Scott Fack, Starfleet Special Operations.” He turned his head to talk over his shoulder. Gesturing towards the unusual area on his back, Fack continued, “I’m not fully human...”

“Yes...” Bourget’s voice trailed off as she ran the tricorder over the area for a second time. “Hm. You’ve been genetically altered...”

Commander Fack returned his attention to the back wall of Sickbay. “Yes.” His voice was nearly a whisper. “A long time ago by a race called the M’Tar.”

Doctor Bourget frowned as she studied new data streaming on the tricorder’s screen. “Never heard of them.”

“Not surprised.” Fack stretched slightly backward, trying to see the information on the doctor’s tricorder. “They’re extinct.”

She smiled lightly at her patient as she placed the tricorder atop a free console and pushed several displays for further information as Commander Fack swung his legs around to face her. The doctor whistled as the extended database results came in. “I have *never* seen anything like this.” Bourget laughed uneasily as she pinged the screen with the back of her hand. “Your genetic sequencing is amazing; I could study your immune system alone for decades, not to mention win the Carrington Award again after completing a few papers on it.” The chief medical officer abandoned the console and moved her attention back to the Special Operations officer’s back.

Cautiously, she raised her hand, palm opened, approaching the alien attachment. Slowly, her hand steady, Marie Bourget made contact with it, her fingers contouring the various folds, ensuring she took all care not to hurt him. "I'm risking sounding rude here, but what *is* this?"

A smile blossomed on Fack's face. "Think of it," he stated as if he explained it for the first time to a medical practitioner, "as an input of sorts."

She frowned as her finger rubbed the attachment slightly. "For what?"

The Special Services officer pulled away slightly, clearing his throat at the same time. "For the M'Tar to access my genetic structure..." He looked away towards Sickbay's back wall again. "Alter me to meet their whimsical pleasures."

Bourget glanced briefly at the nurse, an unsure look on her face, then returned her attention to her patient. "Sounds pretty creepy to me."

Fack remained focused, away from the doctor. "Actually," he stated coldly, "it scares you. A lot."

"And they've given you telepathy." The chief medical officer smirked slightly, her tone growing more on-edge. She glanced around Fack's shoulder to see him side-on, a PADD in her hand now. "Anything else?"

His eyes held on Sickbay's back wall. "Limited telekinesis. I try not to use that either." He turned towards her, his face mere centimeters from hers, his voice dropping to a whisper. "I freak people out enough as is."

"Doctor!" The chief engineer screaming for help, carrying Cadet Wrightson, made the three jump.

"Bring him to this bed." Second medical officer Doctor Pela rushed over, helping guide Wrightson's body down onto a biobed. The engineering cadet's limp body rested on the bed, and she flipped open a tricorder, her blue fingers typing in various information as the chief engineer squinted at a body across the room.

Ethan Arden patted Nate Wrightson's shoulder. "You're in good hands, mate." He set his sights across the room and weaved his way towards the biobed with an officer perched on it, rubbing her head.

"Liz?" Arden approached her, running his hand on top of the bed, as his gait slowed. "Liz, is that you?"

Lieutenant Commander Liz Singh looked up and found Ethan leaning down, staring right back at her. His hand trembled slightly, reaching to touch her. He retracted it before asking, "How? How are you?"

"Ethan." She rubbed her forehead and sighed. "I'm too tired for pleasantries."

He leaned up against a bulkhead, folding his arms. "I heard you were aboard. Are you okay?"

Singh diverted her attention away, glancing around Sickbay at the medical staff and patients. "Nothing a dermal regenerator and a good night's sleep can't fix." Her voice sounded low and distant, and she remained slightly turned away from him, resting her hand on the far corner of the biobed.

His hand brushed her arm, but she pulled away, still avoiding eye contact. "I..." He cleared his throat before removing his hand, clasping it with his other hand in front of him. "I haven't stopped thinking about you since..."

Liz shoved off the biobed and moved into the crowded room. "Ethan..."

"No." He pursued her, reaching out for her, grabbing her arm. "Wait. I..."

Her arm shoved his hand off her as her tone raised, uneasy. "No, you wait." She pointed at him, her voice starting loud but dimming. "You jumped at the opportunity to overhaul this thing and *expected* me to wait around?"

Ethan Arden scratched the back of his head and sighed. "We've been over this..."

"Well." Her hands and body shaking, Liz Singh reached back towards a medical trolley for something to steady herself; her hand found a tricorder. "Just you think about what's been said before, Ethan, before you lay on that Aussie charm."

She slammed the tricorder down as she spun around, the trolley clattering to the ground behind her, spilling various implements across the deck plating. Liz Singh stalked out of Sickbay, the door hissing shut behind her the only sound.

Ethan Arden shifted his focus from the door to find many eyes fixed on him.

Doctor Bourget stepped up behind the chief engineer, a smirk on her face. "That little reunion went amazingly well, didn't it?"

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### **The Observation Lounge, The *Starship Cantabrian***

He peered out the viewport, his fists white from pressing against its lower frame. Star-streaks dove toward some distant, dark point in space, and everything was quiet.

They were quiet. Those he'd assembled in the *Cantabrian's* observation lounge behind the bridge sat and stared at him. He could feel their eyes boring into the back of his skull, even though his eyes scanned the star-streaks outside.

Captain Noel Turner cleared his throat. "Thank you all for coming." He lifted his head slightly, stretching his neck and almost appearing aloof for a few seconds, before craning his head towards the others seated around the conference table.

"The events in this region of space have been... interesting over the past couple of days." The commanding officer turned, pacing around the table and those seated at it. "We've received radio silence from nearly every Federation colony, Starbase and starship in the region until we're nearly on *top* of them, the *Koru*," he gestured towards the viewports, "being a prime example of this."

Turner stopped and folded his arms. "In addition, Commander Fack and his team have reported some... disturbing news with regards to the Myhr'an, the owners of the hostile ship we encountered."

Lieutenant Commander Tony Ramirez, seated to the right of the captain's empty chair at the head of the table, looked around at the others at the table. Commander Fack from Starfleet Intelligence; Lieutenant Commander Elizabeth Singh, first officer of the *Koru*; Ensign Tawana Killan, flight controller aboard the *Koru*; Lieutenant Commander Ethan Arden; Doctor Marie Bourget; and Lieutenant Commander Ulitania Jonar all shifted their attention to him as he started to speak.

"The Myhr'an haven't been involved in a known conflict with the Federation in over 70 years, much less had contact with any Federation ship we know of in that period of time. The last conflict with the Federation was the Battle of Canaileus Prime in 2298. As you know, the Federation completed terraforming Canaileus Prime two years ago and is currently establishing a Starbase and colony there." Ramirez paused briefly, almost as if collecting his thoughts. "The last known Myhr'an conflict with any other race was with the Thrieshok-nar. The Myhr'an conquered them, occupied their planets for a decade or so, then, for no known

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reason, withdrew about 40 years ago to begin another extended period of isolationism. No diplomatic channels, formal or informal, exist between the Federation and the Myhr'an at this time."

Commander Fack chimed in, his hands aiming outwards and gesturing to highlight his point. "The Myhr'an remained inwardly focused until a few months ago when long range sensors indicated several abnormal deployments of starships near their borders with us and other powers, including the Wthaure and the Thrieshok-nar." He glanced at Commander Singh next to him, his voice sounding slightly hoarse. "Starfleet Intelligence sent a covert ship, the *U.S.S. William Hamilton*, to investigate this, but we lost contact with them several weeks ago."

"It would be interesting to note," Ramirez interjected, "that the Thrieshok-nar home system fell to the Myhr'an approximately two months ago."

Liz Singh took over. "The *Koru* established the whereabouts of the *William Hamilton's* wreckage, and Starfleet Intelligence sent us to retrieve the flight recorder." Her gaze met Ethan Arden's, and she looked away, heat rushing to her cheeks. She turned to look at Captain Turner. "Our team on the *Avon* recovered the flight recorder, but we have yet to review what data is there. The recorder's pretty heavily damaged."

"What other information do we hold on the Myhr'an?" Captain Turner frowned, his arms still crossed, and paced towards his chair as he nodded at Ramirez. One hand unlocked from the other elbow, pulling out his chair at the head of the table, but soon retreated back into the elbow's comfort as he remained standing.

"Not much, I'm afraid." Tony clasped his hands together, tapping his left index finger on top of his right hand. "Our database holds very little information on them, their society, even the structure of their government, if they have one. I would construe, as have many other Federation xenopolitical scientists, their shift in governmental policies buoys from extreme conservatism to liberal extremism." He paused. "Our records indicate that on last contact, Myhr'an space-faring technology was quite rudimentary."

Turner sat down and perched on the edge of his seat, leaning forward with his arms rested on the table. "How rudimentary?"

"From the records and the information gathered..." Ramirez thought for a few seconds. "I'd guess about a century behind the Federation at that time."

"Which is strange," Ethan Arden said as he glanced around the table, looked briefly at Captain Turner, then turned his attention to Ramirez. "Given some of their technology now is more *advanced* than ours..."

"In your professional opinion, Commander," the captain scooted his chair closer to the table, "how much more advanced?"

"With the way they were chewing through our shields, Cap'n, and from what sensors picked up," Ethan continued, "I'd say some of their systems would have half-a-century's lead on ours."

A silence filled the room. Commander Fack shifted in his chair, whilst Ethan looked down at the conference table's smooth, shiny black surface.

"Commanders Ramirez, Arden, and Singh: I want you to mull over the data we collected." The captain pointed at each of them. "Crack open that flight recorder and see what you can find. I have a feeling we'll find our Myhr'an 'friends' have a sponsor of some sort, someone trying to destabilize the Beta Quadrant."

Ramirez nodded back. "Understood."

Captain Turner glanced over at the chief medical officer, whose arms aimed down in a v-formation, her hands clasped and tucked between her knees. “Doctor, any medical data you can share with us? In case we need to engage in, God forbid, hand-to-hand combat with the Myhr’an at any point?”

Marie Bourget leaned forward slightly. “Our medical database has virtually nothing on the Myhr’an.” The lighting in the room cast dark shadows on her face, the bags under her eyes more pronounced. “What reports there are in the database have come from sightings only – and those are few and far between – xenobiologists have only hypothesized on the Myhr’an body and its workings, construed a rough working draft of how they *think* their bodies might function, extrapolated from similar species like the Gorn.” She looked over at the *Koru’s* away team. “What we do know is they look a lot like bipedal Komodo dragons, about 2 meters tall. Very strong, very muscular.”

Ensign Tawana Killan stared at the table, her voice quite distant. Her normally medium chocolate-colored skin appeared a few shades lighter, her Trill spots nearly matching her skin tone. “We’ve seen a few for ourselves...” She glanced up at the others. “We can confirm that, at least.”

“Sociologically,” Jonar spoke up, her pale blue eyes shimmering, “from what records I could dig up – and, like the doctor’s records, mainly rumors exist on the Myhr’an I’m afraid – they were once a warrior race.” A small smile appeared on her face. “Quite vicious from all accounts.” She cleared her throat. “Like Commander Ramirez pointed out, they would advance on neighboring civilizations and conquer them, usually very swiftly. The Myhr’an would enslave those populations, then, after a period of a few decades and for no apparent reason, they would retreat back into their own space.”

Commander Singh broke the slight pause. “I still find that quite strange.”

Jonar nodded at her and continued. “They have apparently completed their latest period of isolationism...” Her attention shifted to the head of the table. “Perhaps the Myhr’an undertake a cycle: advance and conquer; occupy and enslave; retreat; and then isolate themselves. Much like the Kaartali and their seven-year life cycle; when they reach a certain time limit, they undertake a total change or enter a new phase.”

“And you are proposing,” Captain Turner ran with Jonar’s line of thinking, “the cycle has gone to the expansionist phase again. This would be followed by three more phases, then start all over again. And perhaps some external agency could be behind their latest push?”

Ulitania Jonar nodded. “Unless their latest period of isolationism undertook a large jump in technological advances – which I find very unlikely – I would assume another power is interfering here.”

“Fascinating.” The commanding officer seemed distant for a moment before addressing the table. “It would appear that...”

*“Bridge to Captain Turner.”* The voice spoke clearly and calmly.

Captain Turner held up a finger to pause the conversation, glancing up slightly at the ceiling. “Turner here. Go ahead, Bridge.”

*“Sir, we are approaching Starbase Expanse 4, but communications is not detecting any transmissions in the area or from the base itself.”*

“I’m on my way, Bridge. Turner, out.”

The commanding officer planted his hands on the table and lifted himself out of his chair. His hands remained on the table as he addressed the observation lounge. “I’d like you all to join me on the bridge. We may need your expertise if we have another run-in with the Myhr’an. I’ll join you shortly. Dismissed.”

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Everyone rose from their chairs and headed out the access-way into the corridor towards the bridge.

Captain Turner organized the PADDs into a pile and picked them up. As he planted them between his hand and his hip and moved around the table, his gaze fell upon Doctor Bourget. "Doctor?"

She looked at the deck then up to meet his glance. "May I speak to you, Captain?"

Turner headed towards the door, stopping side-on to the chief medical officer. "If you haven't noticed, Doctor, I *am* quite busy at present..."

Bourget turned to face her commanding officer. "It'll only take a few seconds."

The captain paused and then nodded towards the corridor. "Walk with me, Doctor."

The two strolled side-by-side out of the observation lounge and into the corridor, Marie fidgeting with her hands. "I have... some reservations about Commander Fack."

The statement stopped Turner in his tracks. Bourget halted a few steps ahead of him. "That's a very worrying statement, Doctor. Would you care to elaborate?"

The doctor folded her hands in front of her and inhaled sharply. "He's been altered by a race called the M'Tar..."

"Never heard of them."

"Neither have I... until today. They are, according to Commander Fack, extinct." She moved closer to Captain Turner, her voice dropping to a whisper. "I did a little research, but most of the files are heavily classified, which makes me rather suspicious." Bourget looked aside. "Anyway, Commander Singh and the other survivors from the *Koru* reported the Myhr'an started chanting or making some sort of guttural noise..."

"And?" His eyebrows raised as he waited for the relevance.

"Commander Fack was... mesmerized. 'Entranced,' according to Ensign Killan." Her hands gestured as she explained. "It could be the Myhr'an have some influence over him, found out how to access his M'Tar genetic alterations..."

Captain Turner resumed walking to the bridge, the tone of his voice harsh. "This is pretty far..."

"We were just talking in that room about some external force helping the Myhr'an. Who's to say that that race doesn't hold some old M'Tar secrets as well?" The doctor rested her hand on his arm, and he stopped, turning to face her. "I'm *not* saying he is aware of it or in any way in control of it, Captain."

"You know, when people see something they can't believe, even in the face of eminent and life-threatening danger, they stand there and stare; this could be the case with Commander Fack."

The doctor appeared unmoved, removing her hand and folding her arms.

His grey-blue eyes met her dark brown ones, and the stare held for a few seconds until Turner's stance softened. "I'll keep an eye on him, Doctor. And we will get to the bottom of this Myhr'an threat. I promise."

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**The Bridge, The *Starship Cantabrian***

His attention shifted from the viewscreen as he turned when he heard the aft starboard door hiss open. "Captain," Ramirez reported, "we're approaching the planet now. No ships in the vicinity."

Captain Noel Turner jogged down the three steps to the command circle and stopped in the middle as Ramirez took the operations station. "Helm: put us into a geo-synchronous orbit over SE4."

"Aye, sir."

Doctor Marie Bourget stood with her arms folded at the back of the bridge, glancing over at the other group of displaced officers. Lieutenant Commander Singh and Ensign Killan watched the planet's edge on the viewscreen whilst Commander Fack leaned against an empty station on the edge of the command circle.

"Any luck in hailing either the station or the starbase?" Captain Turner's voice pulled her back to the situation at hand.

"No, sir." Jonar checked her station and then gazed up from it. "No communications from either."

Ramirez peered at his station's display and reassessed his readout. Keeping his eyes on his station, he reported, "Captain? I think you should see this."

Turner cleared his throat then nodded towards the planet's curvature. "On screen."

Lightening illuminated a mass of angry brown clouds passing and swirling on the viewscreen. The commanding officer strolled forwards, squinting. "A storm?"

"No, sir." Ramirez looked up at Turner. "A topographical scan indicates the Starbase has been destroyed." He nodded at the viewscreen. "*That* is the aftermath."

The storm dissipated from the screen as the sensors extrapolated information from the surface. A computer-generated model of what remained beneath the clouds appeared. A large crater stood where a once-bustling starbase had been. Small arrows appeared with various facts and figures scrolling above the arrow lines, including where the starbase's perimeter once was, crater depth and width, outlying supply and monitoring stations, and so on.

"The orbital station?"

Tony shook his head. "Sensors indicate a debris field." His attention shifted back to his station. "It's all Federation debris, no foreign debris. I'm reading three flight recorders: one from the station..." He paused as his hands danced on the ops station's surface. "...One from the *U.S.S. Marsh*, and one from the *U.S.S. Ruapehu*."

"The *Ruapehu* is... was an *Ambassador*-class starship," Liz Singh chimed in from the bridge's rear. Captain Turner looked around at her, and she met his gaze. "It would take something pretty massive to obliterate two starships, an orbital station and a starbase..."

Turner returned his attention to the viewscreen, and his face turned pale. "Survivors?"

Ramirez's voice came low. "No escape pods detected and no life signs in orbit." The operations station beeped twice, paused and beeped twice again. Tony tapped a few times and his voice returned more normal. "Sensors have found approximately 40 life signs, some of them faint, on the surface." More arrows appeared on the viewscreen, including some on mountains near the once-starbase-now-crater, and the numbers bounced back and forth like an unsteady scale's.

The second officer looked up at Turner, his dark eyes sparkling. "I'm sorry I can't get more accurate readings but the atmospheric disturbance is making it difficult."

"Ramirez, Doctor Bourget: Assemble away teams to start the rescue effort." Captain Turner paced back towards the captain's chair.

"Sir?"

Ramirez's voice stopped him mid-gait. "Yes, Commander?"

"With the interference, the transporters might not be the best option." The second officer stood and approached the captain. "Might I suggest we utilize the two *Titania*-class scout ships we have aboard?"

Captain Noel Turner faced Ramirez, an uneasy look on his face, but before he could speak, Tony put his hands out to explain further.

"I know they are experimental..."

"Much like the HOLIE system," Turner interjected.

Ramirez smiled lightly before continuing. "But this would be an ideal environment to test their capabilities in."

The commanding officer paused, gazing at the various arrows and figures the viewscreen. After a few moments, he shifted his attention to Tawana Killan. "Agreed. Take Ensign Killan with you; she's reportedly one of the best pilots around."

Commander Ramirez dashed up the three stairs to the upper deck surrounding the command circle, pointing at Ulitania Jonar and several other officers on the bridge, and headed towards the turbolift, Bourget and Killian close behind.

The turbolift doors hissed open, and Turner called out, "And Commander Ramirez?"

As the others piled into the turbolift, Ramirez turned around. "Yes, sir?"

Captain Turner stepped forward, glancing at Fack and Singh, before continuing. "At the first sign of trouble, get out of there." *Things are already as complicated as can be, with D'Angelo and the others probably dead.*

"Understood." Ramirez nodded and stepped backwards into the turbolift, and the doors hissed closed in front of the away teams.

Turner slowly stepped up the stairs to the bridge's upper deck, speaking to Commanders Fack and Singh as he did. "Any idea what could cause that level of destruction," he nodded towards the viewscreen, "without at least *something* humongous and striking-the-fear-of-God-into-you showing up on long-range sensors?"

Fack looked at Singh and then back at the captain. "No, sir. I've never seen anything quite like that." He straightened up and folded his arms. "There was an orbital platform one time when I was aboard the *Prospect* that we had to disable. If it fired, it could have possibly caused devastation on the planetary scale we're seeing here but..." He shrugged. "No. I've never seen anything that could destroy so much so quickly and not even appear to get a dent in the paintwork."

Turner shifted his attention to Liz Singh.

"For that amount of firepower and for our forces to be so utterly destroyed, it would have to be a fleet of ships." She arched her head, and turned, leaning up against a work station. "But if it was a fleet, they would've shown up on sensors. There would be at least *some* foreign

debris, some losses on the hostiles' side, especially with an *Ambassador*-class starship around." She glanced over at Fack. "Unless they were cloaked and had the uttermost element of surprise, but..."

"Well, we could speculate all day on what happened here. We'll have to narrow the options down, find a few leads." Captain Turner tapped one finger on the edge of the station. "Commander Singh, I'd like you to join Commander Arden in Engineering to extract as much data as you can from the *William Hamilton's* flight recorder. I'll have our teams beam the other flight recorders aboard for analysis as well." Pointing at the Special Operations officer, he continued. "Commander Fack, comb over Starfleet records. Delve into your special files if you need to. If you find anything remotely similar to this case, I'd like to hear about it."

The commanding officer turned around, headed down the stairs and across the command circle towards a forward starboard door. "If anyone needs me, I'll be in my ready room. Lieutenant Willard, you have the bridge."

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### ***Titania* Launch Bay, The *Starship Cantabrian***

Engineers hustled to various areas in the scout ship launch bay, and Lieutenant Commander Antonio Ramirez led his rescue team towards the *Titania*. Two engineers worked from stations on the bay's second floor, whilst an engineering lieutenant stood at a freestanding station next to the scout ship. Ramirez approached her.

"Commander." She nodded and looked up from her station at the ship. "The *Titania* is ready for launch, and I understand the *Oberon* won't be far behind."

Ramirez joined her stare. "Starfleet commissioned the *Titania* and her sister ship, the *Oberon*, as experimental scout ships to be based from a starship or a starbase but self-sufficient for longer periods of time than standard shuttlecraft or runabouts." He smiled at her. "At least, that's what the tidbit we received from the Corp of Engineers said. In a round-about sort of way."

The *Titania's* warp engines cast a blue glow on the deck and the closed bay doors, reflecting upwards onto the smooth underbelly, a long, oval-shaped tube embedded half-way into the scout's ventral. A deflector dish at the ship's fore shone blue upwards onto the larger top section's underneath, the bridge section immediately above it. The bridge section's upper and sides curved gradually outwards as it progressed towards the ship's aft. Towards the scout's aft, the starboard and port sections stretched outwards towards the embedded warp nacelles. On the ship's aft dorsal area, two curved arms propped up a small sensor platform.

A large bulky arm, its sections folded up by hinges, held the scout ship in place. Attached to the ceiling by a hinge-like apparatus, the arm's base fit snugly into a small, shallow hollow on the ship's top; when the base was attached, it created a flush, even surface.

The team charged up the stairs to a platform connected to the starboard airlock immediately behind the bridge section but forward of the rest of the ship. Ramirez paused and smiled back at Ensign Killan. "I guess it's time to see if this thing really works."

Killan smirked back at him, raising an eyebrow and tilting her head to one side, her eyes growing slightly wider, as she walked past him.

Ramirez and his team entered the bridge through the starboard door. The bridge reminded Ramirez of a larger version of a runabout's cockpit module. Two forward stations – Ops left and Conn right – shared a larger console, separated by a dark grey divider. One station port and one station starboard joined the front stations at the corner, whilst a freestanding secondary console stood towards the aft section of the bridge.

Lieutenant Commander Antonio Ramirez took the operations station, with Ensign Killan next to him at the flight control station. Doctor Bourget checked her station behind and to the left

of Ramirez, whilst Ulitania Jonar familiarized herself with her station's configuration mirroring Bourget's.

"Sir, we are ready and cleared for launch." Killan held her hands over her station. "Awaiting your order."

"*Titania to Cantabrian. Open bay doors and extend the launch arm.*"

"*Cantabrian to Titania. Understood. Bay doors open. Extending the launch arm.*"

Ensign Tawana Killian scanned her station, watching the readings change, but the view of the thick deck plating progressing upwards in the forward viewports, the cold darkness of space replacing it. The star's refraction on the planet cast bright sunlight and contrasting dark, sharp shadows across the bridge, and Killan wondered how well this little ship would perform under pressure.

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### **Main Engineering, The Starship Cantabrian**

Standing at the other side of Engineering, she still wasn't far enough away from Ethan Arden.

*Well*, Liz Singh thought, *to be comfortable*. She thrust the hyperspanner closer to the damaged flight recorder, careful enough to mind the jagged edges poking out at odd angles, heard its hum increase but scanned her former lover out of the corner of her eye.

He tapped uneasily at the console in front of the warp core, his fingers jabbing so hard most of Main Engineering could hear them over the core's steady heartbeat. An ensign approached; he slid a PADD off the console's top and handed it to her. The ensign walked away, but Ethan Arden had turned and was fast approaching...

Liz Singh dug the hyperspanner closer than tolerable towards the flight recorder's surface, the tool reverberating in protest. The sweat gathered on her palms as she steadied the hyperspanner as much as she could. It hummed louder.

She jumped as his hand slid over hers, moving it slightly away from the flight recorder. "You're gonna short it out, love." The humming softened as he removed his hand from hers.

"Thanks," came softly in return. Her hand ran the hyperspanner over the damaged recorder as she caught him continuing onwards out of the corner of her eye, his focus returning to his PADD.

Singh turned and swallowed hard as the hyperspanner clicked off. "Ethan."

He stopped but didn't turn around. His shoulders stiffened as he raised his head and licked his bottom lip before he bit it.

"About before. In Sickbay." Her hand slid the hyperspanner next to the flight recorder and she approached him. "I wanted to say..." She spoke up. "I wanted to say sorry. You didn't deserve that. I was tired and I shouldn't've..."

His bottom lip released, his shoulders relaxing, Ethan Arden turned and glanced at Liz like he had all those years ago. The familiarity in his eyes, like a thousand ships welcoming her home, embraced her. She felt the tension dissipate, her stomach's churning slowing. "No worries. After all you've been through in the last few days..." He cleared his throat as he scratched at the back of his neck. "Yeah. Apology accepted."

Liz Singh smiled. *One of her best attributes*, Ethan thought. *Too bad we don't see enough of it.*

"Don't think you can get off so easy with the way we broke up last time..." Her voice grew softer. "I'm willing to work with you but I'll be damned if I let you break my heart again, Ethan."

After an uncomfortable pause filled with Arden glaring at the deck and Liz scratching the back of her neck whilst studying another part of the decking, she pointed back at the workstation, the smile still present. "If you wouldn't mind, and if you're not busy... I'd appreciate some help with these flight recorders."

Ethan Arden smiled back uneasily and nodded yes.

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#### **The Entrance to the Krakonian Cave System, Near Starbase Expanse 4**

Odd dark brown and rust-colored streaks in the light brown dust storm fell like rain onto the dusty plain outside the cave, small rocks clacking to the ground, but Dakota Caldwell laughed as he spoke. "And so the Bolian says to my Mom, '*Th'rello grestlink* not jello wrestling'..."

Yh'ahni's brown eyes blinked back from a blank face as she sat cross-legged across the cave's mouth from him.

Dakota's laugh dimmed to a grin. "You're not finding this amusing..."

The alien woman's eyes widened as she cleared her throat. "On the contrary, Lieutenant. I am finding your story quite fascinating."

He slapped the ground with an open palm, a small dust plume rising and swirling around. "It's not supposed to be *fascinating*, Yh'ahni; it's supposed to be funny." His head rested against the cave wall. "You're not smiling, or laughing..."

Her eyebrow raised as she explained like a university lecturer. "Xenobiologists believe my race have a different muscular anatomical and physiological traits on their faces than most humanoids, Lieutenant. It is very difficult for me to mimic smiling."

Blankness swept across Dakota Caldwell's face. "Oh." His eyebrows shrugged, and he added, "Then how do you... Did you hear that?" The shrugging eyebrows crept closer to one another, the creases in his face deepening.

Yh'ahni glanced out the cave mouth into the dust storm then down into the dark cave. She looked back at Caldwell. "Hear what?"

Concentrating on the distant sound, he looked down towards the ground. "At least your race doesn't have super-hearing," Caldwell muttered.

She raised an eyebrow and leaned closer to him. "However, I did hear that."

Dakota shooed at her to quiet down, then raised his pointing finger. "I think someone's coming..." His attention swung to the cave mouth, his eyes wide, as he backed himself up the cave wall to stand.

Yh'ahni stood, too, slowly, hands out to balance. She cocked her head slightly. "I hear it as well." Her hand pointed down into the cave as she remained focused on outside. "Quick. Grab a blunt object..."

The young lieutenant absentmindedly stretched his arm backwards as he crouched, his hand grasping for a large rock or anything blunt when two shadows became figures.

Those figures emerged from the dust in Starfleet environmental suits, the man holding a tricorder outstretched in their direction. He flipped the tricorder closed as they entered the cave mouth, gazed back at the woman, then turned back. "I'm Lieutenant Commander Antonio Ramirez of the *Federation Starship Cantabrian*. We're here to rescue you."

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Dakota Caldwell smiled as he glanced over at Yh'ahni. The smile stretched when he saw Yh'ahni's quivering lips and puckered cheeks...

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### **Sickbay, The *Starship Cantabrian***

The room was so dark her eyes had trouble adjusting to the light pouring in from the recently opened door leading into the corridor.

And then his form in the doorway started to eclipse the light, the more so the closer he moved towards her. The door hissed closed behind him, the darkness returning, and her eyes adjusted again to the dim night lighting of Sickbay.

"Doctor," the captain nodded towards the chief medical officer as he approached. His eyes fell on the various injured lying asleep, unconscious or gazing around at the darkness on the biobeds around Sickbay. His voice came low and quiet. "D'Angelo, Senegal, Hernandez?"

Doctor Marie Bourget shook her head and looked down. "I'm sorry, Captain. They aren't amongst the survivors."

Captain Noel Turner swallowed hard and rebalanced himself. His eyes started to reflect the dim lighting in the room, and he cleared his throat as his hand wiped at his right eye. "It's been... a long day. Can I ask the survivors a few questions?"

She closed her medical tricorder, her tone hushed. "Most of them are exhausted, or under sedation. I would highly suggest against it."

Something moved from beside a far biobed, standing and emerging from the shadows. A woman with coffee-and-cream complexion, eyes darker than night, and small cranial ridges running parallel to her dark eyebrows came forward; he'd seen her emerge from the *Titania* upon its return. "Perhaps I could be of assistance, Captain?"

"Yes, you can." His eyes drifted above the mustard-colored shoulders of her jumpsuit uniform to the two pips on her collar. "Lieutenant...?"

"Yh'ahni." She bowed her head.

"Ah, yes." Turner gestured towards the CMO's office, the dim lighting providing most of Sickbay's illumination through the glass floor-to-ceiling wall, and the duo walked towards it. "I've read your report through. You're very thorough." The commanding officer rested on the CMO's desk's edge as Yh'ahni faced him, her dark eyes scanning his face. "Can I ask you a few questions, Lieutenant?"

"Yes sir."

"Your report," he produced a PADD and both his hands clasped it, "spoke of two shockwaves."

"That is correct."

"And our sensor logs show the blast crater was over 90 kilometers in diameter..." His right thumb absentmindedly rubbed up and down the PADD's side. "Your ship, the *Marsh*, just returned from a tour in this area. Have you ever seen anything like this before?"

Yh'ahni squinted at first and she looked away. Her dark brown eyes met Turner's, steady and true, as she answered. "Once. We received a distress call from a Trookanian colony and responded." She clenched her teeth for a few moments. "What we found... An orbital attack obliterated half the colony, and the other half..." Yh'ahni cleared her throat as her hand steadied herself against the bulkhead. "There was nothing but rubble left. The few survivors there were had terrible injuries. Multiple fractures, burns, those sorts of things." Her eyes

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shifted to the floor. “Whoever or whatever attacked...” Her eyes returned to his. “They have improved the weapon, sir, and quadrupled its firing power. Any Federation colony or starship within a few light-years of SE4 could be in danger...”

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**The Observation Lounge, The *Starship Cantabrian***

He slapped the PADD down on the observation lounge table. “You wanted something interesting? Here it is.”

Captain Noel Turner picked up the PADD and surveyed its contents. He didn’t say a word.

“You do realize I stayed up all night combing through thousands of records to find this,” Scott Fack explained as an aside.

Turner squinted at the PADD for a few moments, absentmindedly commenting, “I appreciate your effort, Commander.” He kept his focus on the information.

“Captain...” Fack took a seat to the captain’s right. “Is everything okay?”

“I...” The commanding officer placed the PADD down on the table and covered his mouth with his hands, then placed them on the table as well. His eyes were bloodshot and swollen. “In the starbase destruction... I lost a few close friends.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Do you want to talk about it?”

“I’m...” Turner picked the PADD back up, wiping one eye with the back of his hand. “I’m fine, Commander.”

The door hissed open, and Ramirez, Arden, Jonar, Singh and Bourget stepped in, each taking a seat around the table. Captain Turner looked up from the PADD, shaking it lightly at the others. “Commander Fack’s found some information. Hopefully you all have as well?”

Singh glanced over at Ramirez and Arden, then back at the commanding officer. “The flight recorders held some interesting information about the Myhr’an ships, but nothing we didn’t really gather already from our most recent encounter with them.”

“One interesting thing,” Ramirez added. “Each of the Myhr’an ships had some advanced communication equipment on a tower-like appendage on the dorsal section of the craft. Besides receiving and sending communications, its other functions are not quite apparent at this point in time.”

“The *Marsh* and *Ruapehu* both recorded mere seconds of data but it confirms the Myhr’an attacked SE4 and have stealth technology on their ships. They were virtually on top of the Starfleet ships before they decloaked.” Liz Singh sounded somewhat excited about the findings.

“We did find,” Arden tacked on, “extremely minute traces of thimaldicide gas leading away from Starbase Expanse 4.”

Turner glanced over at Fack. “And your readings came up with some information on this?”

“I cross-referenced it with several files to make sure and even took it to Commanders Ramirez, Singh and Arden to back-up my findings. It appears the weapon the assailants used was bilitrium combined with an antimatter converter.”

“That would explain the quick power-up and the level of destruction on the colony,” Jonar added.

“And thimaldicide gas is a by-product of bilitrium when it is used,” Ramirez chimed in.

“Isn’t bilitrium an extremely rare element?” Turner squinted slightly.

“Yes, but in our planetary surveys on the *Koru* we discovered two or three planets around the Typhon Expanse with rich deposits of it.” Singh shrugged. “Perhaps it’s not as rare as we thought.”

Turner stood up and paced to the viewport. “So this weapon, whatever it may be... It’s leaking?”

A period of silence followed, but Fack broke it. “It appears so.”

“Well, it looks like we found our lead,” Captain Turner stated as he turned around, leaning up against the viewport’s lower frame. “Ramirez, calculate where that trail leads and follow it. Singh, Arden: See if there’s any more information you can extract from that flight recorder, especially about that communications tower. Use whoever you need; I’m hoping we can integrate the Starfleet survivors from SE4 and the *Koru* into our crew to make up for the shortfall. Doctor: Prepare Sickbay for combat casualties. Fack: Work with Singh and Arden on their findings; maybe your special files will have some information on those towers. Dismissed.”

The officers attending rose from their chairs and broke into two separate groups, one leaving through the starboard entrance and the others leaving through the port entrance.

Noel Turner pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to get rid of his growing headache. He felt uneasy, then noticed Ulitania Jonar’s ice blue eyes staring back at him.

“Oh, sorry, Jonar. I completely forgot. There’s a lieutenant from the *Marsh*, Yh’ahni. She was their chief of security and she is quite familiar with this area of space. Rangi Manawatu spoke highly of her service aboard the *Marsh*. Use her however you see fit. See if you can work with her and get any data about the ships in this region...”

“Understood.” Ulitania Jonar moved closer, resting her hand on Turner’s upper arm. “But you are avoiding the real crux of this situation. You’re upset about Leslie, and the others.”

“You know me too well, my friend.” Turner blinked as he looked at the ceiling. “Sam D’Angelo. God, I knew her for... what seems like forever. Do you know, on the *Christchurch*, Sam was one of those people I could always trust? There was a job to do? She’d get it done. I even wanted her to be my first officer when I took command of this ship in ’69 but she wanted to see out her time on the *Christchurch*, make sure she got to drydock in one piece. Loyal to a fault. And an excellent Eucker player!”

“Leslie Hernandez... what a great counselor. Always rational, always keeping her cool under pressure. When we had that stand off with the *Wthaire* – and you know me, I get pushed to a point and I explode – Leslie was the calming influence. She kept things right and level, made sure we weren’t overreacting. And even when the subspace explosion went off... she responded like any good officer should in that situation.”

Turner glanced over at Jonar, his eyes glistening. “D’Angelo, Hernandez, Senegal: they were all good people, Jonar. They shouldn’t have died that way.”

“No one chooses, Noel, how or when they’re going to die.” Jonar clasped her hands together. “Look at my previous host, Salin. Blink of an eye and he was down for the count, bleeding so heavily they didn’t know if they could save the symbiont even. I remember when you got the news, when I contacted you to let you know I was Jonar’s new host. It was difficult, telling you Salin was dead but a part of him lived on in me, this perfect stranger who’s vaguely familiar.” She looked out the viewports. “Good people, bad people...we all die. We don’t have a choice. But we can make sure that their deaths, if tragic, aren’t in vain, aren’t repeated. And that’s why you have to be strong, lead, and push your crew and those on this ship to find the truth.”

Turner smiled lightly. "You love your motivational speeches, eh?"

Jonar grinned back. "Salin adored them. Me? I'm just following in his footsteps, trying to keep up." She whispered conspiratorially to him. "I don't know if I'm doing him any justice though. I always feel like I'm on the back foot..."

"Thanks. You're doing perfectly fine."

"Not a problem." Jonar pointed back towards the bridge. "Shall we?"

Turner nodded and the two left the observation lounge.

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### **Captain's Log, Stardate 49546.3**

*Captain's Log, Stardate 49546.3: The trail is faint, but it's the only lead we have without showing up at the Myhr'an border, and oh how the Myhr'an seem to hate uninvited visitors. Communications have cleared up again, although how much longer will they stay that way? And could our decreased communications abilities be due to the Myhr'an being closer than we think?*

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### **The Bridge, The Starship Cantabrian**

A beeping from the Ops station drew Turner away from one of the aft bridge stations. Stepping down into the command circle and approaching the captain's chair, he ordered, "Report."

Lieutenant Commander Ramirez tapped at his station. "Sir, I'm detecting a drifting Myhr'an scout vessel two light years away."

"Set an intercept course." Turner slid into the captain's chair and clutched the armrests. "Red alert. Try hailing them."

Jonar scooted her stool closer to her tactical station. She shook her head. "I'm not getting any response."

"Keep trying." A note of irritation sounded in the captain's voice.

Ramirez scanned Ops, then looked up towards the viewscreen. "We're approaching the vessel's co-ordinates."

Turner turned his attention to the Vulcan at the conn. "Drop out of warp. Take us to the ship, maximum impulse."

"Aye, sir." The Vulcan appeared collected, his voice unwavering and his hands moving gracefully over his station.

Turner pushed himself up from the captain's chair, walking over to the Ops station. He rested a hand on the chair's shoulder. "Anything?"

Ramirez absorbed the information streaming in from sensors. "The ship's interior is pretty heavily damaged, sir. I'm not reading any life signs."

"Sir, we are approaching the ship now."

"Full stop. On screen." Captain Turner's voice sounded strained.

A small shark-like ship appeared on the screen. Its dark shark grey hull only reflected the light of a distant star and the *Cantabrian's* flood lights. The vessel slowly rotated starboard like a dead fish in a fish tank.

Tony Ramirez shook his head. "I'm not getting anything. No life signs, no life support, no other systems on-line."

The commanding officer turned away from the viewscreen and approached tactical behind his chair, glancing at Jonar for answers. "Any sign of weapon fire?"

Ulitania Jonar scanned her station. "No, sir. No external damage to the ship was caused by weapon fire." She returned to looking at the commanding officer.

Turner pondered for a moment, glimpsing over at Commander Fack at Counselor Hernandez's old station. He looked back at Jonar. "Jonar: take us down to yellow alert." The commanding officer sat down at his station, leaning forward on the seat. "Ramirez: assemble away teams. Find out what went wrong on that ship."

Ramirez rose from his station and approached the commanding officer. "Sir, I'd like permission to take some linguists aboard. So little is known about the Myhr'an language, and they might be able to help."

Captain Noel Turner nodded. "Permission granted."

Tony Ramirez pointed at Jonar as he stepped up from the command circle towards the turbolift.

Turner smiled at Commander Fack. "I'm sure you'll want to tag along as well."

Fack nodded as he rose from his station, dashing to join Ramirez and Jonar in the turbolift. As the doors started to close, Ramirez tapped his comm.-badge. "Commander Ramirez to..."

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### **Corridor, Myhr'an Scout Ship**

All decked out in environmental suits, Ramirez's away teams materialized in a dark corridor, the away teams' palm beacons clicking on and shining around like spotlights announcing the opening of a new shopping mall.

"Wow," Commander Scott Fack whistled as his light beam fell across a black gel-like material splattered across the corridor walls and ceiling. He followed the splat marks upwards. "They must've had one hell of a party."

"Thank God I misplaced my invitation," Dakota Caldwell said absentmindedly, his beam tracing a path of black goo to a Myhr'an lower arm, separated at the elbow.

The corridors matched the dark grey exterior, their height taller than normal Starfleet ships but the same width, giving the ship an eerie, uneasy feeling.

"What is that... substance?" Threk's phaser shook slightly as his gaze followed his light beam to a severed leg.

"My readings indicate some sort of biomatter, extremely complex in genetic structure." Marie Bourget knelt at the severed leg to get a better reading. "Whatever it is, it seems to be the stuff the Myhr'an are made of. If someone could keep a light on this while I gather a sample..."

Fack's light beam met Bourget's, and the *Cantabrian's* chief medical officer put her beacon face down onto the deck's metal grating. Unscrewing a Petri dish lid, Bourget scooped the black substance into the dish with a spatula. Screwing the lid back on, she placed the sample into an away team medical bag over her shoulder. She turned around, after grabbing her

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beacon off the deck, a surprised look on her face (which calmed), and stated to Fack: "Thank you."

"Welcome, Doctor." Commander Fack smiled lightly then nodded towards the others further down the corridor. "We better catch up."

The duo walked towards the others, all gathered at the corridor's end, around a closed door. Lieutenant Commander Ulitania Jonar held her phaser rifle close to her hip, her ice blue eyes scanning the corridor for any sort of movement. "Anything?" Jonar looked over at Lieutenant Yh'ahni, the *Marsh's* former chief of security.

Yh'ahni turned her attention from her tricorder to Jonar. "No, sir. My tricorder is not detecting any life signs or abnormal energy readings."

"Keep an eye out." Jonar turned towards the others. "I don't have a very easy feeling about this place."

Ramirez planted an emergency hand actuator on the door's surface, clicking the handle into place and sliding the door partially open. Caldwell, Threk and another security guard grabbed either side of the door and helped Tony Ramirez open it further.

The security officer entered first, his phaser rifle at the ready. "So this is the bridge," Fack commented from the rear of the group.

Three free-standing stations, assembled in a semi-circle, stood away from another semi-circular wall with more consoles at the bridge's aft. A large chair, raised off the deck by a few steps up, perched on a mound in the room's middle. Three more free-standing stations, all without monitors on the back, formed a mirror semi-circle in front of a large viewscreen. Doors led out from the bridge either side of the aft stations.

"Threk, Caldwell: see if you can get computer access." Ramirez nodded towards the aft three stations. "Doctor: gather more samples."

Threk and Caldwell, both linguists, moved towards the stations, while Bourget moved to the remnants of Myhr'an bodies – mainly limbs and smaller parts – littered around the bridge. "I'll try, Commander, but I need an entire body if I'm to gather any *deep* insight."

Jonar stood guard at the access way, and Yh'ahni and the other security guard moved to two other exits aft.

Fack and Ramirez shone their beacons over other consoles. "Standard starship configuration, really More gray: the new black in starship design, I hear; that or there was a sale on at the paint shop. Helm, by the look of it, there, in the middle. Elevated captain's chair: charming." Scott Fack ran his hand over part of a decapitated head lying on the captain's chair; he shivered.

Tony Ramirez picked up on the shiver. "What? What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry, Commander," Threk called from the aft stations. "All the computers have been wiped. The core has been purged by the look of things."

Fack raised his hand. "I'm okay." He pointed at the remnant of a head. "I just got a brief flash of memory from... what's left of this being. Some sort of revolt took place." His hazel eyes met Ramirez's. "Other than that, I can't tell you much other than what you see here. It's was a pretty bloody fight. All encompassing. No survivors."

"Sir!"

Ramirez and Fack turned, their beams shining over to the area on the bridge's wall where Yh'ahni's beam shone on. Scratched into the wall was a word. Ramirez, Fack and the others converged on the spot.

"What does it say?" Bourget leaned closer to Yh'ahni.

"I'm not certain, Doctor; however, Lieutenant Threk might have the ability to decipher it."

Threk ran his gloved hand over the word, as if tactile sensation could translate the word for him. He squinted at it for a while before turning to Ramirez. "I can pronounce it, sir, but I have no idea what it means."

Ramirez glanced over at Dakota Caldwell. Caldwell met his gaze, blinked and calmly replied, "It's a slang term."

"Slang term?" Fack's expression was one of puzzlement. "What do you mean? Like an expletive or...?"

Caldwell laughed. "No, no, sorry. I didn't mean that." He pointed at the various parts of the word as he translated. "It translates literally into 'The Ancient Area in Space Both Sacred and Haunted'."

"Which means...?" Bourget crossed her arms uncomfortably.

"Starbase Expanse 3." Dakota looked from Bourget, to Yh'ahni, to Fack then to Ramirez. "It's the Myhr'an name for what we call Starbase Expanse 3."

"Sounds like, to me, that's where they're headed next," Jonar called out from over her shoulder.

"Okay... finish up our scans here and we'll head back to the *Cantabrian*." Ramirez scanned the word etched into the wall into his tricorder.

"How did they get the word onto the wall?" The security officer looked somewhat puzzled.

"Whichever Myhr'an it was, Ensign," Bourget replied calmly. "It did it with its claws."

The security officer shivered.

"Hey," Fack commented to Ramirez. "Commander Ramirez: I think I've found something. Doctor: you might be interested in this."

Ramirez and Bourget moved towards Fack's position near what looked like an airlock. As they approached, Fack shone his beacon light through a small window into the decompression chamber. He smiled at Bourget. "Do you see what I see?"

Bourget's face lit up as her eyes fell upon a Myhr'an environmental suit leaning up against the decompression chamber's wall. "An intact Myhr'an body."

"Exactly."

Ramirez felt the wall for any sort of manual release. His hands ran over the surface until a panel popped open, revealing a small alcove with a handle. He smiled at Fack and the chief medical officer, before wrapping his gloved hand around the handle, pressing down on the trigger and pulling hard. Repeating the action three times, the airlock hissed open.

Bourget rushed in and leaned down on one knee near the body, tricorder open in one hand and palm beacon shining on the Myhr'an in the space suit in the other. "Yes, great." She turned to Fack and Ramirez, immediately behind her. "An entire body, from what I can make out." She stood up and shut her tricorder, placing it back in its holster. "This will do nicely."

Ramirez tapped his comm.-badge. "Ramirez to *Cantabrian*."

"*Cantabrian here. Go ahead.*" Captain Turner sounded anxious.

"Captain, we've made our way to the Myhr'an bridge, only finding mainly body parts and a strange black substance smeared throughout the ship. Computer records have been wiped but we found an interesting clue scratched into the wall..."

"*Scratched?*"

"Yes, sir." Ramirez turned around to look at Caldwell and Threk glancing in the airlock at the Myhr'an body. "Mr. Caldwell translated it for us. It's a clue; we think it means whoever wrote it that they were heading to Starbase Expanse 3 next."

There was a brief pause. "*Anything else, Commander?*"

"Yes, sir." The Operations Manager turned back towards Fack and Bourget, who were attempting to move the body out of the airlock. "We have found an intact Myhr'an body. Doctor Bourget would like to beam the body back to perform an autopsy."

"*Understood, Commander. Permission granted.*"

"Sir," Ramirez stated in a lower voice as he stepped out of the airlock, following Bourget and Fack dragging the Myhr'an body, moving towards the bridge's aft away from them. "I believe it would be a tactical error to beam the body aboard. If the Myhr'an were to read a body of one of their own aboard..."

"*I understand your reservations, Commander, but we need to know everything we can about the Myhr'an. Starfleet Medical and Command will both, no doubt, be interested in researching the body and its contents further.*"

"Understood, sir. We'll finish up the investigation here and beam over with the body shortly." Ramirez looked over at the others gathered around the Myhr'an body lying on the deck. "Ramirez, out."

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### **Captain's Log, Stardate 49546.9**

*Captain's Log, Stardate 49546.9: Ramirez and his away teams have returned safely from the Myhr'an scout ship and with a "trophy": an intact Myhr'an body. From their investigations, the ship suffered an explosive decompression after a large fire broke out all over the ship, but this Myhr'an, protected by his environmental suit, survived in one piece.*

*The team took advanced scans of the communications tower to assist Lieutenant Commanders Singh and Arden, and their team, find out the tower's exact functions.*

*Dakota Caldwell, one of the Federation's linguistic wunderkinds, managed to give us our next lead from a clue scratched in the bridge's wall: Starbase Expanse 3. We're en route now at maximum warp to discover the next piece of the jigsaw puzzle...*

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### **The Bridge, The Starship Cantabrian**

"Again."

Lieutenant Greg Willard, filling in for Antonio Ramirez at Ops, shook his head. "I'm sorry, sir. We're not receiving any communications from SE3. Sensors are foggy still as well."

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"Keep trying," Captain Turner ordered as he turned back towards the captain's chair.

The turbolift doors hissed open, revealing Lieutenant Commanders Ramirez and Jonar. Ramirez dashed down the steps into the command circle, joining Turner by his side. "Doctor Bourget is preparing to perform the autopsy on the Myhr'an body."

"She's been awake for far too long and it's been a stressful day for everyone," Turner countered. "It's probably best she waits until tomorrow. Fresh start and all..."

"I tried telling her that, sir, but..."

"Understood." The commanding officer pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'll have a talk with her in a moment. The others?"

"Threk and Mr. Caldwell are off duty, as are our security detail. I must say, I was very impressed with both Mr. Caldwell's and Lieutenant Yh'ahni's performances on the mission." Tony Ramirez shifted his weight slightly. "Commander Fack is contacting Starfleet Special Operations for further instructions."

"Good." Noel Turner planted his hands on his hips. "And that just leaves you, Commander."

"Sir?"

"I'd like to see you in my ready room for a moment." Captain Turner moved to the forward starboard side of the bridge towards a door next to the viewscreen, Ramirez close in tow. "Commander Jonar: you have the bridge."

---

### **Captain's Ready Room, The *Starship Cantabrian***

"The reason I asked you here, Commander," he said, his hands clasped behind his back as he peered out the viewport, stars streaking by, "is because you questioned my orders with regards to the Myhr'an body."

Lieutenant Commander Antonio Ramirez sat motionless in the chair in front of the captain's ready room desk. To his left, Captain Noel Turner faced away from him, the two viewports beyond him filled with streaking stars heading towards them. To the right of the forward viewports, another wall intersected at a 45-degree angle – a picture of a green, lush Earth city hanging on that wall – *Maybe Christchurch, where he's from?* – with a model of an *Ambassador*-class starship on a pedestal below it – and the oddly-angled wall with the picture met another wall that ran the length of the ready room, the desk sitting parallel.

To the immediate right of the desk, two more viewports showed stars streaking from left to right, and two couches – one with its back to the wall behind him and one on a 90-degree angle and leaning up against the upper-level's approximate 1 meter base – comprised a small conversation area. Next to the viewports, three stairs led up to an upper level, much like on the bridge, with a corridor on the left turning right into a private area, and a cream-colored wall separating the ready room from the private area. Several smaller pictures lined that wall and shelves with various artifacts and gifts he assumed the captain had accumulated over the years graced the lower third of the wall. A chrome railing on top of glass dividers protected the edge between the upper and lower levels.

Ramirez remained aware the door on the wall behind him was all that separated him from the bridge.

"I like that trait," Captain Noel Turner continued as he faced his second officer, "in a first officer. With Commander D'Angelo confirmed dead, the *Cantabrian* has no first officer. I would like you to consider the position, Tony."

"Me?" Ramirez's eyes widened and his hands found their way to the armrests on the chair. "As your first officer?"

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Turner moved behind the desk and sat down, folding his hands on the smooth shark-grey surface. "Yes. You are responsible, diligent, can lead away missions with ease. You have a vast amount of knowledge, and what you don't seem to know, you can access quickly and with no problems." The commanding officer pushed a few buttons on his monitor and swung the lieutenant commander's record around to face him. "You have demonstrated, on more than one occasion, that you can lead in even the most difficult of circumstances."

Ramirez shook his head, focusing on Captain Turner instead of his record scrolling to the right of him. "With all due respect, sir, I am flattered you have offered me the position, but I have reservations on whether or not I would be the right candidate for the job."

The commanding officer pulled the monitor back around to face him, and he scanned its readout quickly. "This unease isn't due to..." His finger pointed at the screen for a moment. "...The *Wellington*, is it?"

Lieutenant Commander Ramirez glanced down at his knees, his hands fidgeting. *Sooner or later, every conversation I have with promotions swings around to the Wellington.* "Sir, I'd rather not discuss my reasons why." His eyes came up to lock with Turner's eyes. "I can say now, quite confidently, that I do not believe I am the right candidate."

Captain Turner's lips pressed together strongly as he tapped his monitor to shut-off. He clasped his hands together in front of him, his knuckles growing whiter by the second. "I can't say that I'm not disappointed, but I respect your decision, Commander. Get some rest; we've got a long day tomorrow."

Antonio Ramirez stood uneasily, bowed his head slightly, then walked out of the ready room and onto the bridge.

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### **Sickbay, The *Starship Cantabrian***

He hadn't even tread a meter into Sickbay and, without looking up from the tray of medical implements she was preparing, she stated, "I see you're back."

The flatness of her tone stopped Commander Scott Fack, folding his arms behind his back, several meters away from the chief medical officer. The rest of Sickbay stood darkened and unoccupied. "I'm here to observe the autopsy." His voice remained steady.

"On whose authority?" Doctor Marie Bourget peered up briefly while her hands organized the implements, shuffling laser scalpels and other instruments around. "The Tal'Shiar? The Obsidian Order?" And for the final blow, she halted her task and glared straight at him. "Or your supposedly-dead creators?"

Fack cleared his throat and approached her slowly. "Starfleet Special Operations, actually." He tossed the PADD in his hand onto her tray, and it clanked as it landed, scattering her neatly organized implements into chaos.

Pointing towards the PADD, he continued. "You can view the order, if you'd like."

The doctor nodded no, grandiosely picking up the PADD and sliding it onto the biobed, her hands then shuffling to reorganize her instruments.

She jumped as his voice whispered from close behind her, "And Doctor? I don't like what you're insinuating."

Marie Bourget, medical implement in hand, spun around, her other hand placed firmly on the biobed. "Insinuating?"

The Special Operations officer, in actuality, stood about a meter away from her. "Yes. Insinuating." He squinted at the implement in her hand, and, her face flushing, she clacked

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the implement onto her tray. "I established," his voice came strong, "my loyalties a long time ago."

The Sickbay door hissed open, and someone walked in, but the duo remained focused on one another.

"Fact is, Commander," Bourget responded, her chin aiming upward, "I don't trust Special Ops, and I don't trust you."

Fack crossed his arms and redistributed his weight, spreading his legs slightly apart. "How charming of you to be so forthright, Doctor. Must be that great bedside manner you're renowned quadrant-wide for." The commander started pacing. "And, it's not like we can't question *your* daughter's loyalties: a member of the Arkrand Society?" He leaned closer for the verbal kill. "They're not exactly squeaky clean under all that hype about stopping cultural contamination and cross-species..."

"I tell you what." Her pointing finger thrust at him before pointing back to the biobed. "I'll record the entire autopsy for you, but I'll be damned if you..."

"Doctor, Commander." Captain Noel Turner stepped between the two. "That's quite enough."

Bourget glowered at Turner, somewhat surprised to see him but more angry at his interference. "But..."

Turner put a hand up to both of them and turned his head slightly. "It's been a long day, and I'm heading to bed. I suggest you both do the same."

The chief medical officer raised her pointing finger and started wagging it at her commanding officer. "I'm not..."

"That suggestion, Doctor," the captain said as he turned to face her, "was the nice way of *ordering* you to bed."

Bourget pointed towards the bio-bed. "The autopsy..."

"Shouldn't be performed by a tired chief medical officer." His hands held the back of her upper arms right above the elbows as he smiled weakly. "Bed. Now."

She smiled lightly in defeat and turned to gather some things from her office.

Captain Noel Turner glanced around at Commander Fack to find the Special Operations officer with a glib smile on his face. "You too, Commander."

The smile disappeared as the commander moved towards the door.

"Right, one more stop." The commanding officer rubbed his hands as Fack left Sickbay and the doctor exited out a door in her office. He called out, "I'll see you both in the morning. Good night!"

---

### **Main Engineering, The *Starship Cantabrian***

"No good."

Liz Singh shook her head as Ethan Arden slammed his fist against a bulkhead.

"Oh for God's sake!" Arden's hands shook.

"Ethan..." Singh placed her hand on his back, glancing over at the nervous engineers glancing sideways from their stations in Main Engineering. "Just calm down."

“Calm down!” The chief engineer pounded against the wall and pushed away from it, pacing around the main deck of engineering. “That bloody thing” – he pointed towards the flight recorder – “is being a right little tart.”

Liz Singh tried to cover a smirk with her hand, cleared her throat and then folded her hands behind her back, not noticing the commanding officer stepping into Main Engineering. “Listen,” she addressed the members of their team. “We’ve been working on this all day, and we’re tired. We’re seeing things, we’re not focused, so... I think we all need to step back, go and get some rest and a good night’s sleep.” She pointed at Cadet Lisa Oh and smiled; Lisa blushed. “And we’ll meet back here at 0800. Dismissed.”

Captain Turner walked around the workstation and rested his hand on the back of Singh’s arm. “Can I talk to you, Commander? In private?”

“Sure.” Lieutenant Commander Elizabeth Singh glanced over Ethan. “See you tomorrow.”

Ethan Arden absentmindedly nodded as he gathered up some PADDs from his workstation.

The double-width engineering doors hissed open as Captain Turner and Commander Singh entered the corridor, walking side-by-side towards the forward Engineering Lounge. “Commander,” Turner started as they rounded a corner and then stopped in front of another door on the corridor’s right. “As you know, my first officer was killed in the orbital attack on SE4...” He gestured towards the door and it opened, revealing the lounge, and Singh entered, followed by the commanding officer.

The room had six walls, three of which were on right angles to each other. Where the fourth wall of the rectangle should have been there were three walls shaped like the silhouette of a flat-top pyramid lying on its side. Brown and gold-colored walls complemented the various dark brown chairs and sofas in the room. Three flat-panel monitors graced each of the three flat-top pyramid walls but were black at the moment, their shiny surface reflecting the dim lighting in the room. On the wall mirroring the door they entered from stood another closed door and a replicator.

Captain Turner gestured to the nearest couch and Commander Singh took a seat, sinking into a plush chocolate brown cushion. “Would you like a drink, Commander?”

“Oh, no thank you. I don’t drink usually before bed. Gives me nightmares.” She craned her neck to follow him as he walked to the replicator. Singh watched him punch a button and his face illuminated briefly as a cup appeared in the replicator’s bay.

The commanding officer perched on the seat across from her with a cup of green tea in his hand. He blew on it, the steam blowing away from him, and he leaned back in the chair to continue.

“I know you have been through a lot in the last few days,” and he paused slightly to let the commander reflect on the many meanings that statement could take, “but I would like you to consider the first officer position vacant aboard this ship.”

Commander Singh leaned forward on the couch and, resting her elbows on her knees, she clasped her hands together, her fingers interlocking. “Why me? Why not Ramirez?”

He finished a sip from the cup before placing it down on the chrome end-table next to his chair. “You have vast experience as first officer. The *Rebellious*, the *Koru* to name two.”

“Both of which,” she nearly whispered, “ended badly.”

“Both of which,” Turner stressed, “were situations out of your control.” He paused and then continued. “You have taught at the Academy, and, recently, have impressed me to the point where I can safely say you would be an excellent addition to the *Cantabrian* as a first officer.

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The way you handled Ethan's temper in there, for example, and how you realized it was the right time to step back and get some rest. That's true command material right there."

Singh considered this for a moment before she spoke. "He rejected the position, didn't he?"

"Ramirez?" The commanding officer readjusted himself in the chair, folding his legs and his hands rested on the armrests. "Yes. He has... issues he needs to resolve before he will step up to the executive officer position."

She remained silent, staring at his cup of green tea.

Turner tried a change in subject. "What have you found about that communications tower? On the Starfleet flight recorders and sensor readings of the Myhr'an scout ship?"

Liz Singh leaned onto an armrest. "Well, it's all conjectural at the moment. The communications towers house traditional communications equipment, but there is additional equipment, like we've already discussed. That additional equipment..." Singh shifted slightly. "All lines of thinking are pointing to some sort of thought control device."

"Thought control? Like a 'thought maker'? Aren't those illegal?" Turner scooted forward and scooped his cup of tea from the table, lifting the cup to take a sip.

"I'm not sure we can go that far. For example, on the scout ship, the away teams found no evidence that the tower was malfunctioning when the internal skirmish broke out." She rested her hand on the armrest again. "Systems failure happened *after* everyone was dead, and the tower was in perfect working order when we scanned it. Just turned off."

"Keep investigating that. I have a strong feeling that the communications tower is a key."

Captain Turner put his cup of tea down on the table, an uneasy look on his face.

"We are severely undermanned on this ship," Turner confided, his voice lower and softer. "Nearly two-fifths of our crew died on SE4. Just watch how empty the corridors are when you walk down them to your quarters tonight. I don't mean to push the issue, but we need a first officer to provide some sense of stability to the crew."

"Well," Singh tilted her head slightly, her lips shut tightly before she sighed. "I don't like being a second choice, but..." She smiled lightly. "Why not. I would be delighted to serve as your first officer."

"Good," Captain Turner said as he picked up his cup of green tea, a half-smile on his face. "Welcome aboard, Commander."

---

### **The Forward Lounge, The Starship Cantabrian**

She stirred her drink, glancing down at the happy, bubbly pink liquid. *Oh, how I hate happy, bubbly pink liquid.* Tawana Killan held the glass an arm's length away from her, cocking her head slightly as she frowned. *What the heck is this stuff anyway?*

A figure approached in the pink liquid, and Tawana peered above the glass's rim to find Lieutenant Yh'ahni standing at the edge of her table, a bemused look on her face. A drink sitting uncomfortably in her left hand, Yh'ahni gestured to the seat opposite Tawana's. "Is this seat available?"

Tawana suddenly felt warm, her face burning at the cheeks. Her hand slid her glass along the table's top as she looked away. *I'm really not in the mood...* "Yes. Go right ahead."

The low murmur from the patrons dotted throughout the Forward Lounge distracted from the odd silence between the two women. The ensign formerly of the *Starship Koru* glanced around the *Cantabrian's* Forward Lounge. With muted lighting – most of the lighting in the

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lounge came from the table-tops around the lounge – and decoration in muted grays and creams of different shades, the Forward Lounge held four rows of tables: two on an upper level with views of space out of the circular viewports and two on a lower level with a bar across a wide aisle. Stairs to the lower level stood at either end of the upper level and in the middle, a silver chrome hand-rail with glass panes underneath separating the levels.

At the upper level's ends, couples dotted the booths on either side wall. On the same walls on the lower level, wooden doors with a circular window on each slid open to welcome tired officers looking for a drink and chat after a long day's work.

On the wall facing the viewports, the bar extended from near one door to the other, with breaks on either end to allow wait-staff to tend to customers. The wall behind the bar sported a muted purple wall, the only color in the lounge.

Tawana raised her glass to her lips and pretended to sip. After a few more odd moments, she decided to take the plunge and try a real sip. *Not bad...*

"The last few days have been interesting, have they not?"

The question came in the middle of an adventurous gulp for Tawana. Ensign Killan looked up to see the lieutenant glancing at her for an answer. She swallowed as she put her glass down on the table. "I'd have to agree there. I've seen a lot in my life, but nothing quite like the last few days."

"Interesting." Yh'ahni mimicked Tawana by picking up her glass, taking a swig then planting the glass back down on the table. An attempt at a smile appeared, but this perplexed Tawana more. "Please explain further, Ensign."

"Oh." Killan, her eyes wide, grabbed a napkin and started fidgeting with it, folding its corner over slightly. "My father works for the Trill Government and my mother's a Starfleet captain, so... I've traveled a fair bit in my life and seen a few odd things here and there." She bent the napkin corner the other way. "What about you? What's your story?"

"My story." It was more of a statement than a question. Yh'ahni glanced down at Tawana's napkin, then looked back up at the hybrid ensign. "My adoptive parents found me while on a research mission somewhere beyond the Typhon Expanse."

Killan stopped playing with the napkin and turned her head slightly, maintaining eye contact with the lieutenant. "Somewhere?"

"A hostile vessel destroyed their science ship," Yh'ahni stated matter-of-factly. "Most crewmembers did not survive, and those who did were aboard another wrecked ship when it happened. That's where the Nguyens found me." She took a sip of her drink then continued. "The only thing we had was a shuttlecraft – a very basic one – and we struggled to get back to the Federation, so... my parents were quite focused in one goal and did not maintain a very accurate log on their travels."

Tawana stared at Yh'ahni, the napkin and her drink pushed away from her. "That must've been difficult for you."

Yh'ahni's eyes widened slightly as her hands ran along the table's edge. "I do not remember much. I was six years old by the time we returned to the Federation."

"Still... I couldn't imagine." Tawana looked down at the table then back up at the lieutenant. "And your childhood? Did you have any... problems?"

Yh'ahni cocked her head slightly. "Problems? I don't understand. Could you be more specific?"

Tawana leaned forward, her elbows resting on the table, as she explained. "I've never fit in. Being made-up of different races, I never quite fit in, to one group or another." Her shoulders slumped slightly. "I've always found myself... on the outside, isolated."

One of Yh'ahni's eyebrows raised as she regarded the ensign. "I understand." Yh'ahni then frowned slightly. "No, I have always found the people I have encountered in the Federation to be quite accommodating. What experiences have you had to make you feel otherwise, Ensign?"

Killan licked her lips, her hands outstretched as she explained. "When I was aboard my mother's ship, or at a Starbase, I never really had any problems. But on some Federation worlds..." She shook her head and clicked her tongue. "I was viewed as impure. A hybrid." Tawana leaned forward, the light emanating from the table top bringing out a blue tinge in her brown bifurcated face. "And..."

Yh'ahni waited for the next words but the ensign looked bewildered, paused, and then leaned back into her chair. The lieutenant peered at Tawana. "Continue... please."

Tawana crossed her arms and looked away, glancing at the floor. She shrugged. "It was disturbing, that's all." Shaking her head, she continued. "I'd rather not talk about it."

"I find this discussion... amusing."

Tawana's glare could have ripped a Klingon *targ* apart. "*Amusing?* It wasn't meant to be *amusing*, Lieutenant."

Yh'ahni's mouth opened but Tawana pushed her chair away from the table and stood, pushing her hand out with her pointing finger up. Her hand thrust at the lieutenant but after a few seconds, it rubbed against her forehead. "It's been a long day, Lieutenant, so I think I'm going to try and get some rest now. Good night."

Yh'ahni clutched her glass as she watched Ensign Tawana Killan storm out of the Forward Lounge.

---

### **Morgue, The *Starship Cantabrian***

Doctor Akeras Pela popped her head around the corner and smiled when she saw him at his small work station next to the door. "You *still* here, Nelson?"

"Yeah." The young med-tech laughed and turned around to find Pela's smiling blue bifurcated face glancing back at him, her bald head appearing as if floating. "Just finishing up some 'housekeeping'."

Pela peered over at the dark grey wall across from the doorway to Sickbay (where she was poking out from) and scanned the several stainless steel doors embedded in the wall. "Did Sickbay transfer the Myhr'an body back here?"

Nelson pushed back from his desk, his stool sliding towards the dark grey wall. "Yep," he said as he pounded on one bay door. "Lucky number 7, all tucked in, nice and chilly cold, for the night."

Doctor Pela laughed as her hand appeared on the doorframe. "Good. I'll see you in the morning. Good night." With that, she disappeared.

Nelson stood and craned his head around the corner. "Night, doctor. Sweet dreams."

Med-tech Nelson couldn't wait for his shift to end. *Only a few more minutes*, he thought as he tapped his monitor off for the evening. The narrow morgue wasn't the most ideal of workspaces on the *Cantabrian*, with the grey wall and far wall with drawers for the dead. Of course, this morgue wasn't the only morgue on the ship, but the only one in use at present.

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He glanced again down the corridor leading to Sickbay, but all the doors leading into the various rooms stood closed.

He punched up the code, and drawer 7 hissed open, lurching at first, and then smoothly sliding open to reveal the Myhr'an body.

Nelson looked around again. His hand reached out, slowly, steady, resting only centimeters from the cold body, and, quickly, he touched the corpse. Its scaly skin felt tough and the scales' ends felt slightly sharp.

His hand recoiled when he couldn't stand the cold any longer, flicking his hand as if to ward off the chill in his fingertips. His eyes scanned the body one last time for the night before he slid the drawer shut. He pushed a few more buttons to ensure a consistent temperature, checked the other drawers, then moved to the door.

The door slid open, and, on the way out, Nelson tapped the lights off and headed down the corridor. The door hissed shut behind him.

A pounding noise filled the morgue for several seconds, followed by a hissing noise. Light poured from morgue drawer number 7, a human hand grasping the wall and pushing the drawer open...

---

**Location: Unknown**

All he could see as his eyes flickered open was a black and shiny surface stretching away from him. His lips smacked together as his awareness of dryness climbed up his throat and into his mouth. He tried to move his hand to wipe his face, but his hand did not respond. His head remained dipped, so he scanned the room with his eyes.

Scott Fack gasped.

Bodies, some alien, some human, all sprouting odd grey biomechanical appendages from strange areas on their bodies hung off each wall in the octagonal-shaped room. What walls he could see held the same shiny black surface as the floor before him.

His eyes progressed downwards to his body.

Similar appendages shot out from his body. His vision blurred, as if underwater, tears stinging his eyes. As the first tear splattered on the floor, something moving in front of him drew his attention.

"Ah." An old man toyed with a slim grey handheld device. His black eyes gazed up from over his bifocal glasses. "I see you are awake."

He shuffled over, a snide smile on his face, and stopped next to Fack. His voice dropped low as the smile slowly disappeared and his eyes darted around the room. "You aren't supposed to be, you know, but the lack of intelligent conversation..." His attention returned to his device. "Well, it's not healthy for me."

Fack shook his head, attempting to focus. "Where am I?"

A chuckle escaped from the old man before he cleared his throat. "You don't remember?" He looked around the room and nodded towards another body. "This place?"

Fack pushed back against whatever held his head aiming downwards. He grunted. "It's vaguely familiar, but..." A tisk escaped from between his lips. "It's hazy." His arms spasmed lightly as they struggled to get free. *No use.* "Who are you?"

The old man's eyes widened as his head cocked sideways; he pushed at his hand-held device and it chirped in return. "A friend." He peered over his bifocals. "Of sorts."

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“Great.” Fack sighed. “Ambiguous answers.” He avoided eye contact with the old man. “Can’t anyone in the universe shoot straight from the hip any more?”

The old man leaned in closer to the commander, his neutral-smelling breath brushing against Fack’s neck. “You will find out in time.” He looked away and murmured. “That’s what’s written, anyway. I’m not one for scripture, but...” Shaking his head, he raised the hand-held device, squinting as he surveyed its thin right side. “Oh, you’ll find out soon enough. Now *you* are asking too many questions.”

Fack jumped as the grey device hissed against his neck. As the darkness ebbed in from the room’s corners, his muscles strained against the manacles, but to no avail; the darkness rushed him suddenly. His throat felt far away, the darkness filling his throat, drowning him.

He heard the old man’s voice, faint and distant. “They’re coming back. Coming for you, Creation.” Fack choked on the darkness...

And he gasped as he sat upright in bed, his sweat-dampened sheets clinging to his body.

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### **Outside Ensign Nelson’s Quarters, The *Starship Cantabrian***

Her sudden laugh made him drop his PADD in the middle of the corridor. “I wish,” Cadet Nate Wrightson said as he bent down and picked up the PADD, “that you’d warn me before you go off like that, Lisa.”

Cadet Lisa Oh stopped walking, turned around and folded her arms, her smile growing wider. “Funny. You’re not the only person who’s said that, Nate.”

“Too much information, Lise.” Wrightson caught up with his colleague as she rounded the bend.

Oh stopped and started to giggle as she reached out for a door chime. “I didn’t mean it like *that*.” Nate leaned against the door frame to Oh’s right. She glanced at him and smirked. “Pervert.”

The male cadet nodded towards the door after a few moments. “Is he always like this? I could’ve crawled back and forth to the door three times by now. Without arms and legs!”

“No.” Lisa’s eyebrows raised slightly. “First, he misses our date last night, and now he’s late for his shift.” Her finger pressed the door chime twice.

“Press it much harder and your hand’ll pop through that frame.”

The female cadet ignored him, knocking on the door now. “Nelson? Nelson, it’s me. Are you there?” Her closed fist grew into an open palm, smacking the door.

Oh turned to Wrightson. “Something’s not right. This isn’t like him at all.” Her attention shifted to the door’s PADD, and she started typing.

“What are you doing?”

“Overriding the door control.” Her voice steady and calm, her hands shaking as she punched in various codes, she paused, breathed out and started again. “It’s nine-two-eight-four-seven...”

The door hissed open, Nelson naked down to the waist, his lithe body glistening and wet, leaning against the doorframe. A weird noise escaped his throat, but he cleared it.

“Finally,” Nate muttered.

"Yeah, what took you so long? What happened to you last night?" Oh folded her arms and looked away, pouting.

Another strange noise came from Nelson's mouth, but he swallowed then stated, "Sorry, it was a long day. By the time they transferred the body to the morgue, it was very late." He ran his hand over his wet chest. "Maybe now?"

"Now?!?" Oh sighed and stormed off down the corridor.

"Good one, Nelson. I'm gonna hear about this one all day, and it's gonna be a long, long day." Wrightson pointed at the med-tech as he followed Oh, who by this time had rounded the corridor's corner. "It's morning. Might wanna get into your uniform and report for duty!" The engineering cadet started jogging down the corridor. "Later," he called out from behind him.

Nelson watched him leave, his eyes glowing red...

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### **Corridor, The *Starship Cantabrian***

Liz Singh smiled at the familiar face as she approached the corridor junction. "Tawana."

Ensign Tawana Killan, the Bolian-Trill-Betazoid hybrid, stopped fidgeting with her hands and planted them behind her back. "Commander Singh." She rocked back and forth on her feet's balls and heels.

Singh stopped beside Killan, the latter looking quite bewildered. "Is everything okay, Tawana?"

"Um." The hybrid scratched behind her ear as she watched two officers walk by. "I am just feeling rather... lost at the moment."

"How do you mean?" Liz rested her hand on Killan's elbow.

"I..." Killan looked away, then down at the deck. "I'm not being any use to anyone at the moment. Wandering the decks, floating from area to area."

A pang of guilt overcame Liz Singh. She'd tried to include everyone she could from the survivors, to make them feel like they were contributing something, and the most timid member of the *Koru* crew, she'd overlooked. And Tawana Killan wasn't the type to ask; she'd blend into the background unintentionally. "Listen, I'm sorry. That was my fault."

Singh walked around Killan, walking backwards towards the turbolift at the junction. Motioning back towards the lift, she added, "I'm just heading to the bridge. Why don't you join me at my station?"

Tawana Killan smiled a small smile and nodded sheepishly, then took a step forward to accompany the *Cantabrian's* new first officer in the turbolift.

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### **The Bridge, The *Starship Cantabrian***

"Report." Captain Noel Turner handed an ensign a PADD and took his place in the captain's chair.

"We are approaching SE3, sir," the Vulcan conn officer reported.

The aft turbolift hissed open, Liz Singh and Tawana Killan stepping out and towards the first officer's station.

The viewscreen showed a large, sprawling station, comprised of various sections jutting at different angles. One section, rust brown in color, was shaped like the interior of a toasted sandwich maker with various antennae poking out the end. Another section was all white, covered in what looked like clear plastic bubbles, like the foam on the top of a bubble bath; it was snuggled closer to the middle of the station. A third section was boxy, dark grey, and smooth: window-less and feature-less, tucked parallel to the bubble section in the middle of the conglomeration. A small dome, concrete grey in color, with various antennae and appendages, rose from the middle of the confusion of a space station.

“Interesting design,” Commander Fack commented from his station mirroring the first officer’s station around the command circle.

“According to the database,” Ramirez responded, “over 27 civilizations have contributed to Starbase Expanse 3’s construction over the centuries, if not millennia.”

“What are sensors reading?” Captain Turner attempted to return the conversation to the matter at hand.

“Still a bit foggy, but it appears SE3 systems are failing in some areas. Because of the unique composition of the station, Starfleet sensors cannot penetrate the hull in 87% of the station.” Tony Ramirez turned in his chair towards the commanding officer. “I’d surmise we’d be unable to transport into the sections the sensors can’t breach.”

Turner, his hands on the captain’s chair’s armrests, tapped his right pointing finger on the edge. “Communications?”

“I’m not getting anything, sir.” Jonar leaned over the tactical station slightly to speak to her commanding officer, seated in the command circle below her station. “No responses to our hails, no distress calls, nothing.”

Lieutenant Commander Elizabeth Singh, from the first officer’s station starboard from the command circle, chimed in. “I don’t like this situation one bit.” Tawana Jonar, seated next to her, looked rather uneasy.

“Makes two of us, Commander.” Captain Noel Turner stood, tugging his uniform jacket down around the waist. He peered at the massive station approaching on the screen. “Jonar: Red alert. Commander Fack? Anything?”

“I’m not sensing anyone or anything on the station, Captain. Wherever they are, they aren’t there. And whatever happened, by the sounds of things, happened quickly.” Fack fidgeted slightly in his seat.

Liz Singh rested her palms on her station’s top edge. “Looks like the Myhr’an beat us to them.”

The commanding officer stood still, his gaze fixed on the looming station. “But why did they leave the station in tact?”

Tony Ramirez kept facing Turner. “Mr. Caldwell did say, in his translation aboard the Myhr’an scout ship, that they considered this place sacred and haunted.”

The captain folded his arms, his forehead furled as he squinted at the viewscreen. “Why would that be? The Myhr’an destroyed SE4, killing everyone on the surface and on the ships in orbit, but only, as far as we can surmise, kidnap everyone on SE3 and keep the station in tact.”

Singh rose from her station, walking down the steps to join Turner’s side in the command circle. Killan’s eyes followed the first officer’s path. Her eyes scanned the viewscreen, trying to take in the station’s massive size and various compartments. “The station is a conglomeration of various races’ technology, each inhabitant adding more systems and

adding various sections onto the older parts. Starfleet records indicate – and since we only took over the station a few years ago, there are still many surprises in store I am sure – some sections of the station could be thousands of years old.” Turner looked at her and she at him. “It’s amazing.”

Commander Fack leaned over slightly, attempting to get into Singh’s line-of-sight. “How do we not know they’re still here?”

Captain Turner twisted around, his gaze meeting Fack’s. “Commander?”

“The Myhr’an. They have the ability to cloak or stealth or whatever-you-want-to-call-it their ships.” He nodded his head towards the viewscreen. “How do we know they aren’t still here?”

“We don’t, but it’s a risk we need to take.” Turner returned his attention to the viewscreen, with Singh doing the same. “We need to find out what happened to those people and where the trail leads. Singh, Ramirez: take two away teams to the station and investigate.”

---

### **Corridor One, Starbase Expanse 3**

Team one materialized in a white, odd-shaped corridor. The walls bulging as if ready to burst, the deck uneven, all pocked with bubble-like appendages, Lieutenant Commander Elizabeth Singh uneasily steadied herself by softly resting her hand on the wall. She turned to look at the other members of her team – Dakota Caldwell, linguist; Doctor Akeras Pela, second medical officer; Ulitania Jonar, chief of security; and Ensign Snerl, a Tellarite security officer – to ensure they were okay.

Jonar held her phaser rifle steady and glanced at Singh with her ice blue eyes. “Commander, I believe weapons fire is dangerous in certain areas of this station, so if we could keep weapons fire to a minimum...” The joined Trill started leading the away team down the brightly-lit corridor towards a darker, different area of the station.

“I’m hoping,” Singh commented as she attempted to walk on the uneven surface, “it won’t come to combat at all in here, Jonar.”

“Could we pick a more obnoxious place to beam in to?” Caldwell struggled to maintain his balance as he mistakenly stepped on a “bubble”.

“We were beamed to this area,” Jonar explained, “because it is one of the few areas we can pierce the hull with transporters. The majority of SE3 has transporter-inhibiting structures in place. And this was the closest to Ops.”

Pela had her tricorder open, one hand resting on the wall as she gracefully stepped down the corridor in the middle of the team. “I’m not reading any life signs except ours, but the range of my tricorder is extremely limited.”

Snerl followed behind them, trying to maintain his balance while holding a phaser rifle and maintaining watch behind the away team. “Who built this place?”

“Various races over various times,” Caldwell answered. “From what I can tell from the markings in this section, it looks like a race related to the Straulausians built this section.”

“Related to?” Pela kept her focus on her tricorder.

“It’s an earlier dialect but the root structure is the same.” Dakota Caldwell pointed at a large sign, worn from time, on a wall across from an airlock. “It appears though, to get from this to modern Straulausian, they had two vowel shifts...”

"What does it say?" Snerl commented over his shoulder, glancing quickly at the deck to ensure he didn't slip.

"Welcome. We hope you enjoy your stay."

Snerl grunted, and Jonar and Pela tried to cover up their laughing.

"We better check on the other team," Singh commented, suppressing a smile of her own. She tapped her comm.-badge. "Away team one to away team two: report."

---

### **Corridor Two, Starbase Expanse 3**

Lieutenant Commander Antonio Ramirez tapped his comm.-badge. "Away team two here, Commander. All's well but our comm. signal is very weak."

*"Understood. Keep an open channel as long as you can, Commander. If communications fail, we'll meet you in Ops."* Singh's voice hissed and popped over the communications channel.

Lieutenant Yh'ahni, phaser rifle hanging over her shoulder by the strap, turned around and nodded at Ramirez. He motioned for the others to follow.

The grey smooth surface was slightly wet, making it difficult to walk on. Commander Scott Fack and Lieutenant Threk both steadied themselves as best as they could by running their open palms along the smooth walled surface.

Two security officers, one a Vulcan male, the other a Human female, guarded the rear of the away team.

"There's no doors, no windows, no apparent access of any sort in this area." Threk squinted at the surface as he ran a tricorder over it with his free hand.

"It's minimalist, I'll give you that," Fack commented back.

*"Are you reading anything, Commander?"* Singh's voice sounded frustrated.

"No," A blank expression on his paling face, the blood retreating from the skin's surface, Fack looked at Ramirez. "Nothing. They're all gone."

---

### **Morgue, The Starship Cantabrian**

"What do you think you're doing?"

He jumped at her voice, his quivering hand clicking the monitor off. Nelson bolted up from his seat, swinging around so his back was to the monitor, his fingers touching the desk.

Doctor Marie Bourget pointed at the drawers. "I asked for you to bring the Myhr'an body in for autopsy starting at 0900 sharp."

"I'm sorry." Nelson looked at the floor, tapping his fingers lightly on the desk's edge. "Time got away from me."

Bourget approached the med-tech, trying to peer over his shoulder. "What were you doing, anyway? It looked like you had ship schematics up when I walked in." She tried to peer over his shoulder but he stood a lot taller than she. He didn't say anything, attempting to avoid eye contact.

She looked him in the eyes and tisked. "It's not like you," the doctor commented as she moved to drawer number 7, tapping the controls, "to be so..."

The drawer slid open, but it was empty. Bourget turned pale, her skin the color of coffee with too much cream in it. She glared at Nelson. "You did lock up last night, right?"

"Yeah!" His voice sounded too defensive. "Of course. Doctor Pela saw me lock up!"

Doctor Bourget tapped her comm.-badge and stormed out of the morgue. On her way out, Nelson heard her say, "Bourget to bridge: security alert. The Myhr'an body is missing."

---

### **Ops Lobby, Starbase Expanse 3**

Yh'ahni swung around the corner, her knuckles white, clutching her phaser rifle. A large, lobby-like area sprawled out in front of the team, the interior darkened. Couches and armchairs dotted the room, and doors to what appeared to be turbolifts stood three apiece on either side of the room. A large, sealed door loomed on the far side of the room.

"Ops should be right through that door," Ramirez said, tricorder held out in one hand in front of him, his head nodding towards the large door.

"I surmise something or someone is following us." Yh'ahni kept her voice low.

"I agree." Fack held his hand on his holstered phaser. "Something feels not quite right."

Tony Ramirez started walking quickly towards the large door, Threk and Fack close behind. Yh'ahni turned to face the other security guards and her mouth opened but no sound came out.

The muttered yelp and the crack boomed throughout the lobby as the Vulcan security officer's body slumped to the floor, his crushed head sliding down the wall. Two large silhouettes, illuminated from behind, stood in the corridor, the other security officer falling back onto her hands and feet, scuttling back as quick as she could.

Ramirez, Fack and Threk spun to see the two silhouettes, then realized another entrance to the lobby on their right also had three large lizard-like creatures blocking exit. "The Myhr'an," Fack murmured. "They're here."

Tony Ramirez pushed Threk towards the door and raised his phaser, never taking his eyes off the two-meter-tall alien creatures. "Threk: get that door open now!"

---

### **Corridor One, Approaching Ops Lobby, Starbase Expanse 3**

"What was that, Commander?" Liz Singh held her hand out in an attempt to keep the others quiet. "Come in, away team two. Ramirez. Fack. Threk. Yh'ahni. Anyone?"

Lieutenant Commander Ulitania Jonar picked up the pace, dashing from the new alien section – built by someone whose language Dakota Caldwell couldn't yet decipher – into the Ops Lobby, appearing native to yet another race.

Her ice blue eyes fell upon the advancing Myhr'an. A female security guard – Ensign Merchinson, if memory served Jonar correctly -- rushed the Myhr'an, but one extended its arm and grabbed her head, shoving her away. In a panic, her arm stretched upwards as she flew back towards the door, her phaser fired, ripping a long gash into the lobby ceiling.

Coils of piping and electronic cables and other snake-like appendages spilled out of the ceiling like guts out of a body, sparking and some of them wildly splaying around. A plume of gas sprayed from one of the coils.

Jonar's eyes darted around the Ops Lobby, taking in positions and the situation. Calmly, efficiently, she analyzed everything to work out the best tactic. *Three Myhr'an advancing from*

*far corridor... no make that seven. Two advancing from corridor on the left. No, make that five.*

Lieutenant Yh'ahni and Commander Fack stood their ground, hands extended out like boxers, ready to take on the huge aliens. "Don't fire phasers," Fack said over his shoulder. "We've got some sort of gaseous leak; it could kill us all."

Lieutenant Threk, on his knees, worked frantically at a door lock, as Lieutenant Commander Tony Ramirez rushed to Merchinson's lifeless body.

Liz Singh took one look at the situation and grunted. Pushing past Jonar, her hands grasped her phaser rifle firmly around the barrel, holding it like a baseball bat, and her legs pushed hard against the deck, a low groan sprouting into a battle cry as she charged the large aliens.

Jonar and her Tellarite security guard Snerl followed close behind, ready for hand-to-hand combat.

Doctor Pela and Dakota Caldwell rushed towards Threk's position. Caldwell could hear their comm.-badges crackling with static, Captain Turner's voice intermittent. "... *Singh, please ... come in. We...*"

Singh cracked a Myhr'an around the back with her phaser rifle, sending the large bipedal lizard to its knees. Her leg high-kicked its snout, the lizard yelping slightly as its jaw bent at an unusual angle.

Fack cart-wheeled forward, his feet planting another Myhr'an square in the chest. Bouncing slightly on his feet, he flipped again, digging his heels into the Myhr'an's shoulders and spring-boarding back behind the alien, round-housing it in the back of its legs to bring it down.

Ramirez cradled Merchinson, gazing up at Pela, kneeling beside the security officer. Her tricorder sounded a single tone, and, as her eyes met Ramirez's, she shook her head. Tony opened his mouth to say something, but Threk's screaming interrupted him.

The duo, followed by Caldwell, spun around to see a Myhr'an, its clawed hand planted on the back of the Tiburonian linguist's head, slam Threk's head into the control panel, blood smearing on the panel and wall as Threk's body slid face forward down the doorframe.

Ramirez pushed Pela and Caldwell back, putting his hands up, but the Tellarite Snerl tackled the Myhr'an, pushing it out of the way.

*"Ramirez! Singh! What is going on?"*

"We're under attack by a Myhr'an landing party, sir," Singh said calmly as she swung her rifle butt into the fallen Myhr'an's head. "We need immediate beam out."

*"Negative, Commander. Sensors can't penetrate the hull; you'll need to get into Ops and use their emergency transporter."*

"Understood," Liz Singh stated as she backed up towards the door. "Everyone! Fall back! Strengthen our position around the Ops door. We need to get in there if we want to get out of this alive!"

---

### **Outside Ensign Nelson's Quarters, The *Starship Cantabrian***

"It's not like him," Lisa Oh confided to Nate Wrightson. "He has to be on something."

"And you're sure," Wrightson answered, leaning up against the corridor wall outside Nelson's quarters as Oh tapped a combination into the door lock, "This is the right thing to do?"

She stopped and glared at him. "Something's not right. And we're getting to the bottom of it."

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The male engineering cadet grew irritated. "Hurry up and get in there already." His eyes darted down either way down the corridor. "We don't want to get caught."

The door panel beeped in the affirmative, and the door to Nelson's darkened quarters hissed open. Wrightson pushed Oh in quickly and rushed in, the door hissing closed behind them.

Their eyes struggled to adjust to the dark. Nelson's quarters, standard for mid-level officers, were dark without lights, being an internal room. The first area they entered was the living room and dining area. Off the living area, through a door on the left, the bedroom held a queen-sized bed and an ensuite bathroom.

Wrightson started snooping around the living area of Nelson's quarters while Oh moved around the corner into the bedroom area. The engineering cadet picked up a few knick-knacks on a side table. A statue from Risa he turned upside down to search the cavity: nothing. A Klingon...

The noise of falling items made Wrightson jump, and his voice came hoarse but agitated. "What the hell are you doing in there?"

"Sorry," Lisa Oh retorted. "He left something on the floor. I tripped."

Wrightson moved into the bedroom area. "Computer: lights."

The lights came up, and Oh, on her knees, turned around from the nightstand. "That would he..."

Her eyes fell upon a very pale Wrightson, his mouth open, and as she followed his line-of-sight, she saw Nelson's lifeless and bloodied corpse on the floor. She screamed.

---

### **Ops Lobby, Starbase Expanse 3**

Ramirez grabbed Dakota Caldwell by the shoulders on his uniform, swinging him around and planting him on his knees in front of the blood-stained panel. "Get us in there. *Now.*"

"Hurry," Fack said as he punched another Myhr'an, the crack of the lizard's jaw booming through the lobby. The commander shook his hand, muttering, "Ow."

Yh'ahni's fist flew at another Myhr'an, but it dodged, and she missed, stumbling onto her knees but scuffling back up to her feet. The Myhr'an grabbed her from the back of her uniform and slid her across the floor towards Caldwell and the others.

Jonar cracked the butt of her rifle into a Myhr'an's knee as Singh's rifle butt smacked another Myhr'an upside the head. The two bumped into each other, back-to-back.

Caldwell took his sleeve and rubbed the blood off the panel. His knees soaked with sticky, hot fluid, the lieutenant felt his last meal bubbling up his throat. *Calm, Dak, calm. Focus.*

Squinting at the controls, the hieroglyphics on the panel unfolded in his mind. "Yes," he said quietly. "Yes, that's it."

"That's what, Lieutenant?" Ramirez pushed a Myhr'an Snerl'd punched right back at him.

Dakota smiled as he tapped on the controls. "It's an ancient version of a modern, but not often used, Beddinian dialect..."

"Interesting, but cut the linguistics lesson and get us in there." Singh ducked a Myhr'an punch, but the clawed hand caught Jonar across the back of the head.

Caldwell poked his tongue out slightly as he pushed the most obvious sequence to him. He glanced over at Pela, crouched up near the other side of the doorframe, a tricorder in her hand, taking in as much medical data as possible, then to the door as it rumbled open...

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### **Outside Ensign Nelson's Quarters, The *Starship Cantabrian***

He could hear Oh crying as Wrightson told her everything would be okay. His eyes scanned as far right as he could in this limited, primitive body of his. Moving around the corner, the Nelson clone took a quick glance.

Lisa Oh stood to the open doorway's left, Nate Wrightson looking pale with his arm around her. A security officer interviewed them, Oh nodding as she wiped tears from around her eyes, her right arm folded tightly around her body.

The clone looked beyond them, beyond the outlines of shadows of security officers combing his namesake's quarters for clues.

Another security officer steps out of the quarters, talking into his comm.-badge. "Yes, sir. It appears Nelson's death occurred sometime last night or early this morning. Whoever Doctor Bourget and the others saw is an imposter."

Sudden movement. Two security officers running down the corridor, phasers drawn. He ducked back around the corner, and the officers ran past. Thinking how close they came, he slithered, back against the wall, down the corridor, his eyes glowing red...

---

### **Outside Ops, Starbase Expanse 3**

"Fall back, fall back!" Liz Singh, swinging wildly with her phaser rifle, backed up, forcing the other alive *Cantabrian* officers into SE3 Ops. "Ramirez: get to work on getting us the hell out of..."

A Myhr'an smacked her mid-sentence, planting her to the deck. A clawed arm reaching upwards then sudden motion downwards towards her, a winded Singh rolled sideways, thrusting her phaser rifle up while coughing to regain her breath...

Ramirez tapped frantically at a terminal, peering over his shoulder briefly. Dakota Caldwell raised a hand phaser, pushing himself back against Ramirez, whispering, "You work, Commander; I have you covered."

Scott Fack cracked another Myhr'an under the jaw, its teeth crunching, its hulky body crumpling in pain toward the deck. Several Myhr'an appeared to rush him, flowing in from the open doorway like a hemorrhage, and the commander raised his hands in a defensive posture, but the alien lizards engaged others in combat.

Snerl cracked his rifle butt against another Myhr'an's arm, but a second Myhr'an's clawed hand swept down, clutching onto the Tellarite's leg and ramming it into the bulkhead, dragging a squealing Snerl with it. Jutting at an odd angle, the ensign's leg crumpled, bringing him crashing to the deck, his mouth emitting a high-pitched, continuous squealing noise...

Singh swung her rifle, connecting with the Myhr'an attacking Snerl and stunning it. Another Myhr'an connected with the first officer's mid-section, knocking her arm against the bulkhead; she screamed as a crack sounded.

Ulitania Jonar ducked as another Myhr'an swung. A second arm coming the other direction, the Trill jumped, then connected with an undercut. She forced her rifle butt, the rifle hanging from a shoulder strap, into another Myhr'an behind her, smacking it in the snout.

Fack stood in Ops's center, dazed. "Come on," he yelled as he jumped onto a Myhr'an's back, snapping its neck and riding it to the deck as it crumpled to the deck. "Come on! Fight me!"

Yh'ahni rushed to Singh's aid, but the Myhr'an's hand grabbed her by her throat, slamming her body up against the bulkhead and lifting it slowly off the ground. Her legs dangling, the breath knocked out of her and not returning, Yh'ahni stared down at the glowing red eyes to find its surprised look.

Her leg swung to deliver a kick but a tingling sensation overcame her, and the *Cantabrian's* Transporter Room 3 replaced SE3's Ops...

---

### **The Bridge, The *Starship Cantabrian***

"They're aboard," Ensign Tawana Killan reported from the first officer's station.

Captain Noel Turner paced over to the captain's chair. "Good. Repo..."

"Sir!" Lieutenant Greg Willard tapped frantically at the Ops station. "Three Myhr'an battle cruisers are decloaking!"

"Shields up!" Turner dashed back to his station, throwing himself into the chair. "All hands! Battle sta..."

The ship shuddered as the deck groaned. The commanding officer fell face first to the deck, landing with a thud. He pushed himself up on his hands and knees to feel another barrage strike the *Cantabrian*, watching the helm explode, the Vulcan flight controller's body thumping on the deck next to him, eyes still open, singed green blood caking the side of his face and neck.

"Hull breaches all over the ship!" The ensign at tactical's voice quavered. "Shields at 63..."

Another blast shook the ship, a starboard station spraying sparks on the crewman working there. She screamed as she turned away, burnt.

"58 percent!"

Turner pushed back, struggling to stand up, but another barrage hit the ship. A station at the bridge's aft exploded, and the dome above the bridge's command circle erupted, with sparks showering down on him. He finally gained his breath back.

"Tactical: Fire at will! Ensign Killan, take the helm!" He jumped to his feet and threw himself into the captain's chair. "Get us out of here using some of that legendary piloting you have!"

Killan dashed down the stairs, glancing briefly at the dead Vulcan before sliding into the flight controller's seat. She breathed in calmly as another barrage struck the ship and planted her hands on the station. Her graceful hands dashed across the station, and the viewscreen showed a Myhr'an ship approaching, but Killan took the ship too close for either ship to safely fire.

"Hold on," she stated calmly to everyone. "This is going to be a rough ride!"

Another Myhr'an ship approached on their flank, but the hybrid ensign tapped a few controls, the *Cantabrian* swerving left, then right, up a little, up further, then down slightly. The stars danced across the viewscreen.

"Are we at a safe distance from the station?" Turner pushed himself back up in his chair. He watched the disruptor fire dancing past them on the viewscreen.

"Yes, sir."

"Maximum warp. Engage!"

The stars bobbing up and down on the viewscreen extended, a flash of various colors in a halo around the center of the screen, and the stars grew from pinpricks to streaks.

Captain Noel Turner stood, looking slightly toward the ceiling. "Bridge to Engineering: engage damage control teams."

"Aye, sir. *They're already on it. Engineering out.*" Ethan Arden sounded extremely flustered.

The commanding officer walked towards the Operations station. "Ops: The Myhr'an?"

Greg Willard let out a slight laugh. "...Are not pursuing."

"Thank God something's gone our way this week..." Captain Turner wiped the blood from his lip and sighed, his tense shoulders relaxing slightly.

---

### **The Observation Lounge, The *Starship Cantabrian***

"I'm sorry to inform you, Captain," her voice sounded deflated as she sighed, "*all Starfleet ships reporting in from the region are facing the same threat. We are receiving radio silence from 18 starships at present, and we must assume they have been incapacitated or destroyed.*"

Captain Turner pinched where the bridge of his nose met his forehead between his eyebrows, his head slightly bowed. "So we're on our own," he said softly. Looking up, his eyes met Admiral Zahara Hogan's on-screen. *The bags under her eyes have bags*, he thought. "What are your orders, Admiral?"

Hogan sighed again. "*You are to rendezvous with the Starship Hastings at the Altok III colony, then proceed with them to Canaileus Prime to group with several other Starfleet ships.*" She looked off-screen for a moment as someone handed her a PADD. Her eyes darted over the information, and the PADD clacked on her desk as she put it down. "*We hope a show of force near the border will be enough for the Myhr'an to think twice before re-entering our space. Any questions?*"

Turner glanced around to the skeleton group of senior officers assembled in the conference room: Ensign Killan; Ethan Arden; Commander Fack; Dakota Caldwell; Ulitania Jonar; and Tony Ramirez; they all shook their heads no. "No questions, Admiral."

She paused. "*Good luck, Noel. Deep Space 4, out.*"

And the monitor went black.

Captain Noel Turner headed to the viewports, his knuckles white as he leaned against the frame. He focused on the stars streaking slowly away from him. "Commander Arden: Status of the *Cantabrian*."

Ethan Arden cleared his throat, glanced over uneasily at Tony Ramirez, and stood. "Sir, the *Cantabrian* took quite a pounding at SE3. Our top speed is warp 4.6 until engineering teams can repair affected systems. I might be able to push the engines to warp 5 but I can't guarantee anything. Hull breaches on decks 4 through 7, 10 through 12, and 18 through 21 have been temporarily sealed with force fields; repair teams are working on them and they should be patched up in a few hours. Isolation bays have been compromised." Ethan tapped his right hand on the conference room tabletop as he checked his PADD for further information. "Ah, Shuttlebay Two remains evacuated due to decompression danger. Cargo bays 2, 3 and 9 are..."

Turner raised his left hand at Arden but didn't look at him. "That's enough, Ethan. I get the picture." His voice sounded defeated. "Work with Commander Ramirez to establish priorities and have emergency repair crews work around the clock if they have to, to get us back up and running."

"Aye, Cap'n."

"Lieutenant Commander Jonar: what's our weapons status?"

The Trill leaned forward, her pale blue eyes meeting Arden's. "Phaser banks 2 and 5 need an overhaul but would function in an emergency. Shield generators on the main hull's port side are being repaired as well."

The door hissed open and Lieutenant Commander Elizabeth Singh walked in, rubbing her right arm. She smiled lightly as she showed everyone her arm. "Good as new."

Lieutenant Yh'ahni walked in behind, pausing at the door-frame.

Captain Turner regarded Singh, his head slightly turned. "Commander?"

"Sir," the first officer stated as she crossed her arms behind her. "I've just come from Sickbay." She walked closer to him, facing him almost side-on. "Ensign Snerl's suffered two compound fractures in his lower leg; Doctor Bourget estimates he'll be back on duty in about two days."

Turner continued to look at Singh and Yh'ahni. "Casualties?"

Liz Singh looked down at the floor. "Threk, Merchinson, and Sentok from the away team are dead. The doctor reports 42 dead, 87 wounded in the latest attack."

Captain Noel Turner glanced out the viewport again and swallowed hard. His eyes glassy, he leaned harder against the viewport, almost as if stretching his legs. "Thank you, Commander."

He faced the senior staff. Lieutenant Yh'ahni stood, arms crossed behind her, at the door; Commander Singh bit her lower lip; the others stared around the room, avoiding his gaze. He cleared his throat. "Dismissed."

Those seated at the conference room rose from their seats and merged with those standing as they filtered out of the conference room and towards the bridge.

Captain Noel Turner glanced at Commanders Singh and Fack for a moment before he headed after what was left of his senior staff. Singh and Fack followed.

Turner paused as he reached the door to the bridge; the others drifted towards their stations (if they had them). The look in his eyes seemed distant, hollow, as they reflected the chrome and grey bridge.

He swallowed as Commander Singh glanced over at Fack, both of whom had stopped behind him in the corridor from the observation lounge. Clearing his throat, the commanding officer of the *Cantabrian* wiped at his left eye with his uniform sleeve, stretched his neck and boxed his shoulders, and marched onto the bridge, darting down the steps between the first officer's and tactical stations to the command circle.

Liz Singh took in a deep breath and followed to her station, standing to attention with her focus on Turner as Commander Fack fell in line at her side.

“Helm,” Captain Noel Turner commanded as he walked slowly towards the space between the flight controller and operations stations. “Set a course to *rendezvous* with the *Starship Hastings* at Altok III, maximum warp.”

Ensign Tawana Killan tapped at her station and confirmed. “Course laid in, sir.”

The stars on the viewscreen danced in his eyes. “Engage.”

TO BE CONTINUED