

Star Trek: The Cantabrian Expeditions

Howl

By Scott Fack

"I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness..."

Howl, by Allen Ginsberg

The sun's orange, red and purple tendrils clutched at the emerging stars to slow its decent. They'd witnessed many alien sunsets before but never a more spectacular one than now. Eleia, one of Milami's Bolian twins, expressed what they all must've been thinking, "The sun's holding on with all its arms."

"Maybe it doesn't want to go to bed." The eldest Bolian child, Tariel, crossed his arms as the slight evening breeze chilled. The hilltop provided the best sunset view in all of New Bolarus.

Saquia, the other twin, smiled. "I think it's pretty." She turned to their uncle, sitting amongst them. "Uncle Ghikadi, does the sun set like this every night on New Bolarus?"

Ghikadi Thall laughed. He never thought he'd enjoy spending time with his nieces and nephew; he didn't even know they existed up until a year or so ago. Maybe Milami wouldn't be so happy about their experiencing a holosimulation of the adopted home the kids' grandfather settled on with his wife and children thousands of light years from the Federation's edge. Milami didn't like talking about New Bolarus; being discontent made her leave with their mother and other siblings years before to return to the Federation.

"No." He ran his hand over her smooth head – a sign of Bolian affection -- and rested his large hand on her small back. In secret, Milami always teased Ghikadi, claiming he'd make a better Nausicaan than a Bolian – Bolians considered his size formidable and unnatural amongst their own ranks – but they could never express that in front of their father. "We have storms and clouds: all sorts of weather." His eyes sparkled. "Did you know it takes 26 hours between sunrise and sunset on New Bolarus?"

The children responded with awe.

Saquia kicked some dirt with her foot. "I wish I could go with you and Mama."

"Not today. Maybe someday." Ghikadi wrapped his arm around the other twin. "I promise."

"I thought I'd find you here." Milami Thall clambered up the gentle slope. She glanced behind her at the sunset, the light shimmering off the swells on the large lake below. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

"It's wonderful, Mama." Tariel fidgeted with his vest.

She ignored his nervousness. "Well, we'll watch it until it sets and then it's time for bed."

The children protested, but Ghikadi supported his sister. "It's already a quarter hour past your bed times. Your mom's being very generous."

Milami winked at Ghikadi. She eased herself down, wrapping an arm around Saquia. Relaxing felt so good; spending quality time with her brother and her children felt better. As Saquia leaned into her, Milami Thall smiled, closed her eyes. *If life could be like this all the time...* She squeezed Saquia tightly and glanced around at the simulation.

The real New Bolarus would not remain so unscarred.

"Are you nervous about it?" The Kaartali hologram HEIDI's first words stung her. The two engineers reviewed the sensor readings on the *Determination's* outer hull and stood either side of the same console.

Milami Thall scanned shield junctions for their fitness. "Shield junction 42 checks out okay." She scrolled the screen for the next set. "Nervous about what?"

"Going home."

The phrase struck a raw nerve in the Bolian chief engineer. She tapped the console roughly for the next junction, then sighed. "Extremely."

The hologram brought up another schematic. The chief engineer pointed to her screen, a red cube flashing around the junction.. "A-ha. Here's our problem."

HEIDI scrolled through her database. "I remember when I went back to Kartaal for the first time to meet my creator. I think it was the first time I felt anything." The hologram observed the junction schematic rotating on the screen, various information typing out and flashing before disappearing. "They didn't program me to feel anything."

Milami accessed a self-repair menu. "It's called apprehension." The computer chirped, ordering the repair of the shield junction.

"Ah. Yes." HEIDI looked over at Milami while inputting crucial information to the repair program. "I realized after meeting my creator for what seemed like the first time that I had nothing to be nervous about. She seemed very nice."

"Well, you haven't met my father." Milami punched several commands into the console. "One of the most opinionated, xenophobic men I know. Stubborn as hell." She pointed at HEIDI's monitor. "The fault's right there."

HEIDI pressed several more command buttons, and a red cube rotated around the area on the screen. "Elaborate. About your father."

"The Bolians who live on New Bolarus don't like other races. They took a several year journey to this planet to remain 'independent.' People like my father saw the drawbacks of integrating with the Federation instead of the benefits, arguing cultural contamination and so on and so forth."

"You do not seem to be like them, Lieutenant Thall." HEIDI sounded calm and collected.

"I'm in the minority, HEIDI." Milami stretched back from the console. "That's why I joined Starfleet. I've not seen my father and some siblings since we left."

"You must've been glad to see Ghikadi when we arrived at the Steranmio homeworld several months ago."

"Yes," Milami confided. "I was. He was, and remains to be, my most favorite brother. He's protected me many times when we were young." Her screen returned to the original command menu. "Finished."

"Do not be apprehensive, Lieutenant Thall. Your older brother will be there to protect you. And your father will be happy to see you."

Lieutenant Milami Thall smiled uneasily. "Come on. We've got to check the warp nacelles."

Captain Noel Turner perched on the corner of his ready room desk, tapping a PADD rested on his thigh. "So you understand all the protocols?"

"Yes. Ghikadi reviewed them with me." Commander Elizabeth Singh leaned forward in a chair opposite the desk, swinging her own PADD. "Several times."

"It's extremely important you don't take offense if the Bolians seem a bit..." Turner licked his lips, searching for the right words. "Off-hand with you. You're a non-Bolian, remember."

"Yes." Singh turned her PADD end on end. "We covered Bolian relations in the Xenophobia course at the Academy."

"Sorry." The commanding officer stood and moved around behind his desk. He leaned over it and tapped a few commands into his desktop monitor. "I must seem like a mother hen." A smile emerged. "You're an experienced officer and know what you're doing. I've known you long enough to realize that."

"These talks," he continued, "are extremely important, though. We need every neutrally-aligned ally we can to enforce the peace between the Steranmio Alliance and the Pilmarian Union, to ensure on-going, peaceful relations in this part of the galaxy."

"And that's why you're taking the *Cantabrian* to Ahlatrea?"

Turner pointed his PADD at his executive officer. "Exactly." He tossed the PADD to his desk top and slumped into his chair. "And that's why you're taking the *Determination* to New Bolarus. Remember, you're in a supporting role to Ghikadi Thall. Let him do the talking."

"Understood." Singh shifted uneasily in her seat, avoiding Turner's glance. "Permission to speak freely, Captain?"

Captain Turner nodded.

"I'm worried about both the Kaartali and Milami's involvement in this mission."

He rested one hand atop the other. "Continue."

"For Milami, there could be..." She cleared her throat. "Unresolved issues that may jeopardize the mission." Her PADD rested on her knees. "And the Kaartali aren't exactly known for their diplomatic skills."

"Liz, Lieutenant Thall remains to be one of the best engineers on this ship. The *Determination's* Kaartali technology remains a prime example of her extraordinary ability to understand new technologies." He leaned back in his chair. "And the Kaartali... Well, they also know how to run their technology better than we do at present, so we need them aboard." Noel Turner maintained eye contact. "While they're not the most diplomatic of races, they *are* our allies. And if anything goes awry..."

Commander Liz Singh cleared her throat; she understood.

"Well, Commander." Captain Noel Turner rose from his chair, Singh following his action. "I wish you the best of luck on this mission. The *Cantabrian* will be in the Ahlatrea system if the *Determination* needs her. Good luck."

"*Determination, you are cleared to depart.*" Lieutenant Commander Antonio Ramirez's voice boomed throughout the *Determination's* main engineering.

"Releasing docking clamps." Lieutenant Milami Thall nodded to the two engineering ensigns and HEIDI to follow her command.

"*Bridge to engine room. Maneuvering thrusters only. Pull us away from the Cantabrian.*"

"*Good luck, Determination. We'll rendezvous in a week's time near Ahlatrea.*" Captain Noel Turner sounded extremely confident. "Cantabrian, out."

"I'm already missing them." Ensign Lisa Oh scratched the back of her neck.

Milami raised an eyebrow at Ensign Nate Wrightson and turned to Oh. The two engineers waited for an elaboration.

"You mean..." Wrightson laughed.

"What?" The chief engineer's hands danced on her console. "Am I the only one in the dark?"

Wrightson's blue eyes sparkled. He nodded at Oh. "She's *finally* got a boyfriend..."

"Really?" Thall smiled and leaned forward on her console. "Is it that.." She looked to Ensign Wrightson for confirmation. "...Lieutenant Parks?"

Ensign Lisa Oh blushed as the other two laughed; the ensign finally convinced the man she'd been pursuing for months to give her a shot.

Milami continued laughing while gauging the distance between the ships by gazing out the portholes above her. The *Cantabrian's* underbelly fell away above them, achieving a safe distance, and shot into warp. Her smile faded to a sigh as a nagging feeling came; they'd meet up with the *Cantabrian* a lot sooner.

"Sensors indicate something strange occurring in orbit of New Bolarus." Lieutenant Brendon Lawless attempted to clarify the sensor readings at the combined Operations and Flight Control station.

"Strange? Can you elaborate, Mr. Lawless?" Commander Liz Singh perched precariously on the captain's chair.

The readings made Brendon frown. "There appears to be a lot of debris in the atmosphere. And there's a starship in orbit. Strange readings are emanating from that ship as well."

"Why didn't we detect this before we entered the system?"

Tapping frantically on his console, Lawless shrugged.

Colonel Vehayz Ca'l glanced at the sensor readings on her station. "The starship design is unfamiliar to the Kaartali or Steranmio databases. I'm attempting the Federation database."

Singh rose from the captain's chair. "Lieutenant Lawless: Increase our speed to maximum impulse. Red alert. Contact the *Cantabrian* and inform them. Engineering: Shields and weapons to full." Moving to Vehayz's station, she rested a hand on Ca'l's chair back. "We don't want to take any risks..."

"What?" Rejection signals sounded as the Kaartali senior officer pushed several commands. "The Starfleet database has information on the starship design, but I can't access it."

"Access denied." A male Kaartali voice sounded from the computer. "*This file requires Situational Access Code, Starfleet Captain level only, in order to view.*"

Vehayz turned to Singh, but the commanding officer shrugged. "I don't have that level clearance."

"Even though you're in command of this craft?"

"Colonel, there are a lot of things I am not privy to."

"Captain," Brendon sounded from his station. "Our signal to the *Cantabrian's* being jammed. And we're approaching the colony now."

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“Slow us down.” Singh fiddled with an auxiliary console at Vehayz’s station.

The large, slowly rotating planet grew larger on the screen.

“They’re firing on the planet...”

“Magnify.” Attention shifted to the viewscreen. A small starship, its forward section aimed at the planet, released controlled bursts below. Pits and craters scarred vast plains, and strong disturbances occurring in other parts displaced soot into the atmosphere. “Let’s hope the communications to the other ship work.” Singh pushed several more buttons and spoke. “Hostile starship: This is Commander Elizabeth Singh, commanding officer of the Federation *Starship Determination*. Under Steranmio law, firing upon an unarmed colony is considered an act of war. The Steranmio government has authorized the Federation...”

“Captain!” Brendon’s console screamed several warnings. “They’ve scanned us and are turning! Their weapons are charging!”

“Evasive action, Mr. Lawless. Attention all hands! Battle stations!” The first blast fell across their shields, forcing Singh to the decking. The back of her head cracked against Vehayz’s station. Her speech slurred, Singh uttered, “Return fire.”

Colonel Vehayz checked Singh’s condition, but the commanding officer raised her hand in refusal of help. Singh jumped up and slumped into the command chair.

“The hostile craft seems to be employing...”

The *Determination* lurched violently again, several stations and panels exploding on the bridge.

“Phasers are down.” Vehayz clutched her station as the ship grunted.

“After two shots?” Tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear, Singh studded.

“They’ve hacked into our computer system!” Lawless’s swift hands attempted to lock down the systems. “They’re extracting data from our computer core at 1.4 million kiloquads per millisecond. Computer’s sluggish in responding. We’re not receiving any information from Engineering...”

Lieutenant Milami Thall spun and ducked, avoiding the arch of raw energy spewing from the torn flexible conduit. HEIDI calmly reached up and clutched the writhing hose like an experienced snake handler. The Kaartali hologram continued babbling various facts and figures.

They – whoever they were – hacked into HEIDI’s program, forcing her to regurgitate as much information about the experimental Federation-Kaartali support starship *Determination*. And the Engineering staff on the small vessel needed to stop her.

“...standard Federation matter/antimatter core, type 7-A. Kaartali offensive systems: three transphasic torpedo launchers...”

Ensign Nate Wrightson wiped the blood from his face while Milami Thall hunched between him and HEIDI. Wrightson dragged his body sideways, towing his shrapnel-torn legs behind him and leaving a trail of blood.

“...crew compliment at present: 10 Starfleet officers, 8 Starfleet crewmen, 4 civilians, 17 Kaartali officers...”

Ensign Lisa Oh darted out from behind a console and heaved open the holographic control system. She strained to reach inside towards the isolinear chips.

"Engineering!" Commander Singh's voice boomed over the hissing of breached environmental systems, the sparking of HEIDI's conduit, the general rumbling of the protesting *Determination*, and the occasional blast falling across the shields. *"What the hell is going on down there? Report!"*

The announcement distracted Oh, and HEIDI seized the opportunity to realize Oh's intentions. The hologram slammed the sparking end of the conduit into Lisa's chest. A boom ensued, and Oh's limp, smoking body catapulted like a rag doll tossed by a child across the small engineering room.

*"...landing capability. Starfleet classified the *Determination* as an experimental support craft, integrating the best systems from existing Kaartali and Federation starship technology..."*

A large blast threw the hologram and two remaining engineering officers off balance. HEIDI recovered quickly, dropping the conduit and moving towards the large engineering display on the starboard wall.

"...Commander Elizabeth Jacqueline Singh in command; Kaartali Colonel Vehayz Ca'l, first officer; Lieutenant Brandon Zachary Lawless, second officer; Lieutenant Milami Thall, chief engineer; Doctor Marie Bourget, chief medical officer..."

Wrightson grunted as he eased into the console chair. The young officer punched several encryption commands to block HEIDI. He shook his head in frustration, as Milami Thall backed around a corner into one of the side rooms off Main Engineering.

*"...currently assigned as a support craft to the *Starship Cantabrian*. The *Cantabrian*, its two support starships, and seventeen other Starfleet starships are stranded in this part of the Beta Quadrant due to the collapse of the Hanej Gateway at the hands of the M'Tar twelve months, eighteen days, five hours, thirteen minutes and five seconds ago..."*

Thall stormed into Main Engineering from the other side, hopping over Oh's lifeless body. "We don't have time for this," the Bolian spat, raising the Kaartali disruptor rifle and cocking it to full charge.

HEIDI turned her attention to the chief engineer, her white eyes analyzing Thall's intentions.

Before the hologram reacted, Lieutenant Milami Thall discharged the disruptor rifle, exploding the exposed holographic control system.

HEIDI opened her mouth and dissipated.

"Nice shot," Wrightson commented from his station.

Milami discarded the rifle and dropped to her knees. Her blue hand contoured Oh's neck, searching for a pulse, but found none.

"Engineering? Report!" The commander's voice sounded more frantic than before. Other voices muttered in the background.

Thall tapped her comm.-badge. "Lieutenant Thall here. Ensign Oh's dead." The Bolian chief engineer glanced over at Wrightson. "We disabled HEIDI. She was under the aliens' influence."

"We need more power to the..."

A large blast shuddered the ship, killing the communications system. The lights, the ebbing red alert signals, the warp core: all knocked off-line. Several sparks showered from the

ceiling, breaking the darkness, accompanied by several panels popping open and discarding their contents across the deck. Wrightson's face illuminated as his station flickered back on-line.

"Report," Thall barked, peeling herself off the deck.

The ensign's hands danced across his station. He clicked his tongue in despair. "That last shot knocked out most of the remaining major systems. Communications are down." As the emergency lighting filled the room, Wrightson winced slightly. "At least they can't download any more information from our core." The ship groaned in protest, and the surviving ensign turned a pale gray color. "What should we do now? Escape pods?"

Milami listened carefully. "No." She joined the ensign at his station, pulling up an obscure command menu. "The thrusters are still on-line. Short range sensors too. Singh's taking us in for a landing." She punched up several more commands, but the computer sounded in the negative. "Computer access is down on this deck."

His eyes wide, Nate Wrightson still mulled over the thought of an uncontrolled landing. "Will that be safe?"

"With the size of that other craft, there's no way they're going to be landing." The Bolian scanned the room. A distant sound distracted her. "It'll give us a few hours to repair systems. By the time they find us..."

Wrightson waited for Milami to complete her sentence. He placed pressure on his right leg to help ease the bleeding.

"Come on, Nate." Milami Thall wrapped the ensign's left arm and draped it around her shoulders. "There's nothing we can do and this is not the place we should be in during a potential crash..."

"Damage report!" Commander Elizabeth Singh clutched the armrests of the command chair to balance herself against the bucking *Determination*. She winced as the pain in her head ebbed with the violent protest of the small starship.

Lieutenant Brendon Lawless crawled back to the combined Ops/Flight Control station. He coughed the smoke from his lungs, clutching the chair for support as he pulled himself up.

Colonel Vehayz punched queries into the tactical station, steadying herself with one hand, but only a limited amount of information returned. She blinked at the screen several times before she translated the information. "That last blast took out life support and computer control on all lower decks. Emergency life support on-line."

Lawless shoved several renegade strands of his black hair behind his ear as he concentrated on his readings. "Um, thrusters still responding. Short range sensors indicate we'll hit the atmosphere in eight seconds."

Singh exhaled as the ship protested its planetary contact. *Brendon has control*. She licked her lips to clear the blood. "Ca'l?" The commanding officer sought clarification from her Kaartali first officer.

Vehayz Ca'l wiped the mixture of sweat, blood and soot from her forehead with her sleeve. She turned, her fair hair mixing with the red, clear and dark substances all over her, a small smile on her face. "The hostile craft broke off pursuit."

"For now," Liz Singh replied.

"Landing area targeted." Brendon Lawless worked swiftly at his station. He responded to a series of chirps. "Captain. Deflectors at full and landing struts are extended."

"Atmospheric pumps are on-line," a Kaartali engineer sounded from the rear of the bridge. "I can begin interchange at your command, Captain."

Singh raised a hand. "Wait until we land."

She jumped at the sharp pain growing at the base of her skull. Rubbing her neck with her right hand, Commander Singh uttered, "Must've hit it harder than I thought."

"Sorry, Captain?"

The pain eased when she shifted her weight. The commanding officer dismissed Vehayz's concern with a wave of her hand.

"We're approaching the landing co-ordinates."

The viewscreen static dissipated for long enough to show the tops of a forest of trees bowing with the pressure from the atmospheric thrusters on the *Determination*. A clearing appeared, and Brendon steered the small starship towards the area.

Commander Liz Singh felt an odd sensation. She tingled in some areas and ached in others. As the deck shook slightly from the touch down, Singh struggled to turn to Vehayz, shielding herself against her console exploding, before everything went black.

The communications section of tactical beeped aboard the *Starship Cantabrian*, and Lieutenant Yh'ahni tapped several commands into her station. "We're receiving an automated distress call from a Steranmio scout ship."

"Triangulating its position." Lieutenant Commander Tony Ramirez scanned his Operations console. "The Steranmio starship's location: 3.9 parsecs away, near the De'Cha system. Transferring co-ordinates to Flight Control." He exchanged glances with Yh'ahni at her station to his right at the aft of the bridge. "We didn't detect any ships on long-range sensors up until now. And I'm not detecting any sort of warp signature from the ship..."

A strange feeling overcame Captain Turner. Something nagged him. He casually slid into the command chair. "Jonar: Alter our course and engage at maximum warp."

"Aye, sir." The hybrid flight controller, joined with the Trill symbiont Jonar, input the command and turned her attention to the shift of warp pattern on the viewscreen.

Counselor Scott Fack scrunched up his nose and leaned over to the commanding officer. The M'Tar-modified telepath sounded what Turner thought. "Something's not right."

Captain Turner glanced over at the counselor, uneasy. "Yes. Something is not right."

Something still nagged within him but he remained lost as to say what exactly.

Lieutenant Brendon Lawless entered the bridge from the starboard doorway. "Doctor Bourget's injury and casualty reports are in. Eleven dead, twelve injured out of our complement of thirty-nine. Seven are critically injured, and the others have been treated and released, you included."

"Not including HEIDI." Colonel Vehayz Ca'l pondered how to retrieve the valuable hologram. "Ensign Wrightson reported the holographic system housing her program completely destroyed."

“The doctor says Commander Singh needs immediate medical attention,” the partial Maori reported as he took his position at the joint Ops/Flight Control station. “She can maintain her critical status, but some of the medical facilities she needs to treat her injuries are aboard the *Cantabrian*.”

Colonel Vehayz Ca’l sighed as she called up more sensor records. “So this means I’m in charge?”

“Affirmative, Captain.” Lawless nodded at the Kaartali officer.

Vehayz broke from her records and turned to her temporary first officer, who scrolled through other sensor records on the Operations station. “Have you found anything yet? Any clue who they are or what they want?”

Brendon Lawless exhaled and pushed more commands into his console. “No. The only information I’ve found is that they employ some sort of energy-to-matter weapon.” He scratched his head. “The plasma-based weapon strikes shields, transferring the energy into matter.”

“But the Kaartali shields aboard this ship are transphasic and transpolygonal.” The Colonel punched up shield sensor records. “Sensors indicate that the shields somehow redistributed the plasma with the constant shift in shape and phase of the shields.”

“Basically, like throwing oil in boiling water,” Lawless likened. “The oil doesn’t clump together but gets pulled into smaller and smaller clumps.”

“Interesting,” Vehayz commented. The Kaartali officer tapped her finger on the edge of her console. “But that still doesn’t answer who they are, why they attacked a non-aligned colony or us, and what they want. We *need* to get into that encrypted file...”

Doctor Marie Bourget rushed from the makeshift second ward of Sickbay – the engineering ensigns’ quarters sufficed – to the main Sickbay. One of her Kaartali assistants, a weapons specialist named Retas, called her for a medical emergency. The French African chief medical officer dodged several collapsed bulkheads and pushed into the main medical center.

Retas pumped the civilian’s chest. “He’s in cardiac arrest,” the weapons specialist turned nurse advised Bourget about the light green Merchokan on the biobed.

“Both of his hearts have stopped beating?” The doctor snatched the medical trolley from the corner and shoved it against the biobed. “Switch places.”

Retas clutched the cart as Bourget punched up Merchokan anatomy and physiology on a bedside monitor. “20 CCs of hyperzine.”

The Kaartali stumbled through the small vials and found hyperzine. He slapped the small vial into the hypospray and handed it to the chief medical officer.

Bourget plunged the hypospray near the dying civilian’s left shoulder. The chief medical officer swore under her breath. She scrolled through several screens on her monitor. Concentrating on the monitor, the doctor barked, “Get me the pulmonary support unit!”

Retas swerved around the injured and pulled the unit from its shelf housing. He nearly collided with Ghikadi Thall before spinning around and returning to the doctor’s side.

“What’s going on?” Ghikadi moved to the opposite side of the Merchokan’s bed.

Marie Bourget slid the resuscitation gear from the unit, planting two small devices over each heart. "Your colleague is in bicardiac arrest. Stand clear, Mr. Thall." The chief medical officer typed several commands into the unit and set the devices.

The makeshift nurse waited for a command. Bourget nodded.

The Merchokan arched his back as the charge pulsed through him.

The status monitor continued to shriek.

"Again."

The green faded more from the Merchokan's body. The pulse contracted his muscles again.

The status monitor bleated the monotone note.

"Again!"

The Merchokan barely moved.

The status monitor sounded the same tune.

Marie Bourget slammed her hands on the Merchokan's chest and pumped. She pushed the base of one palm so hard into the top of her other hand it crunched. Perspiration beaded along her dark chocolate forehead as she continually thrust her hands against the alien's chest.

Finally, Ghikadi Thall wrapped his light blue hand around the doctor's arm. She halted mid-pump, her brown eyes searching the bifurcated blue face for answers.

"He's dead." Ghikadi loosened his grip, made the Bolian gesture for apology and left.

Doctor Bourget wiped the sweat from her forehead. "Computer: Mark time of death." As she heard the computer acknowledge the order, the chief medical officer commanded, "Retas: Take this body to the make-shift morgue in the Cargo Bay."

The Steranmio scout ship slowly tumbled end upon end, a trail of debris drifting away. The port warp nacelle flickered intermittently, and the viewports betrayed the fires blazing within the ship.

The Steranmio Alliance consisted of many warrior races who insisted on arming their starships – science vessels, scout ships, warships, hospital ships, whatever – to the teeth at the expense of other systems like escape pods or medical facilities. The civil war between the Steranmio Alliance – once a part of the larger Pilmarian body – and the Pilmarian Union of Planets raged for decades.

To witness a Steranmio scout ship battered struck a note of terror in Captain Noel Turner. He wondered at the bruised starship. "Survivors?"

"I'm reading one weak life sign. A male," Lieutenant Commander Tony Ramirez sounded from Operations. "The ship's structural integrity is failing."

"Drop shields to beam him directly to Sickbay." Turner analyzed readings coming in at his command chair. "Then raise shields. Ramirez: Scan the area for signs of hostile craft or weaponry."

"Aye, sir."

"Sickbay reports the survivor has been successfully transported." Yh'ahni slid her delicate hands over her station. "Shields back up."

"Sir," Ramirez continued from his station. "No hostile craft are in range, but I am reading a foreign debris field just beyond the Steranmio starship." The second officer's station sounded a warning. "The Steranmio ship is reaching critical mass."

"Move us away," Turner ordered as he braced himself for any impact.

The Steranmio starship shrunk slightly on the viewscreen as the *Cantabrian* backed off. A crack formed in the hull, and a bright light emanated from it before a violent explosion tore the small starship into debris. The shockwave raced towards the *Cantabrian*.

"All hands! Brace for..."

The shockwave struck the *Cantabrian*, throwing the commanding officer and counselor to the deck. Lieutenant Tawana Jonar coughed as her body slammed into the helm station, knocking the wind out of her. Captain Turner could hear several other crewmembers colliding with consoles or deck plating at the aft of the bridge.

Captain Noel Turner rose to one knee and brushed himself off. He reached for Counselor Fack, still struggling on the deck to sit up. Showing a gash on his right temple, Fack waved his hand in refusal but appeared disoriented. Turner pulled himself up and then offered his hand to the counselor.

"Damage report," he commanded as he checked the counselor's head wound.

"We've got some slight damage to the forward shields," Lieutenant Yh'ahni responded.

Lieutenant Commander Tony Ramirez pulled himself into his chair at Operations. "Sickbay reports several crew members wounded."

"I'm okay," the counselor whispered. "Head wounds appear to bleed a lot but..."

"Report to Sickbay." Captain Turner helped the joined partial Trill Jonar up from the deck. "You too, Lieutenant." He turned to see the counselor's mouth open, about to sound a protest, but he beat him to the punch. "That's an order, Commander."

As a medic appeared to help the duo to Sickbay, Captain Noel Turner made his way to the command chair. He sunk into his chair and pulled up some of the Operations commands on his small monitor; he wanted to find out everything he could about his debris field.

"Operations: Beam all the debris I mark to Cargo Bay Two." He indicated the first piece of wreckage on his screen. "We're doing some investigation work ourselves..."

"Lieutenant." Colonel Vehayz Ca'l faired worse than the *Determination*. The Kaartali officer displayed shrapnel cuts across her paler-than-normal face. Vehayz's fair blond hair stuck together in clumps, coagulated from a mixture of blood, sweat and grease.

"It's better than it looks." The Kaartali officer brushed some stray hair out of her face. "What's your status?"

Brushing off her uniform, Lieutenant Milami Thall rose to confide in her temporary commanding officer. "Warp engines can't be repaired unless we rejoin the *Cantabrian*. Our most hopeful option now appears to be the impulse engines."

"I think you misunderstood me," Ca'l smiled lightly. "You witnessed Oh's death. You had to essentially kill HEIDI..."

The Bolian pushed a few buttons on the ship schematic before she dropped her barriers. "It's hard." Milami crossed her arms uncomfortably. "I've never killed before. All these years in Starfleet and I've never been forced to kill..."

"Even though she's a hologram?"

The Bolian chief engineer's voice barely sounded above a whisper. "Hologram... organic... mechanical... We still all feel; what does it matter?"

Vehayz prodded further, knowing fully she treaded in territory Milami didn't want to discuss. "This race appears to be ferocious. They may come and search for us. You may need to kill again, and I need to count on you..."

Thall's eyes glazed slightly as she faced her Kaartali commanding officer. "You can count on me, Colonel." The escaped words stung the chief engineer.

Vehayz stepped fully into the small Engineering section and calmed Milami Thall. Clearly, she overstepped the mark. "The impulse engine's main power supply ruptured during the attack, and the back-up generators are off-line." The Kaartali prompted for an explanation.

Thall wiped her eyes and shifted back into professional mode. "If I'm not mistaken, the Kaartali power each individual weapon with a separate generator..."

Colonel Vehayz placed her hands on her hips defiantly. "You're not rerouting the torpedo tube generators to the impulse engines?"

Milami smiled uneasily at her ingenuity, but by the dissatisfied look on Ca'l's face, she could tell the idea bore problems.

"The phaser generators fused in the attack; they're useless."

"We're not going to need torpedoes if we can't get off the ground." *Touché*, Milami thought. In the year and a half she'd worked with the Kaartali, the chief engineer learned they hated being wrong. *The pride issue dominates their warrior culture and ours; just look at Papa. Pride explains my stubbornness as well*, Thall concluded.

Vehayz compromised. "Draw power from the aft and forward port torpedo launchers. Leave the starboard torpedo launcher on-line." She sighed lightly. "We'll do what we have to do to get out of this predicament and contact the *Cantabrian*."

The crewmembers who could attend the meeting in the mess hall did. The small group of faces ranged from Terran to Bolian to Vulcan to Kaartali to Steranmian. The remaining senior officers – Colonel Vehayz, Lieutenant Lawless, Lieutenant Thall and Doctor Bourget – stood precariously in front of the others. Vehayz took the lead.

"Thank you for gathering here on such short notice. We have obtained only a small amount of data on the hostile force that attacked this colony and forced us to land here, so we are assuming that they will send down search parties for us. Their ship is too large to land, from what we can gather, and there are no clearings around here for them to land in. But we can't face them on our own. We need the *Cantabrian* and other vessels to engage the hostiles. I'll turn the meeting over to our chief engineer for her input."

"Thank you, Captain." Milami Thall crossed her hands uneasily. "We need to repair several vital systems in order for us to attempt to communicate with the *Cantabrian*. The majority of our systems are fused or destroyed, but we can manage to restore some of the systems. Communications, life-support, structural integrity and inertial dampeners, and impulse engines are our main priorities."

“How do we know that communications will work? They jammed us last time...” Ensign Nate Wrightson’s eyes widened as he sought an answer.

“It’s our only hope.” Lieutenant Lawless crossed his arms. “We’ve found that our shields can stand up to their conversion weapons, so we assume that the secondary Kaartali communications array might be able to break the jamming signal.”

“We’ll need to complete this as soon as possible.” Vehayz scanned each and every face in the crowd. “The sooner we get our signal off to the *Cantabrian*, the better our chances for survival.”

“Are the short range sensors working?” Ghikadi Thall look concerned.

“Yes, they’re operating, but there’s something blocking the effectiveness of them outside the ship. We think it’s the hostile craft.” Brendon Lawless had hypothesized earlier on the issue with Colonel Vehayz.

“The Bolian colony had a thoron generator large enough to emit a cloud of radiation to shield this continent,” Ghikadi remembered. “They didn’t have a lot of power, but they would have activated it in case of an emergency.”

Vehayz looked to Milami for confirmation.

“Yes,” she confirmed. “All of us had to learn how to use it in case of an attack like this. It worked through the trade winds of the planet.”

“It must mean someone’s still alive,” Ghikadi answered. “Ca’l, we need to take an away team to find out if there are any colonists alive.”

“Our first priority is to repair this ship,” Milami retorted.

“They *might* be alive...”

“We *are* alive. We’re no use to the colonists if we’re all dead.”

“Since when have you become so heartless?” Ghikadi scanned his sister’s face and an answer came to him. “You’re afraid that Papa might’ve survived?”

“Ghikadi...”

“That’s it!” Ghikadi stood and pointed his finger at Milami. “You hoped that...”

“Mr. Thall.” Colonel Vehayz Ca’l crossed her arms and stared at the large Bolian.

“...That maybe they had all died...”

“Mr. Thall! That is enough! Disobey my order one more time and I’ll have you confined to the brig.” Colonel Vehayz frowned, her cold gaze focused on Ghikadi. “Understood?”

Ghikadi’s skin turned a darker shade of blue. He opened his mouth to argue but one of his cohorts rested his hand on Ghikadi’s shoulder, and the large Bolian emitted a large sigh instead.

“Any other questions?” The mood in the room was somber and silence prevailed. “Good. Report to your stations.”

Milami Thall rushed towards Engineering. A lot of work needed to be completed if the crew wanted to get off the planet.

“Ami?” A male voice called out from behind her.

She knew Ghikadi wanted to take the “finding their father” issue further, so she continued her pace.

His long legs worked to his advantage, and the ambassador grabbed her arm, swinging her around. He smiled uneasily at his younger sister.

Milami looked Ghikadi up and down. He sported an away team belt fitted with a standard tricorder and phaser. She frowned. “What’s this?”

“To see if Papa or any of the others survived.” He adjusted his belt.

Milami clicked her tongue. “But we need you *here*.” She crossed her arms defiantly. “HEIDI’s off-line. Warp engines and impulse engines are off-line. Life support’s barely...”

“I got the idea in the mess hall.”

“No, maybe you didn’t.” Milami pointed to his belt. “An unknown, hostile force drove us to the surface. They’ve nearly fused or destroyed all of our systems. They’re still in orbit, searching for us, and it’s only a matter of time before they find us. The planet must be *crawling* with away teams from their ship. And *you* want to go on a *field trip*?”

“Not a field trip.” Ghikadi folded his arms. “I’m talking about Papa...”

“If he’s still alive...”

“He’s alive. I know it.”

“...He’s old enough to look after himself.” She raised her eyes at him to make her point.

Ghikadi shifted his weight to his other foot. “This isn’t about the *Determination*...”

She met his gaze. “It’s not?” She mocked him.

“No.” He ignored Milami’s sarcasm. “You never liked Papa.”

Milami squinted at him and sighed. “And you’re wasting my time.”

“You never had time for Papa. Even as a child, you spent most of your time with Mama.”

Her cheeks turned a darker shade of blue. “Well, when you’re constantly told the things he told us, Ghikadi...”

“He wanted to protect us, ‘Ami.”

“More like hold us back.” Her hands landed on her hips. “He never made anything of himself. He *ran* from the Federation because everyone else’s success threatened him. And our potential success added to that insecurity...”

Ghikadi shook his head. “I’ve heard enough of this. I’m leaving.”

As Ghikadi Thall turned to leave, the Bolian chief engineer wrapped her hand around his arm and pulled slightly. The ambassador stopped in mid gait and swung around to find his sister with her hand out. “The away team belt...”

He looked at his waist and back at her. “What?”

"The belt. The phaser. The tricorder." Milami Thall maintained her steady gaze. "That's an order, Mr. Thall. While you're a guest aboard this ship, you are still under Federation and Kaartali jurisdiction..."

Ghikadi Thall unbuckled the belt and slid it from around his waist. Slapping the belt down in her hand, his face grew a shade of navy blue. "I hope you're happy," he spat and stormed off.

"They came out of nowhere." The Steranmio officer hunched over on one of the biobeds in Sickbay aboard the *Cantabrian*. "We didn't even pick them up on sensors."

Captain Turner listened sympathetically, one hand resting on his chin. "Did they say what they wanted? Who they were?"

The Steranmio officer swallowed as he turned paler. He continued to stare at the blue carpeting as he swung one leg nervously. "They just came out of nowhere," he repeated. "They knew we'd had contact, so they attacked us. So vicious. We fell in only four shots..." His body started shaking slightly.

"There, there." Counselor Scott Fack rested his hand on the officer's back and looked over at Captain Turner. "You're safe now. You've been through a lot today. You should get some more rest." He patted the soldier on the back. "Thank you."

The officer nodded in agreement as he attempted to hide the tears streaming down his face. He swung his legs up on the bed, gaining assistance from a nearby nurse.

Captain Turner and the counselor moved outside earshot from the biobed, the commanding officer peering over his shoulder at the soldier. Fack whispered, "He's terrified. Whoever they are, they must be one hell of an adversary..."

"Ramirez to Captain Turner."

The commanding officer tapped his comm.-badge, glancing over at Fack. "Turner here, Commander. Report."

"There's something you should come and take a look at."

"On my way," Turner assured as he started for the corridor. "Turner, out."

The officer continued to shake as he witnessed the two officers leave Sickbay.

"The truth is," Lieutenant Milami Thall reported as she ran her hand over the flight control station, "we don't have enough parts to complete repairs. The attack severely damaged the engineering parts storage bay, and replicators are down."

Colonel Vehayz Ca'l kept her hands closed below her chin, her two pointing fingers resting on her upper lip. Distant in thought, the Kaartali commented, "So what are you suggesting as an alternate plan, Lieutenant?"

The chief engineer dropped down into the flight controller's chair and faced her commanding officer in the command chair. "There's a hidden Bolian supply depot in a cave about two kilometers from here. I could take an away team and be back within a few hours."

Vehayz remained distant in thought. She suddenly stirred, unpaired her hands and rested them on her thighs. "It's too dangerous for you to go. We can't spare you at the moment, Lieutenant."

"I'll go," Lawless sounded. He leaned up against Vehayz's station on the bridge, his arms folded. "I could take two security..."

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“No,” Vehayz interrupted. “I can’t spare any of my senior officers...”

“Sir, no one knows where the supply depot is except me...”

“What about Ghikadi?” The commanding officer raised her eyebrows and awaited an answer from the chief engineer.

Milami Thall avoided the colonel's gaze. “Yes,” she sighed. “Ghikadi knows where the supply depot is.”

“Good.” Colonel Vehayz Ca’l rose from the command chair and clapped her hands together. “Lieutenant Lawless: Organize Mr. Thall and an away team of engineers and security officers to head to the supply depot.” She nodded for the Maori to start right away. “Lieutenant Thall: Continue to oversee repairs. Dismissed.”

The heavy bay doors echoed throughout the bay as they slid open for Captain Turner and Counselor Fack. Both slowed their gait as an amazing sight confronted them.

A holographic display flickered in the air. Ramirez greeted the officers. “Captain, Counselor.” He gestured at the hologram. “I’ve accessed the Steranmio ‘black box’, and you won’t believe what I’ve found.”

The display altered as Ramirez pushed several commands into the console. A starship schematic appeared in the air.

“What type of starship is *that*?” The commanding officer squinted at the design.

“I don’t know.” Yh’ahni reviewed designs at another console. “I’ve not been able to match it to anything yet, but the database is still working.”

Tony Ramirez folded his arms across his chest. “The design and manufacture of the foreign debris matches this ship’s design but there’s not enough wreckage to indicate that it was the ship. And the ‘pieces’ don’t fit into the overall design of the ship.” He turned to the other officers. “It’s almost like it was a marker buoy or weapon...”

Yh’ahni’s console sounded success.

“A match?” Captain Turner moved to Yh’ahni’s station. He reviewed the information on the display. “It’s in the Starfleet database, but I’ve not seen anything like it.”

Lieutenant Yh’ahni attempted to access the file, but a warning sounded. The calm female computer voice added, “*Access denied. A Situational Access Code from a Starfleet Captain is required to access this file.*”

Turner appeared impressed by the classified information. “Patch this through to my ready room,” he ordered as he moved towards the corridor. “At last, we seem to be getting somewhere...”

The thick forest sheltered them from the harsh summer daylight. A Kaartali security officer led the team through, his disruptor rifle swaying from side to side as he checked the path for any unwanted visitors. A large rock – a part of the rubble left from a glacier that moved through this specific valley millions of years ago – jutted from the side of a hill in front of them.

“It’s right up ahead,” Ghikadi Thall sounded excited at the prospect. Maybe some of the survivors sought shelter in the supply depot. While slinging his disruptor rifle over his shoulder, he pushed his way in front of the Kaartali security officer and pulled moss from a niche in the rock face. Ghikadi wiped away years of dirt build-up; no survivors made it here.

While disappointed, the Bolian punched in the access code, and part of the rock face slid away. Ghikadi pushed the door the rest of the way in.

The away team dropped their guard as they entered the depot. One of the Starfleet officers whistled at the sheer size of the cavern housing the depot. She pulled the disruptor rifle strap over her right shoulder, commenting, "There must be three hundred shelves of supplies in here." The officer stood at the base of one of the shelves and peered up at the top of it. *At least 3 meters tall*, she surmised.

"Yes," Ghikadi responded as he pulled a box of supplies from a shelf in the third row. "They wanted to make sure they were prepared for any situation." As he dug in the box, he continued. "There's also parts of the starship we arrived in in this depot somewhere. They disassembled it in case we needed it one day."

"Enough talk," the Kaartali engineer snarled, pulling a PADD from his away team sack. "Let's find these parts."

The team members split up and started their search.

The remaining senior officers aboard the *Cantabrian* gathered in the conference lounge immediately behind the bridge. Captain Turner appeared distraught, and the others grew nervous at his uneasiness.

"Ladies and gentlemen." The commanding officer pushed a button on his PADD on the conference room table, and the display behind him illuminated with the design of several alien starships. "It appears we've stumbled upon the Vendoth."

"The who?" Counselor Fack wrinkled his nose. He'd never heard of them, and Starfleet appointed him the Special Services officer aboard the craft; he made it his point to know about everything he could.

"The Vendoth." Turner rose from the head of the table and pushed several more commands into the monitor's access PADD. "They're a hostile alien race first experienced by the *Starship Excalibur* several decades ago. The *Starship Rutledge* encountered the same race a few years ago."

"What happened?" Ramirez started rubbing his thumb against his pointing finger: a sign of nervousness.

"The files are extremely classified; even the counselor would have a hard time gaining access." Captain Noel Turner folded his arms. "All the information I have could be outdated by now, for all I know."

"Humor us, Captain." The chief of security took her duties seriously and wanted any information she could get to prepare the ship for a possible encounter.

"From what I can gather, the Vendoth are bent on destroying the Federation and her allies as some sort of vendetta," he confided. He pointed at the display. "Their ships are extremely advanced, employing energy-to-matter offensive and defensive weaponry. Prior encounters have seen intense confrontation, and we should expect nothing less."

"Expect?" Lieutenant Tawana Jonar folded her hands on the table and scooted closer. "You mean, you believe we will encounter the Vendoth?"

"They *are* on a mission of revenge," the counselor added. "It would only be a matter of time before we encountered them..."

"Or another starship encountered them." Yh'ahni looked at Jonar across the table. "What about the *Determination* or the New Bolarus colony? The *Prospect*? The *McCaffery*?"

The thought rested uncomfortably with Captain Turner.

“But why way out here?” Ramirez rubbed his thumb against his pointing finger harder as he turned to Captain Turner. “Maybe they’ve already defeated the Federation and we’re the last remnants of Starfleet?”

Captain Turner raised his hand to stop the operations officer. “Speculation, Commander, will get us no where. We need to take several steps to resolve this: actively seek out the Vendoth starship; prepare defenses against the Vendoth; and ensure other Starfleet and associated vessels in this region of space are aware of the threat.” He paused. “Did we find out what the Vendoth debris was?”

“Doctor Pela couldn’t get the information out of him,” the counselor contributed. He scanned the faces in the room. “I tried to coax it from him, but he was too tired.”

“Commaner Ramirez: I want you to find a way to track Vendoth starships. At present it appears that we cannot. Lieutenant Jonar: Set a course to sweep the area for Vendoth starships.” The commanding officer shifted his view to Yh’ahni and Fack. “Lieutenant: I want you to prepare defenses against the Vendoth and what we know about their weapons; I’ve declassified information and placed it in your databases. Counselor: Contact all Starfleet starships and the representatives of local governments to make them aware of the threat. Also, try and find out what that Steranmio officer knows about the Vendoth.” Captain Noel Turner rested his knuckles on the table top, scanning each of his officers’ faces. “Understood?”

The officers nodded.

“Good. Dismissed.”

The away team finished their scavenger hunt for parts at the Bolian depot. One of the Starfleet engineering officers snapped her bulging away team sack over her shoulders and pulled her disruptor rifle up by the strap. “We’ve found everything we need, Major.”

“Good.” The Kaartali engineer secured his away team sack and energized his disruptor rifle. “Let’s move out.”

The Kaartali scout peered outside the door. Nothing. He held the nozzle of his disruptor rifle in one hand while trying to heave open the door with the other. Satisfied with his result, he smiled and resumed down the path.

The small team followed. Ghikadi performed a head count to make sure all the away team members stood in line. The male Starfleet security guard, the male Starfleet engineer, the male Kaartali engineer, the female Starfleet engineer, and two Kaartali security officers: yes, all accounted for.

The Bolian handed all the supplies he’d found to the female Starfleet engineer, not because he didn’t want to carry it, but because he’d taken some of the heavier equipment for her. The Kaartali in charge, an engineer named Latralis, took the command too seriously and ignored the fact that Ghikadi commanded the mission just as much as he did.

Ghikadi Thall followed at the back of the away team. He’d pondered the idea of running off and finding the colonists but decided against it. His colleagues aboard the *Determination*, advisors of his from his ambassadorship, hid their communicators well, and Ghikadi decided not to let the officers know the four – now three with one dead – carried these devices. *Probably no use anyway*, he surmised.

He remembered how, when younger, he’d taken Milami and the others to this area to play. His stories held ghosts and goblins but every time he reneged and told them the truth; no

monsters prowled these forests. New Bolarus seemed devoid of predators interested in Bolians – one of the reasons their fathers picked the planet – and he knew they'd all be safe.

Ghikadi smiled at the memories. He knew Milami would have liked...

A disruptor shot tore through the forest, snapping several branches. Another blast smacked one of the Kaartali security officers in the shoulder, and he shrieked in pain as he crumpled to the forest floor.

Ghikadi fell backwards and struggled to find shelter from the fire. He backpedaled, pulling at the earth, trying to escape from the wild fire dashing from inside the forest.

Another shot. The female Starfleet engineer emitted a mixed scream of surprise and pain as she twisted around. She thumped as she hit the earth, the skin on the side of her face melted. Moaning once, her body twitched slightly, and Latralis checked her pulse as the body fell silent. Nothing.

The Bolian climbed the slight slope to get away from the enemy fire. He managed to find shelter in the doorway of the depot. As he peered around the corner, Ghikadi noticed the disruptor fire growing more distant as the away team grabbed the away sacks and forged deeper into the forest, discharging their weapons into the deep darkness of the forest. Far away, an alien scream interrupted the constant whining of disruptors firing; the away team scored their first hit.

Ghikadi pulled his communicator from a thigh pocket on his pants. He decided not to venture back to the *Determination* but would fall onto 'Plan B'. Flipping open the communicator, he commanded, "Going to 'Plan B'. Meet me at the pre-arranged co-ordinates."

The ambassador turned his sights one last time on the distant away team as they struggled up the slope towards the *Determination* before venturing into the darkness of the forest.

The remaining three members of the away team stumbled into the airlock, all sweating, covered by dirt, breathing heavily. Lieutenant Milami Thall arrived, out of breath, to greet her brother.

The Starfleet security crewwoman dropped the two packs into Milami's arms and walked past. The Bolian chief engineer slid the packs onto the floor and pushed into the airlock.

"Where's Ghikadi?" She confronted Latralis as Bourget ran a medical tricorder over the Kaartali's body. "You split up, right? He's leading the other team?"

"We're all that's left, Lieutenant," Latralis spat. He rubbed his eye as the doctor attempted to run a dermal regenerator over an open flesh wound on his neck. "Sorry. I don't mean to be off-hand."

"I thought my bedside manner was bad," Bourget muttered under her breath. She glanced up from her tricorder readings to scan Milami's mood.

"He disappeared. After the second member of our away team fell, Ghikadi was gone." Latralis shrugged as he tried to keep from releasing his tears. "I don't know what happened to him."

"Major, you're okay." The doctor dismissed Latralis, leaving Milami and Bourget standing alone in the airlock. "He's alive, Lieutenant. Your brother's been in worse situations, I'm sure."

"I keep on saying that to myself," Milami Thall confided. "I just hope I start believing it soon."

Lieutenant Milami Thall swore as the power supply overloaded, but Nate shut it off before the connection could explode. The machinery protested its power drain with a whine.

"Incompatible?" Nate peeked over the console.

"No. More like being impossible." Milami slammed her hyperspanner on the floor. She sighed and ran her hand over her bald head. "I don't know why this ship never wants to cooperate with me."

"Maybe she likes a..."

"Alert: Airlock Three has been compromised."

Milami Thall jumped to her feet. "A man's touch, Wrightson? Stay here." She grabbed a Kaartali disruptor rifle and raced towards the airlock. *Could it be Ghikadi? Or did something more sinister lurk at Airlock Three?*

The chief engineer swung the rifle around the corner, the light humming of the rifle intermingling with her attempt to keep her breathing steady. In the confined area of the lowest deck's corridors, Milami Thall could take no risks.

She followed the corridor to the next junction. The Bolian quickly jugged around the corner to find Lieutenant Lawless and Colonel Vehayz, both pointing their disruptor rifles in her direction. "Don't shoot!" The chief engineer lowered her weapon. "It's just me."

"Come on, Lieutenant," Vehayz ordered, motioning with her rifle for them to continue to the airlock together. "It's right around the corner. Lawless, you take the lead. Thall, you're in behind me."

The trio slowly crept towards the airlock but nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Only a red light flashed at the small computer monitor near the first airlock door. Thall weaved between Lawless and Vehayz, placing her rifle on standby and leaning it against the corridor wall. She punched several commands into the computer.

"Well?" Vehayz surveyed the corridor behind them while waiting the chief engineer's report.

"Nothing." Thall pushed several more commands. "The computer reports that someone with an access code opened the airlock, waited several moments in the airlock and then went outside."

"Open the airlock," Vehayz commanded, waving at it with her rifle. "Keep working on finding out who, Lieutenant."

Milami Thall typed in several more commands and the airlock doors opened.

The other two officers made their way into the small room. The crimson room bore a group of storage lockers full of EVA suits. None of them were missing. Lawless opened a glass locker door and dug through the away team lockers to find two disruptor rifles, two handheld phasers, two tricorders and two away team back packs missing. "Captain." The partial Maori pointed out the missing items.

"Two of each." Vehayz turned to Milami. "Any progress, Lieutenant?"

"Yes." The chief engineer accessed several more commands before a confirmation beep sounded from the computer. "It appears that Ghikadi's two surviving associates left the airlock moments ago."

"Why?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Milami Thall put her hands on her hips. "Ghikadi's used the away team opportunity to mount a rescue attempt for the colonists."

"If they are still alive," Lawless added.

Vehayz shot Lawless a disapproving glare, but she misunderstood his remark to mean the colonists and not the away team.

"That's why I wanted to go myself," the Bolian chief engineer threw at the Kaartali. "So Ghikadi and his cohorts wouldn't gallivant on some side-track mission..."

"Should we go after them?" Lawless started to take another away team pack to sling over his back.

Vehayz considered her next command for several seconds. "No," she concluded. "We've got too few capable officers as is. We need to get this ship off the ground and alert the others." The Kaartali officer glanced over at Milami Thall for her opinion.

"You *are* the commanding officer." The Bolian chief engineer felt torn. On one hand, she understood how deeply Ghikadi cared about their family, and, although afraid to admit it, she felt some level of longing for them as well. But a deeper feeling of dread overcame her; perhaps they were all dead. *Not perhaps*, she surmised, *but most likely*. On the other hand, to avoid that same fate, they needed to get the *Determination* up and running. Her survival was paramount as, if she was alive, she could come back and save the others, if they remained. Milami made her choice. "I concur."

"Good." The Kaartali officer nodded for Lawless to put the away team pack away in storage. "Lieutenant Lawless and I will return to the bridge. Lieutenant, get those systems up and running. Dismissed."

Milami's head swam with the conflict between family and duty. Oh's death and HEIDI's rampage distracted her enough from her work before Ghikadi's self-commanded quest to search out any survivors, but now she wondered how her brother fared. She bit her lip to keep herself situated in the here and now.

The ship shook slightly. "What the hell was that?" The Bolian chief engineer glared over at Wrightson for an answer but he shrugged.

A Kaartali security officer ran into Engineering. He puffed, a disruptor rifle in his hand. "Lieutenant: We're under attack! The colonel wants you to take portable shield generators to her position and Lieutenant Lawless's position outside Airlock Three. I'm to remain here and guard Engineering with Ensign Wrightson."

The butterflies rose in her stomach as she removed a disruptor rifle from the locker and clicked it on. The humming coincided with her nervousness. The Bolian slung the rifle from her shoulder, grabbing two portable shield generators from another storage locker. She turned to face the Kaartali and Starfleet officers. "You keep Ensign Wrightson out of harm's way. Understood?"

"Understood, Lieutenant."

Lieutenant Milami Thall left, thinking of how young both of the officers in Engineering looked.

The chime sounded again, and Captain Turner rushed from the sonic shower in his ready room. "Hold on a second," he called out as he wrapped a robe around him and dashed for the main area of the room. "Come."

The door opened, revealing Ramirez and Fack. The operations manager raised his eyebrows while the counselor nudged Tony in the side. "Um. Er. Sorry to interrupt."

Counselor Fack leaned forward and whispered, "I *told* him you'd be in the shower."

Lieutenant Commander Tony Ramirez avoided looking directly at his commanding officer.

"That's okay." Noel Turner folded his arms. "Report."

"The Vendoth debris we found, we've learned, was from a beacon they left behind. According to the Steranmio officer, the beacon dampened the sensor readings around the area as well as jammed all communications." Ramirez handed Turner the PADD with the data on it and looked at the counselor.

"That's not all," Fack added, his mood now serious. "Admiral Sill reports that there's no signal from the *Fearless* and several ships have reported sensor ghosts in the past few days. And, we're getting no response from either the *Determination* or the New Bolarus colony." His eyes grew wider as he cocked his head slightly. "The admiral did convey that the *Fearless* was on long range sensors, so it may be a malfunction with communications, but..."

"We're not getting any sensor readings of the *Determination*," Ramirez continued from Fack's report. "But we're also experiencing a sensor 'hole' around part of the planet."

"A sensor 'hole'?"

"Lack of data, as if something was blocking the signal or trying to bend the readings around it. We know the planet exists there, but we can't penetrate the area," the second officer reported. "I believe that it might be the Vendoth, sir."

"Understood." Turner tightened the tie on his bathrobe. "Commander: Order helm to take us to the New Bolarus colony, maximum warp. I'll be on the bridge in a moment." The commanding officer stepped back and the door to his ready room slid closed.

The hostiles' weapons struck the side of the *Determination* with great force. Milami deduced they used a disruptor system as well; phasers sounded different. The Bolian pondered the difference in sounds as she rounded the corner to the airlock.

She eased her way towards the airlock. Lieutenant Brendon Lawless crouched beside the airlock door, firing occasionally into the paddock far beyond. The green, long grass obscured the enemy somewhat, but the occasional disruptor blast either hit the frame of the airlock or tore down the corridor.

"Lieutenant," the partially Maori officer screamed over the exchange in weapons as Thall crouched down next to him. "You'll need to take one shield generator and set it up on the right. I'll take the other and set it up on the left."

"These are Starfleet issue," Milami argued back. "They aren't transpolygonal like the *Determination's* shields." She readied one of the generators, and its hum added to the noise of crossfire. "They won't last that long..."

"I know," Brendon answered. "But it'll give us enough cover to wipe them out, hopefully, before the shield generators fail."

The second shield generator hummed to life, and the noise was too much for the duo to talk. Brendon Lawless signed for her to run at the count of three. One finger. Two fingers. Three fingers.

Milami Thall somersaulted out of the airlock and landed on her belly with a thud. She slithered over to Colonel Vehayz, who crouched behind a large rock. Thall pushed the generator in front of her.

"Lieutenant." Vehayz looked relieved to see the Bolian chief engineer as the latter crawled behind the rock. "Set up the generator next to this rock."

"Aye, sir." The Bolian removed the front cover of the generator and a large arm extended itself. Thall punched in several commands and the shields hummed to life. Only seconds later did Lawless's shield generator kick in.

"How many are there?" The chief engineer clutched her rifle and armed it.

Vehayz stepped around the rock, fired, and then ducked back again; she wasn't used to the shields being on. "From the last count, we've got about seven left." The Kaartali colonel nodded at Thall's rifle. "You'll have to set that on level 12; they're extremely thick-skinned."

The chief engineer upped the setting on her rifle. She exhaled twice before swinging around the rock to fire blindly.

The shields crackled with the hostiles' disruptor fire. Milami Thall briefly glimpsed one of the aliens. They appeared short, green-skinned, almost like lizards. She returned to the safe haven of the rock. "Ugly looking things, aren't they?"

Vehayz swung back to the haven as well. "Yes," she agreed as she attempted to get her breath back. She looked up to see the shields gathering a hard layer over them. Milami Thall joined the colonel in gazing at the large solid matter forming. "This is ridiculous," Vehayz said. She grabbed her rifle and started to open fire without worrying about the haven of the rock.

The chief engineer stood and joined her. The disruptors discharged many rounds, and Milami felled two of the green-skinned aliens. Their eyes, even though distant, pierced her, scanning her like an analytical Borg. Their un-Borg-like screams resounded in her ears, and she tried to shut the feelings out of her mind. She needed her analytical nature uncompromised; everyone depended on her to remain calm.

The other officers took down the remainder of the hostiles, and the disruptor fire stopped. The silence hurt Milami's ears.

Vehayz stood in awe; they won this round. "Thall: Reset the shield generators. Maybe the solid matter will dissipate when the shields are down, but I want everyone to stand clear before you shut them down and restart them. Also, supply shield generators around the perimeter of the ship; they'll be our first line of defense and our first warning. Lawless, Retas: Grab one of the dead alien bodies. Take it up to the science lab for the doctor to perform an autopsy." The colonel turned to the chief engineer and blandly stated, "We need to know everything we can about these creatures."

Captain Turner tapped impatiently on his armrest as he rested his head in the other hand. "How long until we arrive?"

Counselor Scott Fack calmly surrounded Turner's tapping hand with his own. "You asked that question only a few moments ago," he whispered.

"Three hours, fifty-four minutes," Ramirez reported from the Operations station. He smirked slightly at Yh'ahni at the Security station.

"Engineering: Give me all the power you've got."

"We can't take her any faster, Captain, without her flying apart..."

"Damn it," the commanding officer slammed his fist on his armrest. "Draw power from life support if you have to!"

"Aye, sir."

"Engineering's reporting a marginal amount of power rerouted to the warp engines," Lieutenant Commander Tony Ramirez sounded from behind Turner.

Captain Noel Turner leaned over to the counselor. "Haven't I always told you there's always more power?"

Fack just agreed, rubbing his temples with his index fingers.

"Increase maximum speed," the commanding officer directed towards the helm.

"Aye, sir." Jonar slid her hand over several sections of her station. "We're now at warp 9.92."

Captain Noel Turner started tapping his fingers again. "How long until we arrive?"

The four gathered in the conference room. Doctor Marie Bourget seemed excited at the opportunity to report her results to the rest of them. Lieutenant Lawless brought one of the hostile's weapons and what appeared to be a tricorder of sorts with him.

"Report," Vehayz stated without a pause as she entered the conference room. None of them opted to sit.

"Well, the computer can't decipher their language," Lawless went first. "It's unlike anything I've ever seen." He turned to the tricorder and the weapon. "And these... don't even get me started on them. They employ technology far beyond our own capacities. I've tried everything I can think of to try and access the alien tricorder but there seems to be a high-level encryption or some sort of biological interface preventing me from getting beyond some of the primary screens." He shrugged. "Sorry captain."

Vehayz turned to Bourget for her report. The doctor appeared eager. "Doctor?"

"This race is extremely... interesting. That is, from an evolutionary standpoint."

Vehayz prompted the doctor to continue.

"Whoever they are, they evolved from a lizard-like ancestor. Their integumentary system – their skin or hide if you will – regulates their body temperature at a far more stable rate than most reptilian species we have encountered." The doctor punched up a schematic on a display screen of the body. "They are cold-blooded, which means they are susceptible to high and low temperatures that don't affect warm-blooded creatures as much. I estimate they wouldn't be able to stand temperatures much lower than negative two degrees Celsius or much higher than fifty degrees Celsius."

"What about their bodies? What can you tell us about them?"

"They seem to be carnivorous. I found meat from an unknown species in one of her stomachs. It appears to be several days old, and their digestive system seems to break down food in two stomachs over a period of a week or so.

"The lieutenant brought a female of the species aboard. She seemed to be barred from having offspring; her reproductive system was shut down by a small implant with an extremely advanced encryption code. This female was about 20 years old, which I would assume would be similar to the human level of development. Females appear to carry eggs much like other cold-blooded species.

"Their blood is orange in color. On analysis, I've found it's more complex than human blood in the fact that their cardiovascular system also functions as a lymphatic system. The blood carries enough lymph-degraders so that large, foreign particles can be broken down."

"In English, Doctor Bourget." Lieutenant Thall surveyed the alien tricorder while she awaited an answer.

"It means, Lieutenant, that they can fight off infections and diseases at an extremely efficient rate." The doctor clasped her hands behind her back.

"Our best hunch," Vehayz spoke up, "seems to be the susceptibility to cold temperatures. We may exploit that if we need to." She nodded at the doctor then turned to Thall. "Lieutenant?"

"Communications and life-support are on-line, thanks to the Bolian parts. The SIF and IDF will be up and running within the next few hours. The interface between the torpedo generators and the impulse engines are proving to be a sticking point, but Ensign Wrightson's working on that with one of your engineers now. I think..."

"Bridge to Captain Vehayz."

"Vehayz here. Go ahead bridge."

"We're receiving a signal from somewhere in the vicinity. It's somewhat garbled but I think we can clear it up."

"We're on our way, Bridge. Vehayz out."

The quartet stormed out of the conference room and onto the bridge.

The viewscreen flickered, static clearing and then worsening. The words made no sense, but Lieutenant Lawless took over from the ensign at the Operations station to strengthen the signal.

The static cleared for the most part, and a Bolian's face appeared on the screen. Milami recognized him immediately. He'd led the colony for many years but rumors abounded that he would be overthrown eventually. She'd never known his fate since they left before they'd had a chance to find out.

"It's only transmitting, Captain. We can't respond." Brendon pushed several more buttons before the sound made sense.

"...know you are there. Ghikadi's made it to us. We're on our way. We estimate our arrival at three metriquads past Terzani. Milami'll know what that means."

Milami sighed in relief at the news of Ghikadi's survival. A smile combined with tears of joy escaped. Vehayz reassured the engineer, a steady hand patting her shoulder.

The transmission ended and started again. The old Bolian calmly repeated his message. *"Determination. We know you are there. Ghikadi's..."*

"The message obviously repeats," Vehayz commented as she leaned over and switched the sound off on the message. She turned to Thall. "Who is he? And how long until they arrive?"

Milami scanned the image on the screen. "I still can't believe he's alive, let alone in control of the colony." She cleared her throat and started. "His name is Rils Narkona. He's the leader of the expedition here."

"And?" Lieutenant Brendon Lawless turned from his station. He sought clarification from the Bolian.

“And three metriquads past Terzani means they’ll be here in approximately four hours from when they recorded that message; they must’ve assumed the hostiles were listening in.” The Bolian engineer paused as she mulled over her knowledge of the Bolian colony’s systems. “There should be a time when it was activated.” Milami Thall glanced over at Vehayz. “I don’t care what anyone else says; there is no way those aliens, no matter how advanced they are, will decipher that. It’s an oral, not recorded, slang term.”

“From what I can tell, the message started transmitting about twenty minutes ago.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, you heard them. We need to be ready in less than four hours. Dismissed.”

Ghikadi Thall watched the large colonist group moving steadily through the forest. After his two companions had arrived, they’d stumbled into the cave housing the thoron generator to find over eighty colonists alive, including Rils Narkona. Ghikadi smiled lightly as he remembered his joy at discovering his father and sister escaped the orbital bombardment. His serious mood returned when Sileon Thall, his father, informed him of the death of his brother, sister-in-law, and nephew. Sileon reassured him they had not suffered, but the look on his father’s face and the change of tone implied otherwise.

The group of blue heads bobbed and ebbed in front of him. He clutched the disruptor rifle close to him before his sister Ikani spoke.

“So what’s Milami like? I barely remember her; I was so young when they left.”

“She’s kind-hearted. Loves her children a lot.” He thought of how he could describe Milami best. He nodded towards Sileon, walking alone several meters in front of them. Raising his voice, Ghikadi commented, “Just as stubborn as her father.”

The remark didn’t elicit the response he wanted.

“Anyway,” the older brother returned to his conversation with his youngest sister. “You’ll meet her soon enough, and you’ll have plenty of time to talk with her yourself.”

The duo watched the wave of Bolians before them, maintaining silence for several meters. “He’s still mad at you for leaving,” Ikani interrupted Ghikadi, deep in thought. She looked down at where she walked.

“I know,” Ghikadi confided but anger boiled within him. “That was years ago, though, ‘Kani.” He thought back on the events of the day he left. Like usual, he and his father exchanged words, but Ghikadi finally acted on his threats. “The Steranmio Alliance held more action than this sleepy colony. I always thought...”

A thump filled their ears. A crackling noise followed another thump, and Ghikadi twisted to find a large tree collapsing behind them. The earth shook as the trunk bounced on the forest floor. Another thump ensued, and Ghikadi gasped as a disruptor discharge cascaded over their heads.

“Run,” he muttered under his breath as he picked up his pace slightly. Ghikadi wrapped his large hand around Ikani’s arm and jumped through the foliage. “Run! Run!”

The thumping echoed throughout the forest as the disruptor fire increased. The Bolian colonists scrambled towards the *Determination*, panicking. As the frightened screams staccatoed amongst the disruptor fire, Ghikadi Thall dragged his sister through the forest, running for his life. No. He ran for all of their lives.

Milami Thall worked frantically at her station. She punched up several schematics to find ways – any ways – available, however remote, to reactivate systems that they might need. The Engineering staff, or rather what remained of them, managed to bring the remaining systems needed on-line. Even after the struggle with adjusting the power between the independent torpedo launcher generators and the impulse engines, Thall and Wrightson had an hour left to work on any systems that might help them escape this planet or defend themselves.

Vehayz assigned whatever resources and manpower she could to Engineering, and Thall decided to use the chance to attempt bringing the shield systems and long-range sensors back on-line. Even if the *Determination* only skimmed the edge of space, the crew would have an opportunity to scan the area for any starships in the system. It could give them a chance to see where exactly the hostile starship was, if in orbit, and where the *Cantabrian* was.

So much had happened in the last, long New Bolarus day. They'd set down on her old home planet. HEIDI, Oh, and many others died or bore injuries. They'd encountered a hostile species. Her family may all be dead.

No news on anyone in her family except Ghikadi, that was. She felt upset that she'd fought with him only to have him run off, gallivanting on some mission to find colonists. But what use would he have done here other than fire a disruptor?

And he was a war machine. He'd survived by aligning himself with the Steranmio in their war and became so trusted he was accepted as one of their own and worked amongst the highest ranks in the Steranmio Defense Ministry. She assumed he could look after himself.

A beeping noise stirred her. The console reported the portable shield generators could be hooked in to replace the warp core power supply for the shields. The problems they faced before with the Kaartali torpedo launcher generators and their interface with the Federation impulse engines could arise again between the Kaartali shield systems and the Federation shield generators, but it was possible nonetheless. She requested the adaptations and equipment be wired up at once.

She smiled. Maybe today would come right after all. And she hoped Ghikadi – and her family, no matter how much she disliked certain members of it – fared well. She had a feeling they were on their way.

Many blue faces appeared on the horizon, the swaying long grass and the large trees behind them framing the group. They appeared rushed, bruised, battered... and something was wrong.

Milami readjusted the shield generators but couldn't hear what the colonists yelling. She scanned the crowd and saw Ghikadi pushing the colonists along and continuing to look over his shoulder. She smiled at him but he didn't see her.

"What's are they saying?" Colonel Vehayz Ca'l searched the colonists for an answer.

Milami shook her head. "I don't know." She pointed at Ghikadi. "Look at how he's looking over his shoulder."

"Something must be coming," the colonel added. She readied her rifle and gestured for the others to ready their rifles as well.

The mass of voices grew clearer as the colonists jumped through the fields. Milami strained to hear what the group shouted.

Suddenly, a large tree swooned into the clearing, its leaves rustling as the trunk thudded against the prairie floor. Weapon fire erupted from the forest beyond the clearing. Some of

the fire slammed into the shields and Milami witnessed several colonists fall victim to the alien discharge. Ghikadi gestured for the colonists to keep low, and the majority of the colonists did. A halo of disruptor fire enshrouded a colonist, her eyes wide as it burrowed into her back. She collapsed.

"We have to help them." The Bolian chief engineer powered up her rifle and aimed at the emerging aliens but felt her arm pulled away. Milami looked up to find Vehayz holding back her arm.

"We have to wait. We could unintentionally hurt or kill someone." The colonel looked to the upper decks of the *Determination*. A battle plan came to her and she tapped her comm.-badge. "Vehayz to all crew: All available officers and crewmembers report armed to Airlock One. Vehayz, out."

Milami Thall prompted her commanding officer for an answer.

"We'll fire uninhibited from the top of the ship. I want you and a few others to stay here to ensure the shield generators stay on-line and to drop the shields once the colonists get here. Understood?"

Milami Thall nodded her head. Alien disruptor fire mowed down a few more Bolian colonists as the majority of Starfleet and Kaartali officer retreated into the *Determination*. An old woman shrieked as a disruptor bolt brushed her side, ripping through her shirt, grazing her skin. A woman who looked similar to Milami's mother scooped the old woman up and rushed her towards the ship.

The aliens' disruptor fire slammed into the shields, and the shield generator near Milami groaned in protest. The chief engineer checked over the readings and squinted up against the sun to see a solid shell starting to form. She glanced across the field, watching her brother herding the colonists towards the starship.

Where are they? Milami Thall glared towards the upper decks of the *Determination*. She turned her attention back to the colonists to see a young woman mowed down. The scream echoed in her ears and tugged at her soul. The woman gasped, sinking into the field. A final arm reached defiantly for the air before returning amongst the grass.

A bolt of disruptor fire leaped from above the *Determination* and landed squarely in the chest of an alien, its uniform and skin bursting outwards. More bolts followed the first one's lead, mowing several of the aliens down. Milami thanked the gods for Vehayz and the others.

A grunt erupted from one of the shield generators, followed by a puff of smoke and a small explosion. An engineer scrambled to work on the generator while a disruptor shot spun a Kaartali engineer to the ground.

The disruptor fire volleyed across the field with a fury like Milami never witnessed before. She leaned against the large rock to ensure the reality of these events. *Ghikadi. Was Ghikadi still alive?*

He charged through the wild grass at the back of the group, still safe. Milami steadied her hand, perched above the generator's control panel.

The exchange of fire escalated into a panicked frenzy. Several aliens slumped as the disruptor beams struck them in the chest, in the arm, in the head. But for every fallen alien, ten more marched into the field. They poured from the depths of the forest into the clearing.

The first of the colonists arrived, and Milami Thall scrambled to drop the shields. Her hands unsteady, she shook at the thought of their vulnerability. With the shields down and the colonists pouring through the area, she directed them to the airlock while the others on the *Determination* laid cover fire.

A disruptor beam struck a male colonist. He gasped for air, his arm outstretched as he sunk into the field.

“Hurry to the airlock,” Milami Thall ordered as she gently urged the colonists along. She looked between the streaming colonists to glimpse Ghikadi in the distance. *What was he doing?* “Hurry along to the airlock.”

Her brother turned back, witnessing two screaming Bolian children; a boy fell and an older girl tried to help him up. Milami could read the girl’s lips: “My brother! Help us!”

Ghikadi crawled back to the duo, the disruptor fire wildly searing over his head. Calmly, he ducked below the disruptor fire and calmly analyzed the situation. Ghikadi scooped the boy into his arms and gestured for the girl to remain low in front of him. The boy’s leg twisted at an unnatural angle, and his face was streaked with tears.

The last of the colonists made their way into the safe haven of the shield wall. Milami witnessed her father and her mother’s likeness in the distance, both glancing over their shoulders to glimpse Ghikadi between the disruptor fire and aliens.

Milami pulled her disruptor rifle close to her chest and joined the firefight. She failed to think about her morality; she needed him to survive. For the peace, they needed him to survive. Her children needed him to survive.

Ghikadi struggled towards his sister as she planted a shot into the chest of another alien, its wound pumping orange blood in an arc as it collapsed. A shot struck another alien’s head, twisting it at an unnatural angle, orange blood spraying. Another alien screamed in agony as her shot sheered its arm off. Milami Thall, unfeeling, methodically, calculating, fired into the wild sea of aliens fast approaching the *Determination*.

Milami clutched the girl by her shirt and threw her behind the safety of the rock. She discarded her disruptor and wrapped her hand around Ghikadi’s arm. Her brother’s eyes bore determination mixed with fear as he handed her the boy. She planted the boy in the shadow of the rock as the sizzle of a disruptor striking flesh filled her ears, and her brother’s eyes widened as a line of blue blood and an extended gurgle escaped his mouth.

Milami Thall screamed as her brother slumped into her arms, a weeping disruptor burn sizzling on his back.

Through the open airlock meters away, Sileon Thall felt his daughter’s scream pierce his soul. He jumped against the tide of the crowd and struggled through them.

“Papa? What’s wrong?” Ikani Thall called after her father and saw him through the masses of Bolians and Federations and Kaartali disappear around the corner. The second youngest child of Sileon pushed her way through the crowd, pursuing her father. “Papa,” she yelled over the excited mumblings of the crowd. “Papa! Where are you going?”

The shields buckled under the firepower from the aliens, but Milami only cared about cradling her older brother. The two children shrieked and cried in horror, clutching each other behind the rock, while the small group of Starfleet and Kaartali officers on the ground retreated into the *Determination*.

Through her tears, Milami realized two familiar faces moving quickly towards her. She pulled Ghikadi closer to her chest as the woman who looked like her mother gasped and recoiled, pulling her fists to her face and swinging away.

Sileon remained calm and kneeled beside his daughter. He ran his hand over her smooth head, reassuring her. “Ami. We need to get Ghikadi inside. The medics can help him there.”

She shook her head and leaned it against Ghikadi's. She rocked him as if she was singing a lullaby to one of her children. "It's too late, Papa. It's too late."

Sileon's calm manner gave way to irrational panic. Shaking, he rested his hand on Ghikadi's slumped head. Moving his mouth to Ghikadi's ear, Sileon whispered, "I forgive you, son." The tears rolled down his cheeks. "I forgive you."

Captain Noel Turner perched on the edge of the command chair, leaning his elbows on his knees. They'd pushed the *Cantabrian* to the limit but made it to New Bolarus at a record speed.

"We're approaching the New Bolarus system, Captain." Commander Ramirez exhaled nervously. "Sensors still foggy in that same area of the planet."

"Drop us out of warp, Lieutenant Jonar." Captain Turner jumped to his feet, crossing his arms. The sudden image of New Bolarus dominating the viewscreen startled the commanding officer. He attempted to regain his composure as he scanned for the Vendoth. "Raise shields and declare red alert, Lieutenant Yh'ahni."

The red alert beacons ebbed, casting an eerie light in several areas of the bridge. The silence of the crew, interrupted once or twice by the chirping of a console interface, set Turner on edge. The planet loomed larger on the viewscreen.

"There," the counselor pointed out a small speck from his seat. "They're there."

"Can you sense them?" The commanding officer squinted at the growing dot as Counselor Fack rose and joined Turner at his side. "Could you...?" He looked over at his partner.

"Could I... what?" The counselor propped his hands on his hips. "You mean read their minds? Control them?" He shook his head. "I don't know. I can sense them, but controlling them is asking me to commit mental rape..."

Captain Turner sighed as the dot morphed into a barely visible ship. "What can you sense?"

The counselor's eyes unfocused as he attempted to establish contact. He recoiled slightly at the connection but relaxed as he adjusted to the visions.

They flashed before him at various rates, and Fack sought out one mind, one that would betray their mission. He prowled through the minds, one by one, to hunt down the leader.

Tony Ramirez broke the silence. "Captain: sensors indicate the vessel in orbit of the planet is a Vendoth ship." He awaited instructions.

"They're breaking orbit," Yh'ahni added calmly from tactical. She replied to a beeping signal from her console. "Their weapons are charging and shields are up."

Turner pointed at the helm. "Jonar: Evasive action." The commanding officer calmly grabbed the semi-tranced counselor and guided him back to his station. "I need," he whispered, "to know about them..."

Fack shook as he eased into his seat, his eyes quivering. "They." He searched for the right words. "I can only see images, brief snippets of things." He shook his head. "I can't control them."

"Easy, Scott," Noel Turner calmed Fack.

"They've discharged their weapons!"

"Brace for impact," Turner ordered as he clasped his armrests. The *Cantabrian* shuddered slightly as the disruptor fire sprayed across their shields. "Return fire!"

"Shields are at 92 percent." Lieutenant Yh'ahni moved to a different part of her station. "Phasers and photon torpedoes had limited effect on the Vendoth vessel."

"They've been offended," Fack suddenly offered. "They believe their society is the pinnacle of all societies. The Federation... No. A Starfleet ship interfered with their control over another planet..."

"Which ship?" Turner watched the Vendoth ship arching for another pass on the viewscreen out of the corner of his eye. "Open fire!"

The phasers and photon torpedoes jumped forward and impacted at various points on the Vendoth shields. "Limited effect, again," Yh'ahni commented from tactical.

"I don't know." Counselor Scott Fack slowly shook his head. "I can see other starships. Past. Present. Future. Alternate." He closed his eyes and focused deeper.

"Ramirez: Gather a team and assemble on the *Peacekeeper*." Captain Noel Turner comforted the counselor as the Vendoth weapons impacted. "Try seeing what effect phaser cannons and Kaartali ingenuity has on the Vendoth..."

"Aye, sir." The second officer pointed at several crewmembers on the bridge and motioned for them to join him in the turbolift.

"Earth." Fack opened his eyes, horrified. "This ship was en route to Earth but fell through some temporal vortex into Steranmio Alliance territory. They've destroyed..." He concentrated on the visions. "...several Steranmio starships. Passenger ships. Military ships. They found the Bolians through one of the passenger ships and intended on destroying the surface of the planet." He looked deep into Turner's eyes. "They forced the *Determination* to land. Tried to divide and conquer. Half of their crew are on the planet's surface, hunting for the *Determination*. They'll lead us to fight in low orbit of the planet and drive us to the surface as well. And we'll become their next prey..."

Turner patted Fack on the shoulder. "Break off the link, Scott. We've got enough." The *Cantabrian* shuddered again. "Return fire!"

"Sir." Yh'ahni piped up from the tactical station. "Our weapons aren't having much effect. I suggest we try quantum torpedoes?"

"Do it," Captain Turner confirmed. He steadied himself as another blast hit the ship. A computer station on the port side ruptured, the explosion sending two crewmembers to the floor. The quantum torpedoes impacted the Vendoth shields with a little more success than the regular torpedoes.

"Medic to the bridge." The counselor rushed to help the crewmen.

"The *Peacekeeper*'s departed," the ensign at operations confirmed.

The deck shook violently again as the medic disembarked the turbolift. Another blast impacted the shields and another station exploded in protest. A ceiling panel groaned and cracked, sparks raining down, the contents dangling over the bridge.

"Shields down to 58 percent!" Yh'ahni tapped frantically at her station.

"The matter on the starboard shields is slowing us down." Jonar searched for maneuvering options at the flight control station.

“Arm quantum torpedoes and fire,” Turner yelled over the rumbling of the *Cantabrian*. “We’ve got to find a way to stop their weapons from solidifying our shields.”

Another blast answered the commanding officer, and he found himself staring at the carpet. “We definitely need to find a way to stop those damned disruptors.”

“Everyone’s aboard,” Lieutenant Brendon Lawless signaled from his station. “Security reports all airlocks are closed and secured.”

“*The external shield generators are failing,*” Nate Wrightson reported from Engineering. “*Now’s the best time to get away, Captain.*”

“Understood, Engineering.” Colonel Vehayz Ca’l sunk back into the captain’s chair and rerouted her station to the arm console. She punched up the tactical information as well as some communications commands. “Helm: Atmospheric thrusters to full. Follow these coordinates.”

“Yes, sir.”

The thrusters fired and the deck shuddered with the vibrations of the ship straining against New Bolarus’s gravity. As the trees fell away and the viewscreen filled with blue sky, Colonel Vehayz sighed in relief.

The *Starship Cantabrian* veered to avoid the disruptor fire but the fourth shot clipped the shields. The experimental support *Starship Peacekeeper* danced in front of the *Cantabrian*, the phaser cannons blaring across the Vendoth shields.

The scab on the *Cantabrian*’s side continued to grow, but the *Peacekeeper*’s phaser assault started a scab on the Vendoth shields.

“The *Peacekeeper*’s making progress.” Yh’ahni’s voice could barely mask the excitement. “Their shields are converting to matter. I still can’t raise them on communications, though.”

“Find a way to free up communications,” the commanding officer wiped the grime from his face. “We’ll take the Vendoth down if it’s the last thing we do...”

Lieutenant Milami Thall peered out the viewport as the New Bolarus colony fell away, the glowing blue horizon giving way to the darkness of space. “Thank the spirits,” the Bolian engineer sighed. Vehayz wanted her to take a break from things, with the loss of Ghikadi, but Milami convinced her commanding officer the *Determination* needed her in Engineering.

The Bolian chief engineer wiped away her tears, cleared her throat, and entered Engineering. Nate Wrightson and Latralis worked vigilantly, rushing around the small room.

Wrightson glanced up from a console and smiled. “Lieutenant. It’s great to see you. We need your help.”

Lieutenant Milami Thall erased Ghikadi’s death from her mind for now as she took a seat at the main engineering console. There could be a battle brewing soon.

“I’m reading the *Cantabrian*, the *Peacekeeper*, and the hostile starship engaged in orbit,” Lieutenant Brendon Lawless exclaimed. “We can only maintain a low orbit for three cycles...”

“What’s their status?” The colonel pondered their options.

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"The *Cantabrian's* sustained moderate damage." Lawless scanned over more of the sensor data. "The *Peacekeeper's* suffered light damage and seems to be causing the alien starship some grief." The Maori smiled over his shoulder at Vehayz. "Seems at least the *Peacekeeper's* keeping them at bay."

This isn't a time for celebrations, Vehayz decided. "Contact the *Cantabrian*. Let them know we're here."

Lawless clicked his tongue as his station sounded. "No effect. The alien hostiles are still jamming communications."

Colonel Vehayz Ca'l grinned at her ingenuity as she input commands at her armrest console. "Loading one photon torpedo in the starboard torpedo launcher. Setting it to detonate at a safe distance..."

Lieutenant Brendon Lawless turned from his station. "Sending up a flare. Very impressive."

Colonel Vehayz raised one eyebrow as she finished loading the torpedo. "I thought so." She turned her attention to the viewscreen, the planet rotating bright below them. "Firing now..."

"Sir, I'm detecting a photon torpedo detonation in low orbit of the planet." Lieutenant Yh'ahni's face betrayed her perplexity. "All of our torpedoes are accounted for..."

"The *Peacekeeper*?"

"She's not using torpedoes, sir." Yh'ahni squinted at her console. "Just phaser cannons..."

"The *Determination*?" The counselor glanced over at Captain Turner. "If communications are down, maybe they're sending us a signal?"

"I'm reading a small starship in low orbit," the ensign at Operations interjected. "It's badly damaged, but visual configuration seems to be similar to the *Determination*."

Turner steadied himself as he rose from the command chair. He stepped along side of Jonar at the flight control station, leaning on the station for support as the *Cantabrian* continued to protest. "Take us within distance to tractor beam them in." He glanced at the viewscreen, watching the images of the *Peacekeeper* pounding the Vendoth shields leaving the screen to find the planet once again dominating.

The badly damaged *Determination* appeared small on the screen. Turner pushed several buttons on the flight control station to prepare the tractor beam. "Tactical: Be prepared to drop shields. Sickbay: Prepare for casualties."

"Sir," the Operations ensign interrupted. "The Vendoth ship is in pursuit."

"We're going to have to time this just right," Captain Turner confided to Jonar.

The hybrid Trill nodded and returned her attention to her station. "I'm laying in several escape options so we don't end up on the surface." She closed the menu and opened her helm controls. Glancing up at the viewscreen, Jonar added, "We're within range."

Turner waved his left hand. "Drop shields."

"Shields dropped."

"Tractor beam engaged," he confirmed from his place beside the flight controller.

"The Vendoth ship is opening fire." Yh'ahni tapped commands at the tactical station, the fear apparent in her face. "Twenty seconds until impact..."

"C'mon," Turner urged the viewscreen. "Come on..."

"Fifteen..."

The *Determination* slowly moved closer to the *Cantabrian*, the blue rays casting an eerie light over the small hybrid starship.

"C'mon..."

"Ten."

The various members of the bridge crew braced themselves for impact. Counselor Fack pushed hard against his armrest.

"Five."

"Hurry up, *Determination*."

"Four."

"Brace for impact!"

"Three."

"They're within shield parameters!" The Operations ensign sounded nervous.

"Shields up!"

The impact sent most of the bridge officers to the floor, and several of the computers erupted, spewing shrapnel and sparks across the bridge. A ceiling bulkhead crumpled, one end crashing to the deck while the other remained fastened to the wall. The *Cantabrian* groaned in protest, the sound of twisting metal filling the bridge.

Captain Noel Turner flipped onto his back, noticing Jonar still perched at her station.

"Lieutenant Jonar: Get us out of here."

The view of the full planet swung away and stars replaced it. The Vendoth starship appeared for several seconds as the *Cantabrian* circled, but it disappeared again.

The displaced officers scrambled towards their stations. The Operations ensign tossed her stray hairs back and reported, "We've got hull breaches on decks four and five. Emergency teams are responding. And, the *Determination* has docked safely." She smiled. "They're reporting sixty-two colonists aboard."

"The injured are en route to Sickbay, including Commander Singh," Counselor Fack added from his station.

The turbolift opened, and Lieutenant Brendon Lawless and Colonel Vehayz Ca'l disembarked.

Turner faced the aft stations from the flight control station. His face bore a seriousness none of them had seen before as he moved to the command circle. The counselor rose from his station, searching Turner's face for an answer.

"Counselor." Turner's voice remained low and controlled. "I want you to take the saucer section and get the civilians out of here..."

"But..." The counselor protested.

"Scott..." Noel Turner looked down and shook his head; he didn't want to argue.

"Noel, I'm not..." Scott pursued the matter.

The commanding officer glared at the counselor. "That's an order, Commander. Do I make myself clear?"

Counselor Scott Fack swallowed. "Perfectly, sir."

Turner nodded. "Yh'ahni, Jonar, Lawless, Vehayz: You're with me." He rushed towards the emergency turbolift to the Battle Bridge, tapping his communicator. "All hands: Prepare for emergency separation sequence."

"Come back safe," Scott Fack whispered as he sank into the command chair.

"Understood." Captain Noel Turner winked at the counselor, and the turbolift doors closed.

Lieutenant Milami Thall, Ensign Nate Wrightson and Major Latralis emerged from the docking area as the *Cantabrian* shuddered again. Thall noticed her father and sister waiting in the corridor for her. "Get to Main Engineering," she ordered Wrightson and Latralis.

"Papa, Ikani." The Bolian chief engineer gestured for them to follow her. "I need you to make your way to the school on deck nine on the saucer section. Tariel, Eleia and Saquia will be there." She reassured her father as the deck shook again and the sound of metal grating filled the air. "They know who you are, Papa. They'll recognize you." Milami Thall moved towards Wrightson's exit. "I'll be in Main Engineering if you need me."

The chief engineer left Sileon and Ikani Thall dumbstruck in the middle of the corridor.

"Captain," an eager ensign at the helm of the *Peacekeeper* reported. "The Vendoth shields on their forward section have been completely turned to matter."

"Good," Ramirez leaned forward in the command chair. "Tactical: Penetrate the matter shield and target photon torpedoes to enter the breach and destroy primary systems."

"Aye, sir," the Kaartali tactical officer sounded.

"We're coming around for another go," the helm ensign continued as the matter shield of the Vendoth ship centered on the viewscreen.

"Fire." Ramirez rose to watch the phaser cannons crack the matter shield until a breach appeared. Satisfied, he nodded at the tactical officer.

"Torpedoes away," the Kaartali officer confirmed.

The torpedoes flew into the breach and swept into separate two separate arcs, one above, one below. The dorsal torpedo slammed into the Vendoth ship, the system it hit exploding. The second torpedo tore a large hole in one of the nacelles, and plasma leaked freely from the wound.

The Vendoth ship shuddered but attempted to swerve away.

The helmsman maintained alignment of the *Peacekeeper* with the breach in the matter shield.

The tactical officer unleashed two more torpedoes.

Commander Ramirez smiled.

Lieutenant Brendon Lawless swung the emergency Operations console over his lap and input commands. "Captain, the *Peacekeeper's* managed to puncture the matter shield and deploy torpedoes inside the shield perimeter, damaging the Vendoth ship." He spun to face Captain Turner taking his place in the command chair on the Battle Bridge. "The *Peacekeeper's* maintaining its position in the 'blind spot' the matter shield presents."

"Good," the commanding officer returned. "We should try and use that to our advantage as well." He swiveled his chair to face Jonar at the helm. "Lieutenant?"

"*Emergency separation sequence engaged,*" the computer sounded as Lieutenant Tawana Jonar smiled at her station.

Captain Noel Turner grinned for a moment. "Always a step ahead, Jonar." The *Cantabrian* shook slightly as more Vendoth weapons impacted, wiping the grin off Turner's face.

"*Separation sequence stage one: Independent operating systems on-line. Docking clamps released.*"

The darkness on the viewscreen started to fade as the saucer section released. Sunlight and reflective light from the planet seeped into the growing divide between the two sections of the ship.

"Helm," Turner commanded. "Once we've cleared, take us to position 265 mark 265. Tactical: lay down cover fire for the saucer's escape once they've cleared."

"Understood." Yh'ahni steadied herself with one hand on the tactical station while typing in commands with the other.

"*Separation sequence stage two: Docking clamps retracted. Minimal safe distance acquired.*"

"Now!"

The saucer section quickly disappeared from the viewscreen as the *Cantabrian* wildly veered down and left. The Vendoth starship moved into view, several areas of the ship glowing and hot with fresh battle scars, but no matter shields impeded the firing power of either ship.

Several quantum torpedoes barrelled towards the top of the Vendoth starship as hostile disruptor shots randomly escaped from various ports along the frontal view.

The stardrive section of the *Cantabrian* groaned in protest as the disruptor fire danced across the shields. Jonar attempted to steer the ship to avoid the fire, and the section rolled, planting phaser fire across the side of the Vendoth starship's shields.

The computer bay exploded, several covers catapulting across the Battle Bridge. Smoke bellowed from the exposed conduits.

"Shields down to 48 percent." Yh'ahni wiped the blood from her mouth; the collision with her console had been sudden and violent.

"The Vendoth starship's pursuing the saucer section." Lawless's hands danced across his station. "Some of their systems are failing, but I can't make out which; their ship is heavily shielded."

The stardrive section aligned with the Vendoth starship again. The *Peacekeeper* released a volley of weapons into the breach, the torpedoes ripping holes in the Vendoth ship.

Captain Turner perched on his command chair. An idea came to him. "Lawless: Ready the tractor beam..."

Counselor Scott Fack peeled himself off the deck. The skeleton crew scurried around the bridge, attempting to patch up failing systems.

Fack crawled to the helmsman, placing his two fingers over the Vulcan ensign's neck: dead.

The saucer section heaved again, a sound of sheering metal filling the bridge.

The counselor pulled himself up the flight control station. Inputting several commands, he ordered, "Tactical: Fire weapons!"

The tactical officer yelled over the rumbling. "I can't, sir! Emergency torpedo tubes are down! Phasers are fused!"

"Manually launch the torpedoes if you have to," the counselor barked over his shoulder. "Shove them out the airlock. Anything!" He pounded on the helm station. "Work, damn you!"

The computer sounded in protest. "*Unable to comply. A large amount of matter is blocking the emergency nacelles' ability to form a stable warp bubble.*"

Fack rose from the flight control station, pushing a replacement command crewwoman down at the helm. "Take evasive action, Chief!" He charged to the command chair and threw himself into its safety, securing himself against the wild shaking of the deck.

"Torpedo control reports manual release occurring," the tactical officer bellowed over the rumbling. "Shields are at 28 percent!"

Commander Scott Fack thought about the M'Tar and how he hoped they could save the day. *Not good dreaming about your worst enemy, he considered, but at least they had an invested interest in me.*

Another blast aroused him from his daydream, and he seriously considered ordering the saucer be abandoned.

"We're in position." The partially Maori officer worked on a rear station of the Battle Bridge as the fire inside the Operations station, visible through the flower-like opening on the top, died down.

"Good." Captain Noel Turner punched up a submenu on his armrest monitor. "Engaging tractor beam."

The tractor beam locked on to a large area of the Vendoth's matter shield, and the *Cantabrian* stardrive section hummed at the strain.

"Helm: Reverse engines! Full power!"

The sound of the ship's engines protesting boomed throughout the bridge.

"We're holding position," Jonar confirmed. She glanced up at the shaking viewscreen then returned to her station. "I don't know how long we can hold them, though."

"Try for as long as you can, Lieutenant," the commanding officer ordered as he clutched his armrest. "As long as you can."

Lieutenant Milami Thall could barely hear herself thinking over the warp core's loud objections. She yelled for Wrightson, but he didn't hear her, so she moved to him at his console.

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"We need to reroute all available power to the impulse engines," the Bolian chief engineer screamed over the noise.

"I've given her all the power I can," he answered back, his voice straining.

"Work your magic, Mr. Wrightson," Thall commanded. She patted him on the shoulder. "I can't work in this noise, Ensign. I'm going to the Battle Bridge. If you need me, call me there."

Nate Wrightson didn't even bother to respond; he just shook his head in agreement.

"The stardrive section's holding the Vendoth starship back," the tactical officer laughed from his station. "The Vendoth weapons are losing accuracy."

"Good." The counselor turned commanding officer of the saucer section sighed in relief. "Drop shields and get rid of that damned matter. Once we're clear, helm, get us out of here. Warp three."

The nervous crewwoman at the helm, overwhelmed with joy, could only nod in response.

"Target their impulse drive," Ramirez ordered as he rested an arm on the bulkhead. He towered over the Kaartali seated at the tactical station.

"I've located what appears to be their main impulse generators." The Kaartali waved his hands over the station and input several more commands. "I've targeted them."

Tony Ramirez focused his attention on the viewscreen. "Fire."

"The saucer section's gone to warp," Lawless confirmed from the aft station. His voice held excitement, as if the tide might finally be turned.

Yh'ahni cleared her throat and scratched at the dry blood at the corner of her mouth. "Tactical sensors show the *Peacekeeper's* firing four torpedoes."

"Tractor beam holding?" Captain Turner steadied himself at the rail surrounding the command circle.

"Yes, sir," Jonar confirmed, one hand wrapping itself at the top of the helm station.

The turbolift doors hissed open, startling them all. Lieutenant Milami Thall stepped onto the Battle Bridge. "It's just me."

"You seem to be saying that a lot lately," Vehayz chimed in from another bridge station.

"What brings you to the Battle.."

The officers fell to the deck as the stardrive section violently jolted. The increased humming of various equipment indicated a large power spike.

On her knees, Jonar tapped the helm station. "The impulse engines on the Vendoth ship have been destroyed."

Turner pulled himself into the command chair. Huffing, he ordered, "All stop. Bring us about!"

The rumbling stopped, presenting an eerie silence. Another explosion illuminated the screen as a torpedo struck the other nacelle. The Battle Bridge crew faced the viewscreen.

"Surely, all their propulsion systems must be down by now," Lawless commented.

Yh'ahni wiped the blood from a cut on her face. "I do not think my body can take many more bumps and bruises," she muttered.

"Strange." Lieutenant Milami Thall mulled over sensor data streaming in from the other ship. "I'm reading a large build-up of energy between their nacelles. No. Large build-up of energy in several parts of the Vendoth ship, like..."

Captain Turner's eyes widened. "A self-destruct sequence."

"I wonder if the *Peacekeeper* detects it." Brendon Lawless noticed the small ship ejecting several more torpedoes through the breach in the matter shield.

Two large explosions, followed by several smaller explosions, punctured the Vendoth starship. The glowing shield surrounding the starship dissipated, and the converted matter floated away.

"Their shields are down, and their weapon systems appear to be off-line." Yh'ahni glanced up from her station. "Now's our chance."

Turner returned to the command chair. "Jonar: Move us within transporter range of the Vendoth ship."

"What?" Colonel Vehayz Ca'l darted from the upper aft stations to the command circle. "That's an extremely bad tactical move, Captain."

Captain Turner rose from the command chair. "I don't think I gave you permission to speak freely, Colonel."

"Should we extend an invitation for cups of tea?" Vehayz folded her arms defiantly. "I'm sorry, sir, but they are a threat and should be destroyed."

Lieutenant Lawless leaned over the rail. "You're out of line, Colonel..."

The commanding officer stopped Lawless. He spoke calmly. "They've committed an act of war against us, Colonel, I agree, but that does not allow us to become their judge, their jury or their executioner." Captain Noel Turner brushed her aside gently. "Lieutenant Yh'ahni: Prepare to drop shields. Have your teams convert cargo bays four through eight into make-shift brigs."

"Sir," Milami Thall interjected. "I have a suggestion."

Captain Turner glanced at Vehayz and then Milami. "Let's hear it, Lieutenant."

"Lieutenant Lawless said their computer systems were very advanced. What if our technology is basic to them?" Lieutenant Thall made her way down to the command circle. "They'd be loose on the ship in no time."

"It would be a tactical nightmare," Yh'ahni confirmed. "The Starfleet files we had indicated the Vendoth's technological superiority, and that every time the other crews tried to outsmart the Vendoth, even with fractal encryption codes and the like, the Vendoth would overcome the obstacles relatively easily."

"I get the point," Captain Turner raised his hands to indicate a stop. "What do you suggest, Lieutenant Thall? I assume you have a plan?"

"Yes," Milami Thall smiled uneasily. She nodded at Vehayz. "Actually, it was Vehayz's suggestion earlier that made me think about it."

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Vehayz relaxed slightly.

“Doctor Bourget, after she performed the autopsy on a Vendoth corpse, indicated they were reptilian and therefore cold-blooded.” She glanced over at the viewscreen and then back at Captain Turner. “Couldn’t we lower the temperature in the cargo bays and dim the lights, sending the Vendoth into a sort of hibernation?”

Captain Turner pondered the idea then snapped his fingers. “Good thinking.” He pointed at Vehayz, Lawless and Thall. “You three convert the cargo bays; it shouldn’t take too long.”

The three nodded their heads and returned to their stations.

“Lieutenant Yh’ahni: Time to their self-destruction?” Captain Turner returned his attention to see three more small explosions on the Vendoth ship.

Her station beeped. “The build-up will reach critical mass in two minutes. And communications have been re-established with the *Peacekeeper*.”

“Put me through,” the commanding officer gestured at the screen. Lieutenant Commander Tony Ramirez appeared on the screen.

“Captain, the Vendoth starship’s on auto-destruct,” Turner conveyed. “We’re beaming the survivors to the *Cantabrian* for holding until a Steranmio court of law can conduct a hearing.”

“*But...*” Ramirez’s face clouded with worry.

“No ‘buts’, Tony.” Turner’s smile reassured the second officer. “We know what we’re up to. *Cantabrian* out.”

The image of the Vendoth starship reappeared on the screen. The *Peacekeeper* spiraled around the ship twice before heading off screen.

“Cargo bay conversion completed, Captain,” Thall confirmed. “Temperature at – 20 Celsius.”

“I’ve locked down all systems in the bays.” Lawless’s hands met behind his back.

Vehayz punched her final commands into her station. “I’ve erected level 9 forcefields to confine the Vendoth in.”

“Lieutenant Yh’ahni: Have security teams report to the cargo bays.” Captain Turner swung around to face the crew at the back of the bridge. “Lieutenant Thall: Use the emergency transporters to beam the survivors aboard.”

“Energizing,” Lieutenant Milami Thall moved her hands to operate the several transporters at once. “30 percent complete...”

The make-shift Operations station chirped. Lawless turned his attention to a specific read-out. “The Vendoth starship has reached critical mass. Self-destruct in progress...”

“78 percent complete,” Thall continued.

Jonar moved the *Cantabrian* back enough to avoid the initial discharge but within transporter range. Several explosions buckled the Vendoth ship’s hull plating, while others melted the plating to an atomic level.

“I’ve got them all. Shutting transporters down.”

“Get us out of here, Jonar!”

The exploding Vendoth ship veered off the screen as they swung away. The planet zoomed closer and closer in the viewscreen as the *Cantabrian* shuddered violently with the destruction of the Vendoth ship. The shaking decreased as New Bolarus dominated the viewscreen.

“Entering orbit of New Bolarus, Captain.” Lieutenant Jonar converted her station to orbital mode.

“Lieutenant Lawless: you have the bridge.” Captain Noel Turner moved towards the turbolift. “Colonel, Lieutenant Yh’ahni: you’re with me.”

A team of nervous security officers flitted outside cargo bay four, holding their compression phaser rifles as if their breathing depended on them. One spotted Captain Turner and his team approaching, bearing their own compression rifles, and sighed in relief.

The commanding officer sailed through the parting group of security officers and stepped up to the control panel outside the cargo bay. He entered several commands, then glanced over at the security team leader. “Status, ensign?”

“Most of the hostiles entered hibernation as soon as they encountered the cargo bay’s environment, sir.” The young Napean woman readjusted her grip on her phaser rifle as she inhaled. “There are a few still with limited movement, but not enough to threaten us, sir. The transporter filtered out any weapons they had on them.”

“Good.” Noel Turner motioned for the Napean officer to move to his position. She fulfilled his order.

“Colonel Vehayz, Lieutenant Yh’ahni and I will enter the cargo bay.” He nodded at the security team leader. “Ensign: you and your team stay out here. First sign of trouble, come in with guns blazing. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Open the bay door.”

The cargo bay doors ground open, and the icy air struck them. Colonel Vehayz watched her breath crystallize as she exhaled. The trio stormed into the bay.

One of the Vendoth moved sluggishly, almost appearing as if he flailed from a phaser shot in slow motion. His eyes glazed over, he struggled to blink, but a deep, ancient hatred swam in his eyes. His innate uniform, covered in exotic and decorative war medals, bore small icicles, and even they seemed to mock him.

Turner trained his phaser rifle on the slow Vendoth and crept slowly towards him. The commanding officer gestured for Yh’ahni and Vehayz to check the others.

He came within a meter of the Vendoth and decided the distance was close enough for his liking.

The Vendoth’s mouth opened, hot steam escaping. Turner strained to hear if the alien said anything, so he crept a few centimeters closer.

“We... shall...” The Vendoth labored to force the words out. “Be... avenged... Federation...” With the last word, he hissed the last syllable until his body seized up. He shuddered slightly as his eyes focused distantly, the hatred ebbing away.

Captain Turner lowered his rifle. “We’ll see about that...”

HOWL

Captain's Log, Stardate 53187.4: We've rendezvoused with the *USS Prospect*, who have been kind enough to leave several engineering teams aboard to assist with repairs while they transport the Vendoth prisoners to the Steranmio homeworld. We swept the New Bolarus colony to beam up any stray Vendoth, and sensors indicate we've incarcerated the lot. To be honest, I've seen enough Vendoth to last me a lifetime.

Commander Singh recovered fully after suffering moderate head injuries during her encounter with the Vendoth. She's scheduled to return to active duty this afternoon, although I have a sinking feeling she's probably avoiding me while she joins in the repair effort "off the clock".

Lieutenant Lawless and Colonel Vehayz are working on restoring HEIDI's systems aboard the *Cantabrian* until a replacement holographic control system can be installed in the *Determination*. I've sent Counselor Fack to the *Determination's* docking bay for support.

I've granted Lieutenant Thall and her family access to the planet to pay tribute to her fallen brothers. She's not only mourning the death of Ghikadi but also the death another brother, Fe'mek, her sister-in-law Sileia, and her nephew Fe'ran, all of whom, I am lead to believe, met a horrible end.

I've forwarded my report to Admiral Sill, but we have no way of warning Earth. After the M'Tar stranded us here nearly a year ago, we've had no regular contact with Starfleet. I hope, for all our sake, the fleet's built up and can handle another conflict with a potentially deadly enemy.

Mulling over the list of the dead – Brendon handed the PADD to me and said, "We lost quite a few people" – I can't help but feel we've lost too many people. 42 Starfleet personnel, 17 Kaartali personnel, and 28 civilians. Ensign Oh, Lieutenant Senegal, Commander Izvornikova, Fe'ran Thall... the list scrolls on. Among those, Ghikadi Thall, the man who led the Steranmio and Pilmarians to the brink of peace.

Maybe Counselor Fack *did* pick the most fitting epitaph for the monument on New Bolarus: "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness..." I can't help but agree.

Lieutenant Brendon Lawless fiddled with an isolinear chip. He removed it and planted it into another slot. The machine hummed to life, and he pulled himself off the ground to access the controls. "Now let's try it."

"Are you sure she'll be okay?" Colonel Vehayz Ca'l folded her arms.

Counselor Scott Fack nodded his head. "That's what I'm here for. Just in case."

Brendon peered up from the mobile console in the middle of the bay. "Are we ready?"

The counselor tugged his uniform coat down. "Yes. Colonel?"

Vehayz agreed and swallowed.

The Kaartali hologram fizzed, static appearing at first followed by an immobile HEIDI.

"I'm inputting her back-up file that we saved before she left on the *Determination*." Lawless tapped a few commands into the workstation.

HEIDI blinked several times and turned to Colonel Vehayz. "Colonel: I thought we were departing aboard the *Determination*. Has there been a change of plans?"

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Vehayz cleared her throat. "Umm..."

"The mission to New Bolarus has been carried out." The counselor shot Vehayz an irritated look.

HEIDI frowned. "Why, counselor, do I not remember it?"

"You were..." Lawless searched for a gentle way of conveying the events without startling the hologram. "Incapacitated. I'm going to add the files I can recover with your permission."

Before the hologram could agree, Fack stepped forward. "HEIDI: These memories may be disturbing and fragmented. We're here to help you. You don't have to agree to the files if you don't want to."

HEIDI pondered the suggestion. She scanned Vehayz's healing face, Brendon's serious state, and the counselor's elevated blood rate. "I would like my memories to be complete."

Lawless looked at Vehayz and Fack for their approvals. Both nodded simultaneously.

HEIDI fluttered her eyes as the partial Maori activated the files. After a period of inactivity, she opened her eyes again. Her mouth gaped but made no noise.

"HEIDI?" The counselor rested his right fist in his left palm.

"I..." She struggled for words. "They... The Vendoth. They infiltrated me. They... made me perform tasks I did not want to perform." Fear spread on her face. "I killed Ensign Oh." Horrified, she grasped Vehayz by her arms. "I didn't mean to do it."

Vehayz turned her head slightly, the tears welling in her eyes. "I know..."

"And Lieutenant Thall... she took my program off line." HEIDI released Vehayz and lowered herself to the deck. "She... She terminated me. I was dead..."

Fack stooped to HEIDI's side and comforted her. "Think of it as a deep sleep."

"I did not see anything. I do not remember anything." HEIDI rocked slightly, retreating inside herself. She curled into a human ball.

Counselor Fack hugged her tightly. "It's all over now. It's okay."

The quartet rested silent in the huge cargo bay, each in their own lonely world.

The sky slowly faded from a light cornflower blue to a salmon color. The sun yawned and started to stretch its tendrils over the horizon, feeling for the disappearing stars.

The first light revealed new islands in the lake, displaced mounds of dirt. The distant plain appeared a jumble of rocks, pitted and dead. A fire burned far on the horizon, its flickering illuminating the corner of darkness still present on the far night borders retreating from the sky.

Milami Thall comforted her children as they witnessed the sunrise fall across the hilltop, the memorial headstone casting a long, dark shadow across them. *The children don't deserve to see the surface like this, under these circumstances*, she brooded. Their sobs joined the joyous chorus of waking birds' songs to form an odd symphony.

Sileon Thall found the experience disconcerting. The reunion with Milami and experiencing his grandchildren did not happen according to plan. His eyes met his daughters' eyes: Ikani's full of shock, Milami's swimming in tears.

Milami's attention faltered. Her father's weatherworn face quivered with the pain of loss. She remembered that same face watching her years ago, as they left him. But this leaving couldn't be altered; it was the more permanent kind.

His hand slipped slowly, uneasily into hers. At first, she felt uncomfortable, but, like an old pair of shoes, his warm, calloused hand felt familiar to her after a few moments.

Maybe she and the children could start his life anew. The corner of her mouth lifted lightly at the idea, and she squeezed her father's hand. Yes, that's what she would do. What they would do. They would start again.

Milami Thal compressed her father's hand again before she released it to tap her comm.-badge. "Thal to *Cantabrian*: Six to beam up."

The scarred surface of New Bolarus disappeared before them.