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(Mars - Utopia Planitia - Academy Campus - CO, Captain Sekal and FO, Commander Sienna Verin - 0725)

Sekal and Sienna had arrived early and he had taken some time to walk through the campus, not out of a fondness for memories but to see how much change had been accomplished in the last three years. The cadet dormitories had been expanded as well as the general housing on the periphery. Fighter and shuttle flights frequently maneuvered in the Martian atmosphere and the expansive grounds held a large number of beings hurrying about from place to place. The science complex was unchanged as it had been one of the largest though an additional building had been erected between science and engineering. Its location was not a coincidence as the department of scientific research and development was housed there, a natural outgrowth of the cooperation between the two. Vice-Admiral Saleke's off-Earth office was located there as well as many laboratories. Lieutenant Bohb had mentioned dropping in today to "check in".

Sienna was curious about why they had been called. The cryptic orders that they had been given were confusing and the anxiety level on the ship had risen to the point that it had been giving her a headache. She wanted to ask needless questions that would be answered in the briefing, but for now they echoed in her head. Sekal would say that it would be revealed in time with his infuriating vulcan ways, but she would rather know now. It was easier to protect the crew and make plans if she knew all of the information. So she stayed silent as she paced beside her closest friend and commanding officer. And being so close to Earth, so close to these formative memories of her time here at Mars, with her twin. So many memories that flooded her. She firmly shoved them aside, "I wonder if they ever worked out the issue with the algae propagation in the tanks. When I stopped working on that project, the plan moving forward was to replace them with something that the Andorians had developed for better o₂ production. The algae tanks were so last century." She smiled a bit, knowing that of all the vulcans that she had met, that Sekal would understand the attempt at humor after so much stress.

He turned his head slightly toward her as he walked. "Along with replacing the tanks there has been a concerted effort to avoid a repeat of the oversaturation of Nitrogen which caused the algae bloom and imports of fertilizers from Earth has come to nearly a standstill. It will take thirty point seven years for the gas locked in the soil to escape into the atmosphere. While StarFleet languished here its overuse was rampant."

He respectfully avoided the seal of the Federation which was inlaid into the pavement of the portico before the Administration building and they stepped through the door. A cubicle had been set up inside the portal for reception, something which had been newly added and the young woman greeted them as they stepped through. Wearing the pips of a Lieutenant she gave the pair a brief smile.

"Captain Sekal, Commander Verin, you are early but the Admirals should be ready. Give me a moment."

Sienna was surprised that she was recognized so quickly. She wasn't anything special, in spite of her fleet brat upbringing and family connections. She schooled her expression however, and stayed beside Sekal. Sy wished for her T'Mur to be here. T'Mur was aboard the ship, trying to figure out how to pack the most important items from their quarters. Her answers would be shortly forthcoming and when they happened, she knew that T'Mur would know immediately.

Sekal gave a brief nod and looked about. When they had first reached Mars the Academy had been long shut in and required a great deal of cleanup and repair. Everything he had seen so far including his earlier visits was updated and upgraded and was in the best shape it had been since the heyday of StarFleet over a generation ago. He turned to Sienna. "The secrecy over this mission has been absolute. While I could extrapolate from the few facts I have it would be a fruitless exercise as there are many variables."

Sienna laughed, "T'Mur was wondering the same thing. And that is likely a reflection of me. The ship's anxiety and concern was becoming overwhelming. Once we can give the crew a firm direction and the reasons behind it, there will be calm. Mr. Laredo was concerned about Luma, so that will need to be addressed. Luma will not do well alone on a ship without any of her small ones to fret over and tend to like some benevolent grandparent. And, to be truthful, the recent deaths aboard the ship have made Luma become withdrawn and unhappy." Luma was as much a part of their crew as any of the other officers.

He quirked an eyebrow at her. "Luma was included in the order, she is accompanying the crew. I would not dare to leave her alone on the ship at any rate and face her displeasure upon returning. Her reaction to our arrival upon the *Mystique* after a prolonged isolation was not pleasant."

Sienna had been present for that experience and remembered both the reaction to their arrival and the subsequent reaction from Luma. She vividly remembered Sekal, who she had a bit of a competitive attitude with, injecting her with the telepathic suppressant and then the resulting medical crises a few days later that had him carrying her to medical as the Fleet tried to sort out her genetic abnormalities. It was unusual for someone with mixed betazoid and human heritage to have so many issues with their biology. The Fleet had been treating it with medication, Q had treated it with a wave of his hand and made her primarily betazoid, an easy way for her to hold the psychic powers that he had insisted that she needed and that had made her life a nightmare.

"Yes." She agreed, "That is reassuring. I'll let Mr. Laredo know when we finish this meeting. Luma will be glad to know that she has been planned for. That will calm some of the anxiety. Luma's reaction can be both beneficial and a problem at times. Mr. Laredo is doing good work with her." Sienna was not sure that the entity that they had destroyed was truly gone, and Luma was absolutely convinced that it still lived. That system had been interdicted, and travel to it forbidden. The nanites were still present. Cleansing that planet was not their task however and with the urgency of this meeting, it was likely not going to be anyone's problem for a while. Sy could sense the aura of a meeting room ahead, and she smiled widely as she recognized one of the presences within. Her Mother was here. As the head of Strategic Operations, that was a very bad thing potentially.

Marines were posted at the entrance leading to the offices and briefing rooms and he gave them an uplifted eyebrow. Security had never been this tight to his knowledge and pointed toward an unusual circumstance or set of them.

"My Mother is present. I can feel her ahead of us by a few rooms." Sy tried to hide her smile and be professional, but she missed her family. She recognized some of the other auras present as well, but stayed quiet. It was like old-home-week. Half the parentage of the Illuminar was present.

His eyes opened a bit at that revelation. The admiral in charge of strategic operations was unlikely to be there alone but in concert with others and some of those names came quickly to mind.

"Captain, Commander, please proceed to briefing room 3. The Admirals are ready for you."

Sekal turned his head and gave her a nod then strode toward the aforementioned entrance.

Sienna felt her heart sink as more of the aura ahead of them became clearer. Something was seriously wrong and the Admirals thought their ship of fleet brats was the best way to handle it. So be it, they had done the impossible several times, as was the Fleet way. But the losses...there was always payment required. Salvation had a high cost.

(Reply: None yet)

(Posted by Charles and Mel)

[illegible]

(Mars - Utopia Planitia - Academy Administration - Briefing Room 3 - CO Captain Sekal, FO, Commander Sienna Verin, Vice-Admirals Jericho Haynes, Sophie Verin, Saleke, Vanyssa Winters and Alex Mayorkas - 0745)

Vice-Admiral Jericho Haynes of StarFleet Tactical had been chosen to lead the briefing and he sat in the center chair at the long table at the head of the room. To his left would be Sophie Verin and Saleke, to his right Vanyssa Winters and Alex Mayorkas. Jack wasn't very familiar with the interim head of StarFleet Security yet and unsure if the man intended to retain his position. The five had been speaking for the last half hour over cups of coffee or Ratkajino. There had been a lot of secrecy about the coming mission that surrounded the USS Raptor which had just been commissioned and those here had been comparing notes and preparing for the arrival of the command crew of Illuminar.

Jack stuck out his hand to Mayorkas. "I hope you don't mind if I call you Alex, we don't stand much on formality since we've known or heard about one another for most of our lives. Feel free to call me Jack."

Alex stared at the hand for a moment. He found himself in a room full of names that had become semi-legends. To say he was slightly intimidated would be unfair. These people had known each other probably longer than Alex had been alive. His promotion to Vice-Admiral of Security had been well earned, but still, these people had earned their places in the history books of the fleet.

He suddenly shook and broke himself out of his semi-fugue state and reached out. A smile grew across his face, “Jack. Alex is fine. Only my mother calls me Alejandro. It’s an honor to meet you.” He motioned to the others in the room. “All of you really.”

Vanyssa was amused. “You can call me Nessa if you want, but most everyone seems to think I’m the supreme high bitch of the fleet, as my minions in my office often think loudly at me. Don’t worry, though. My children are aboard the Illuminar, so are Saleke and the spawn of Sophie’s loins.”

Sophie too smiled, glad that Vanyssa was trying to break some of the tension, “My daughter is approaching. Time to be grown-ups again.”

Vanyssa pouted, the beauty that had been her primary attribute having matured and tempered with time and maturity. She stood up, her red hair shot through with silver. "Welcome Captain Sekal and Commander Williams-Verin. Please have a seat. You know everyone present except Vice-Admiral Alexander Mayorkas, newly appointed to the Security chair."

Mayorkis nodded to the Vulcan and his first officer. He, of course, knew much more about them than they did about him.

"Captain, Lt. Commander," he said, "a pleasure. How is...", he looked at his PADD, "Lt. Commander?... T'Mur doing? I met her at the commencement ceremony of her graduating class."

Sekal inclined his head to the man he was unfamiliar with, all others in the room were part of a tightly knit circle that extended back for decades and he had come into contact with them often since being part of the restart of the Academy and restructuring of command. His father on the other hand was intimately acquainted with them all. Jericho Haynes had come up through the ranks under Saleke on the Hades and the Vulcan had served as Vanyssa Winters executive officer on the Mystique. Sophie Verin was not as familiar to Saleke but Sekal had met her numerous times along with her husband Duke Williams at their ranch in Texas due to their relationship with Sienna. "Admiral." He lifted his right hand. "Dif tor smusima. Lieutenant Commander T'Mur is quite healthy and doing an effective job as head of security on Illuminar." Was the admiral aware of her past issues? It held no bearing on the matter as he would not volunteer any confidential information.

Alex nodded, "I was brought up to speed recently on her ... health concerns and am glad to hear they have been rectified. I was disappointed that it hadn't been handle prior, but as you know, it was not an issue that she cared to speak of openly."

"Indeed Admiral, as I am well aware and unless ordered to do so neither will I." His cocked eyebrow was an effective punctuation to his statement.

"I would expect no less," Alex concluded. "She was an excellent cadet, and I believe will go far with you."

Sienna's eyes narrowed towards this unknown Admiral. She did not appreciate his commentary on her mate. "Thank you for your concern for my mate. I will relay your regards to her, Admiral." Sienna knew that she and T'Mur were going through a rough spot, and had been looking forward to taking her back to Earth for a few days. She wanted her family.

Sophie watched her daughter in interest. "I'm sorry that leave was canceled. Give my daughter my love, and tell her that we have a yearling I think might be a good fit for her. Lots of spirit." Sophie smiled. "She's a pretty girl. An unmol, grey-rose. Beautiful girl. If T'Mur takes to her, she'll be a pretty pair with your Midnight." Sophie wasn't ready for the meeting to start quite yet but she knew that it needed to.

Once everyone was seated, Sophie put her hand on the desktop interface, letting it read her biometrics. "Sienna, the replicator still has that absurd concoction you drink and call coffee programmed in." She smiled as her daughter went over to the replicator and ordered the drink she preferred, knowing that Sekal liked orange juice, she got that for him. Passing him the glass once they took a seat, Sy broke protocol for a moment, knowing that with the telepathic ability of Admiral Winters, that they would be overheard.

::How is Trip? And the baby? I had plans to go to Earth and visit with T'Mur but that seems to have been canceled.:: Sy sipped her coffee/chocolate/sugar concoction and stirred it firmly, then took another sip in pleasure once it was mixed to her satisfaction.

:It's important, darling. Trip's doing well, and his family is also healthy and well. You'd know immediately if that wasn't the case. Trip sends his love, of course.:: Sophie turned to Vanyssa and Jack, "My apologies, family matters. Computer, seal this room under my command codes. This information is confidential. As some of you may be aware, Commander Verin was gifted with psionic abilities by the Q for several months. In one of those visions, she saw a battle with an unknown, nightmare force. Admiral Winters has some experience with those particular aliens, and Ambassador Riven Mias has identified the visions positively as being of the Xenolithe."

Sienna's blood went cold as her Mother, no this wasn't her Mother right now, this was Admiral Verin, was speaking. She remembered the nightmare visions of the Xenolithe attacking Federation ships with furious abandon, not listening to anything that they broadcast and intent of destruction, capture, enslavement. They wanted Luma. She knew that. She would die before she allowed Luma to be enslaved by those creatures. The Xenolithe had the tenacity and warrior drive of the Klingons, combined with the emotional maturity of the Andorians, mixed with the conquering tendencies of the Borg. And they had been classified so firmly by the Fleet that no one in the line ranks knew anything about them. Sienna certainly had no clue that they were 'real' and a warning. Luckily Riven had.

Sophie nodded towards Jack, “Admiral Haynes will be conducting this briefing. The rest of us,” She waved towards the other Admirals, “are support staff.”

"Not exactly support staff." Jack glanced around at all. "I'm merely here as the chair. Everyone here has a speciality that is vital to this operation and that will come out during the briefing as you will see." He glanced at Saleke who had been patiently waiting for the chatter to die down, the Vulcan gave him a questioning glance in return.

"Let's take our places everyone so we can begin. Computer, display the Typhon Expanse."

(Reply: None yet)

(Posted by Charles, Mel and Al)

[illegible]

(Mars - Utopia Planitia - Academy Administration - Briefing Room 3 - CO Captain Sekal, FO, Commander Sienna Verin, Vice-Admirals Jericho Haynes, Sophie Verin, Saleke, Vanyssa Winters and Alex Mayorkas - 0805)

The wall monitor activated as everyone took their seats and turned to face it. This region of space was adjacent to Romulan territory and at the far edge of Federation space in the Beta quadrant. "The Typhon Expanse was only briefly penetrated by the USS Enterprise D over seventy years ago. The Expanse's most notable feature is space/time destabilization similar to what was encountered by the Illuminar within Romulan space, what you called the Maelstrom."

Sekal looked to the right and gave an uplifted brow to Saleke and the Admiral in charge of science and technical research returned the look with a nod. Jack had caught the exchange and gave a grim smile. "So you see how dangerous the area is. There is a pathway through it of which the Xenoliths are aware and they used this route to invade Federation space at the turn

of the century. This is a known invasion corridor and we have been warned that they are coming which brings us to the purpose of this briefing." Jack glanced toward Saleke. "Admiral Saleke, you have the floor."

Saleke gave a brief nod and stood to his feet. "Computer replace the image with the USS Raptor, NCC 70188."

The map disappeared and a ship came on screen in a variety of views, starboard side, bow and ventral.

Saleke turned from the viewer. "The Raptor is an adaption of the Inquiry Class, Toussaint variant but has been heavily upgraded. The original engines have been replaced with the Anelurian Crystal drive, engine type APD-03, by Mercurion Inova and the shielding is the quantum displacement variant recently installed and refitted on a number of prototype ships that have performed to expectations during testing. She is outfitted with phaser type XIV which can be reconfigured for dark matter phased emission at need and carries both photon and quantum torpedoes. She also is heavily protected by ablative armor as is standard. The computer system is a positronic matrix variant which has been partitioned in order to allow Luma'lenai to operate freely. Once the mission is concluded and Luma has been removed it will be reverted to fleet standard."

Sekal was listening with interest even though he had been called upon for the adaption of many of these systems. The fact that the ship was near to being officially launched had been one of those variables he had been considering.

Saleke cupped his hands at his back as he surveyed the room. "This class of ship is the most effective combat vessel that has been developed outside of the refit of the USS Republic and commensurate with the construction of the USS Hades-A. Due to the nature of this mission it was selected to be the platform for it. As for the Typhon Expanse, this area of space will have to be navigated carefully due to its instability however we believe that the sensor logs that were active during the Illuminar's encounter with the Maelstrom have given us a sound baseline from which to eventually map the Expanse and in the interim should facilitate travel through it."

He turned his head toward the far end of the table and looked at Vanyssa Winters. "As for crewing the Raptor, Admiral Winters has those details and I pass the briefing to her." With a nod to her he retook his seat.

Vanyssa nodded, "It has been decided that the crew of the Illuminar will be shifted to the Raptor for this mission. Captain Sekal and Commander Verin are a proven team." Vanyssa turned towards the command team, "The loss of several vital crew members of the Illuminar has meant some shuffling will be needed. The details have not been entirely sorted, but will be within the next week. Your crew should prepare for at least a month aboard the Raptor. This will be the ship's proving ground. Captain, you are familiar with the technologies involved, Commander, you have extensive experience with launching a brand new ship and the pitfalls that can arise. Luma'lenai," And Vanyssa smiled, "Will be shifted to the Raptor with her bondmate. Once this shake down cruise is over, the Raptor personnel will remain with the ship. I suggest that the first officer we are considering for the ship be part of the shake-down cruise in either a second or third officer capacity. There is a talented cadet with engineering and operations experience that will be assigned," Vanyssa looked down at her notes for the specific name then shrugged lightly, "To the Illuminar crew permanently. The loss of Commander Gregory was tragic and we," She glanced at the other Admirals, "Understand and commiserate with that loss. However, the work

that Commander Gregory did on the SPOTS program is currently being employed at the Academy, and will be the legacy that he left to us.”

Vanyssa paused a moment, “After the mission is completed, all Illuminar personnel will be shifted back to the Illuminar, and inevitably some of the officers from the Raptor will want to go with you. That’s a future concern however. Your marine compliment will be increased. Most of Starfleet has never encountered the Xenolithe before, and Commander Verin’s visions are only the tipping point. You should do everything in your power to make sure that the Xenolithe do not acquire Luma. We acquired intelligence that the Xenolithe use living ships. Not an AI per se, but sentient beings that they have enslaved to their ships. Do we think that they are Lenai, with the capabilities that Luma’s race possesses? No. Are they a threat? Yes. Would Starfleet like you to capture one of those living ships and bring it back for research? Absolutely.” And Vanyssa’s voice hardened, “And under no circumstances would such a ship be left in the state that the Mystique was. Starfleet would try to find an acceptable officer to bond with the ship and help it be, well, content. These ships are not happy. From the limited contact we had with them, the Mystique’s crew was able to ascertain that the ships are subjugated and they are miserable. It has been theorized that perhaps Luma might have a way to communicate with those ships and that this might be turned to our advantage. However, and I must reiterate this, you will blow up the Raptor with Luma aboard rather than allow her to be captured. This is non-negotiable.” Vanyssa waited for the two command officers to reply before continuing on with her portion of the briefing.

“Yes, Admiral.” Sienna spoke firmly, understanding what that order meant.

Sekal merely nodded at first, this had always been a possibility as Luma knew however the first and most preferred option would be to evacuate her and the Edmund Hillary had been outfitted toward that end. There was no doubt that he would be insisting that this craft would be accompanying them. “Understood. Under these circumstances I place on record my request that the Edmund Hillary be assigned to the Raptor during this mission as well as the Void Sphinx fighters currently housed on Illuminar. They will give us options that may enhance the survivability and parameters of this mission.”

Sophie chimed up, “That can work. Fighters were already planned but are not finished quite yet. If we shifted the Illuminar’s sphynx’s to the Raptor, that would be acceptable. I agree about the Hillary. I want you to run drills with Mr. Corday and Mr. Montero that involve getting Luma from the ship’s core to the Hillary in under three minutes. This includes evacuating Mr. Laredo as well. This will happen during the pre-launch sequence. I know that you both know your jobs, but this is vitally important.” Sophie smiled for a moment, “Neither myself nor Admiral Williams have encountered the xenolithe. From the limited intelligence that we have, the Admiralty considers the Xenolithe to be Priority Threat #1 to the safety of the Federation. Unlike Admiral Winters, I would like to avoid any aggressive contact and information gather. There are a lot of questions that need answering, one of the biggest being, who are they allied with and what is their support structure. However, I acknowledge that any contact with the Xenolithe and probing into their affairs is going to result in conflict. Hopefully we have bigger guns. If we don’t, well, knowing now gives us some planning time.” The Admiral sighed, “To that end, we will be shifting a few of the more promising cadets to the Illuminar. Lt. Greywolf is good at tempering the antics that young fighter pilots are prone to, and we hope that one of them might have leadership capabilities and be mature enough to shift into a more command role. The down-side of this Fleet as you know is that we are young. Our command crews do not have the decades of experience that are required. There are skills that are only learned by doing and the holodeck can only teach so much, as you both have learned.”

“Any questions so far?” Vanyssa asked, “Jack is going to be going into the defensive and offensive intelligence we have shortly.”

"Admiral," Sienna spoke in that reasonable tone that any male with common sense knew meant a pissed off woman, "Commander T'Mur is not an issue. *I* am, however. I am far from capable of a pitched melee battle after my last encounter with the Q. To be frank, both Sekal

and I know where our current weak links are. Dr. Solice needs a psychiatric evaluation and at least a month of leave. T'Mur and I need time to ourselves. We were looking forward to a week on Risa, which was mysteriously canceled. To be absolutely honest, everyone on our ship needs some downtime, not another mission. We are a small crew, everybody knows everybody and the deaths and loss of parts of our command crew... No Counselor would recommend sending this crew out on such a dangerous mission and expect perfection." Sienna was their human resources person, and tended to the emotional needs of the crew. "Everything that you have said is confirmation that we need to be better than perfect. I know we can pull it off, I just don't know what the toll - in personnel and equipment - is going to be."

Jack had returned to his seat and took a sip of his coffee as the briefing continued.

Mayorkas nodded, completely oblivious to the Commander's ire. "I would have to agree with you. Please rest assured that you people would not be getting read into this situation if we did not consider your ability to handle it. This decision was not taken lightly. But yes, I do believe there needs to be a slight... restructure of your command staff."

Something occurred to Sy and one of her hands dropped below the table. Sekal was used to this tell and dropped his as well. On the tightest band that Sy could project through the touch telepathy, ::He wants T'Mur as our second officer, I think. That's got to be what this commentary is about.::

He had modified his mental shields to allow surface communication. ::The option is there if Commander Solice is physically unable to perform those duties at this time. It could take the form of a temporary advancement or become permanent depending on the circumstances. We will have to consider the possibility.:: Planning for advancement was already in the preliminary stages. This was not the first instance of what Sekal would consider Admiralty tampering or micro-managing of internal Illuminar matters as Vice-Admiral Verin had already named individuals that she wanted involved in certain duties which was generally unheard of ... and overreaching in some respects.

"That will be handled internally I am sure Admiral." Jack quickly pivoted back to the subject. "Let's continue the briefing please."

Alex nodded, "i am sure. Just my opinion based on my research. "Back to it. I agree with Admiral Winters, that entering a conflict with the Xenolithe, in an untried ship that is basically in a shake down cruise, would be ill advised. However, I feel that you should have all of the information available to you. Most of it has made confidential for a reason. If word of the Xenolithe were to get out there would be a panic in our new order. Our last interaction with them was... not as successful as we might like to think, even though we came out on top. We were ill prepared and, to be honest, we got lucky."

Sekal cast another glance at his father who nodded. While Saleke had not been involved in the war with the Xenolithe to his knowledge it would have occurred not long prior to his commission and facts on the conflict in general were largely scarce currently outside of a broad outline. Saleke however should have more intimate knowledge even outside of what he was privy to now. A question had formed in his mind which he would ask later, after the general briefing as well.

Alex waited for those words to sink in before he continued. It was an area of contention amongst the admiralty, but he didn't accept his position to be a wall flower or a yes man. And he knew his stuff after a long deep dive into the subject matter.

“There are few alive, or here,” he said, looking around the room, “that have had actual experience with the Xenolithe. However, I have found someone who not only had experience, but was instrumental in their defeat. I would like to introduce you to Commodore Tahlmari. Tahlmari was a fighter pilot during the battle with the Xenolithe.”

(Reply: None yet)

(Posted by Charles, Mel and Al)

[illegible]

(Mars - Utopia Planitia - Academy Administration - Briefing Room 3 - CO Captain Sekal, FO, Commander Sienna Verin, Vice-Admirals Jericho Haynes, Sophie Verin, Saleke, Vanyssa Winters and Alex Mayorkas - 0910)

The door to the chamber opened and an older Zakdorn limped into the room, leaning on a hip length, wooden cane. He nodded to the admirals as he passed them. It had been a long time since he'd been in a meeting such as this. A long time since Alexanra Lowell and his time on the Paladin.

"This should prove enlightening." The Captain murmured. Having the testimony of a veteran of that conflict should prove to be invaluable. Sienna nodded, this would be very useful. She took a long draw off of her coffee and focused her attention, taking out her personal, ultra secure padd, Sy flipped to a new application and began to take notes.

Mayorkas continued as Tahlmari approached the table, "Tahl was a pilot during the Xenolith incident in 2406. Later he was chief of security and then FO of the USS Paladin, until his wife, Captain Lowell, the CO, died. I just wanted to give you a little background into his importance for this meeting."

The Zakdorn stopped at the table and addressed everyone, “Gentlemen, ladies, I appreciate your invitation to join you here. Although I can’t say I understand it. Surely you have more knowledgeable people than me.”

Alex shook his head, “Commodore, you know that is not exactly true. You’ve been tasked for the last ten years to find out as much about the Xenoliths as possible.”

"Tahl, please," the Zakdorn said, "call me Tahl. Only my mother called me Talmahri. And my wife when she was mad. Which apparently was a great deal of the time. I can be a bit exasperating at time." He shook his head, trying to focus. "Sorry, I digress. That may be true, but there was little to learn that we didn't already know. And what we knew back then was buried under so many piles of red tape it was nearly impossible to uncover."

He rounded the table and handed Mayorkas a data rod. Alex put it in and a holo-image of a Xenolithe appeared over the table.

"What do we know about the Xenolith?" he asked rhetorically. "They are about 6 to 8 feet tall, very strong. They have retractable claws that they can rip through a marine BDU with relative ease. I warn you, the video you are about to see is... disturbing. And highly classified. After you watch it I may be required to kill you."

Sekal gave a cock of his head at the curious statement. "If I am correct that was meant to be a humorous statement. If access to the information required death it would be counter productive to impart it."

When the image appeared, Sy's breath caught. She had faced this in her visions. Her mind had tried to protect her, and Sy hoped that the aliens were a fiction. "I didn't want them to be real. Bloody Q." She sighed. "Does this make me Picard to his Borg?" The thought that she would be enduring Q for many years was horrible.

Jack gave a snort as he pulled the mug safely away from his mouth. "You're telling me. A real catch 22." He replied to the Captain then turned to his executive officer. "I'd say it makes you a point of contact. Q as we know him does things for his own self interest and is seldom altruistic. And he didn't introduce us to the Xenolithe, they did."

He turned to the old veteran. "Please continue "

"You might be unaware of the Zakdorn propensity against humor," Tahl said plainly. "I suppose it's fortunate I'm not your typical Zakdorn." And they don't know the half of that statement. "Anyway, this video was retrieved from a dead marine after the battle on one of the Xenolithe ships."

He played the clip and the projection came to life. There was a squad of marines in close quarters combat. Suddenly the chest of one of the marines exploded as a clawed hand went through from behind. A second hand appeared and ripped the body in half, head to groin, BDU and all. There were several other graphically violent scenes showing the amount of damage the Xenolithe could administer to a fully armored marine.

"Were it not an enemy I might say fascinating." Sekal noted. "Their strength to rip apart a body in marine combat armor is extreme. No Vulcanoid to my knowledge could accomplish such a feat."

"Few species can," Tahl agreed. "And they're tough as well. Now here," he paused the feed and pointed to a blast point of a marine phased rifle, "they are able to absorb a great deal of power from energy weapons. However they are not impervious to physical harm."

He pressed a button and the video changed to the interior of a starship. A lone Brikarian was standing toe to toe against three Xenolithe. Then he did the impossible. The Brikar moved with incredible speed and grabbed the foot of one of the Xenolithe. Swinging the creature around he struck the other two until they fell to the ground in a pool of fluids. He then slammed the remaining Xenolithe to the floor, stood on its, what would be the crotch region for a humanoid and pulled its leg off. Fortunately there was no sound to the video but Tahl could only imagine the screams of the creature.

"Now I would not recommend Mr. Tagon's method of subduing the Xenolithe as a training tool Tahl said, "however it does demonstrate that they can be damaged."

"It would appear that they are armored with an exoskeleton that is resistant to energy weapons...", Sekal began with the obvious. ", which brings up the question of whether it is equally resistant to a bladed weapon such as a combat knife. I also presume that much like a

Horta, phasers require a longer duration in contact with the subject and multiple beams would be more effective."

Jack set the nearly empty mug down. "Now we are getting into my domain. Thank you Mr. Tahl, do you have more for us?"

“Only this,” he answered, “their ships are equally tough to penetrate with phasers and torpedoes. My own solution was, shall we say, unique and desperate. Turning your fighter into a plasma bomb is not something I’d recommend for everyone. But it did work.”

Jack nodded gravely. "Separating a pilot from his fighter is generally considered counter productive and we don't sacrifice our crews as suicide pilots but should the need arise and one of those pilots could be safely extracted it is an acceptable solution in a pinch."

Mayorkas stood up and said, “I would like to recommend that the Commodore accompany the Raptor as a consultant only.”

Jack's eyes swept to each of the Admirals in attendance. "What say you? Are there any dissenters?"

(Reply: None yet)

(Posted by Charles, Mel and Al)

[illegible]

(Mars - Utopia Planitia - Academy Administration - Briefing Room 3 - CO Captain Sekal, FO, Commander Sienna Verin, Vice-Admirals Jericho Haynes, Sophie Verin, Saleke, Vanyssa Winters and Alex Mayorkas - 0935)

Sienna's mind was in shock. She had one of her flashes of intuition. "I am in favor, however, there is only one Captain and that is Sekal. And, do not take this the wrong way, but I hope we are not taking you to your death."

Tahl gave a wry smile, "That would be my hope as well. I will be as helpful as I can for an old Zakdorn."

Sekal shrugged his shoulders. "Expert intelligence is to be desired and the command crew will give your insights due deliberation."

Sophie, who knew the signs of her daughter's visions, looked worried, "I believe the Commodore could be more useful here."

Vanyssa did not speak, watching. A background of ship's counselor was useful in politics.

Jack eyed Vanyssa who was raptly watching the byplay, chuckled and looked to the Vulcan. "Admiral Saleke? Your thoughts?"

Saleke leaned over the table. "We know by the video record that Brikarians are able foes to the Xenoliths in hand to hand combat and are highly intelligent beings however that does not translate to the experience that the Commodore does in strategic operations. It has been made quite clear..." he gave his son an approving angle of eyebrow. "... that this experience will be properly considered. I find Commodore Tahl's presence on this mission to be a logical factor."

Jack nodded. "I am in agreement. We recognize Admiral Verin's concern however I also believe that his presence would be more useful at a possible point of contact with the consideration..." the timber of his voice dropped. "... that should hostilities be joined he will not be on the front lines and will be protected so that his experience let alone his life can be of use to us here in the event full scale hostilities break out. Meaning get him back here hell or high water."

"Now that that is out of the way let's continue to the tactical briefing and the ultimate aim of this mission." He gave a nod to Tahl indicating that he could take his leave. "Thank you for your time Commodore."

Tahl sent a wink to Alex and nodded to the others. "I am at your service." Then he turned and limped back the way he had come. Alex smiled at the old Zakdorn and sat back down. His part of the discussion was done.

"Why are we sending you and the Raptor to the Typhon expanse?" Jack leaned back in the chair. "We have ample evidence that the Xenos are preparing to invade, what we want to know is how close they are and if they have penetrated Federation space. The Typhon Expanse is a part of Federation space though normally near impassable.. We want to know if they are already there. Are they using it as a staging area? How far have they advanced if they are there at all? The one thing we don't know is when they are coming."

He looked at the mug in his hand and chugged the last mouthful then set it down with a clomp. "The Federation has been preparing for a renewal of hostilities since the warning was given. We have a fleet of over one thousand vessels, mostly older space frames that are still in process of being updated, with those updates being 73% complete. We have two dozen Illuminar and as many Exeter class ships completed to further our goal of exploration and have turned our attention to heavier ships of the line for the purpose of defense. How reliable are these older ships? We beat the Xenos back before with older tech but at a horrible cost in lives and materiel and we are strengthening the fleet to meet a new attack. The numbers of newer vessels are still small in comparison and we need to know how much time we have to build more."

He leaned forward to emphasize his next point. "The Inquiry class is the best we've got and she's on 'roids but the purpose of this mission is not to go out looking for a fight, we need actionable intelligence however..." his face got grim. "... if you can't escape a fight then she's the best we've got to get you home. Get in, find out if they are there and how many and get out."

He idly toyed with the mug as he spoke. "The Xenos are tough b***ards as you've seen. Their exoskeleton can turn away bladed weapons but its not foolproof, their weakness is at their joints and a knife slipped into one can do a hell of a lot of damage. Phaser fire as noted requires a sustained burst or multiple beams and don't even try stunning them, they won't stop to scratch the itch. Kill or vaporize if attacked and maintain fire until they are down or gone.

Their technology is equally as deadly as our own, when they decide to use it. In personal combat they prefer to use what passes for hand and claw. Keep them away and avoid close combat if you can. If they get to your lines they can do indescribable damage. And now as for their ships."

His face was grim. "As noted they are slaves and not happy but they won't turn and run from a fight with the Xenos holding their reins. How they keep them in line we aren't exactly sure yet as none has survived a battle. As noted there may be hope of turning one but don't count on it. Should you encounter one and manage to turn it maybe you can get it to help against its

overlords but there's no guarantee. Should you manage to liberate one however we expect you to introduce it to the joys of freedom and the Federation and bring it home. We want to learn about them and try to help if we can. And as already been expressed here they won't be mistreated." He turned an eye to Saleke then looked away. "I guarantee there is not one here who would countenance it..." he shot a questioning look at Alex. "... nor should they. And you have an example to prove that. Luma'lenai already has an advocate in command and I think everyone knows who that is. I wouldn't want to get on his bad side."

"As for dark matter phasers which can be used normally against ships that have a hole in their shields. These ships are sentient beings so the Federation rules of war apply. I don't need to spell that out for you do I?"

Sekal shook his head crisply. "Negative. Your inference is clear. Dark matter phased energy would induce extreme agony and their use should be avoided."

"Correct." Jack nodded. "You'll be alone on this one as this is not a fleet action and we don't want you to enter combat unless it can't be avoided. If possible put on all the speed you can and bring us back what you know. Just knowing they are there, if they are, is half the battle."

Jack looked around as he leaned back in the chair. That ends the briefing portion and it's now question and answer time. We will give you as many of them as we can.

(Reply: None yet)

(Posted by Charles, Mel and Al)

[illegible]

(Mars - Utopia Planitia - Academy Administration - Briefing Room 3 - CO Captain Sekal, FO, Commander Sienna Verin, Vice-Admirals Jericho Haynes, Sophie Verin, Saleke, Vanyssa Winters and Alex Mayorkas - 1015)

"There are a number of pertinent questions,..." Sekal began. "..., but first I must insist that the video be declassified for the crew, namely the marine contingent, security department and senior officers so that they will be armed with information that may potentially prolong their lives and give them an opportunity for success."

Jack turned his head toward Mayorkas, on the far end Saleke had done the same.

Vanyssa nodded, that was fair. "Perhaps we could have the security and marines for a conference? Inservice?" She shrugged towards Mayorkas, and mouthed, 'Sorry'. Sophie shook her head and looked amused. She was used to Vanyssa and her antics.

Alex rubbed his hand over his face as he thought. He picked up his PADD and typed in a series of commands.

"The reason for the classification was to maintain a lid on the Xenoliths. If your people are going to encounter them they should go into that armed with all of the knowledge they can get. I have released the data to be transferred to the Raptor."

He looked over Admiral Winters and gave her a little half smile. “The only good an in-service would provide is to share how little we actually know. About fighting the Xenos. However, if the marines and your security people would like a chance to discuss the matter then I can provide the opportunity while you are here,” he said to Sekal and Verin.

Sekal nodded as he placed his right arm on the table. "I will consult with them and make that determination. At this point I assume that it would be a rehash of the available data which is an inefficient use of your time?"

"That would be an accurate assessment of the situation," Mayorkas replied.

"Agreed. With two full squads of marines being assigned to the ship, are those assigned to the Illuminar being folded into the third squad?"

"That would be the best use of them," Alex said. "They will need someone to hold them together as a Unit though."

"Affirmative. 2nd Lieutenant Temerity may fill that position and the major will command those squads?"

"Major Murphy's reputation has preceded him," the vice-admiral said. "Are you certain he is up to that task?"

Sekal nodded his agreement. "The major is fully competent to fill that role and has performed exceptionally. I believe he may be surprised to find out his contingent will have a full deck at their disposal."

He then turned his eyes to Admiral Verin. "Admiral, with all respect I can assure you that I have had and will involve the most qualified individuals in drills that will meet your qualifications. The safe assurance of Luma'lenai is and will continue to be a priority for a number of reasons, all very logical."

Sophie nodded, "I know that you and Admiral Saleke have Luma's best interests in mind. I do not need to tell you how to do your job, but it is a requirement that within five earth minutes that Luma can be evacuated, and the Hillary launched." Sophie looked at Vanyssa who dipped her chin in a reluctant nod. "We will authorize Luma to jump if it gets her out of a no-win scenario. We can not let the Xenolithe know about the capabilities of a Lenai. But more so, we can not allow her to be captured."

Sekal looked about the table. "There will be six days of travel before we make the Expanse according to my calculations. How much time will there be before the ship leaves Mars?"

Jack leaned back in his chair. "Restock and realignment will be completed within sixty-eight hours. As soon as the final technician leaves the ship you will be cleared for launch."

"Under the circumstances then we should begin boarding no later than 0600 tomorrow morning. That will give my crew two days to familiarize themselves with the ship before we get underway. The drills for the next week will be extensive. There is one more thing..." Sekal cast his eyes toward Admiral Mayorkas. "... what is this 'new order' of which you spoke?"

Alex chuckled, "I'm sorry, that's a little inside joke. I know it's a little inappropriate however, I was referring to the new mission statement of Starfleet. Our mission of exploration over that of conquest. However, it is ill-advised that we not be prepared for some... shall we say, push back. We do not want to be as unprepared as we were with the Borg. Ships like the Raptor are, for lack of a better term, a necessary evil. However, I do realize that the phrase "new order"

was used by the group Roanoke. I kind of found a new use for it, for me. I did not mean to alarm anyone.”

Sekal shrugged. "Understood. Roanoke's works and mission statement is well known. The single benefit from them we have received is in the form of an android." He looked toward Jack.

"Is there anything else Admiral?"

Jericho Haynes stood to his feet. "That will be all Captain... Commander." He gave Sienna a wink. "I will notify the security team on the Raptor of your timetable as well as send out a communique to your crew this evening. The transporter hub on the base will be available for transport to the ship at precisely 0600."

He motioned for them to rise. "This briefing is concluded. God speed to you and your crew."

(Reply: Orders coming)

(Posted by Charles: (Sekal, Saleke, Jericho Haynes)

Mel: (Sienna Verin, Vanyssa Winters, Sophie Verin)

And Al: (Alex Mayorkas and Tahl)

[illegible][illegible]

(USS Raptor - Deck 5 - Holodeck 1 - Operations Ensign James 'Jay' Shaw - 0900)

Three more drills yesterday gave Shaw and his team quite the workout. Shaw had them stand down today so they could review the details of their efforts. He was trying to do things by the book, but the book seemed too rigid. He was sure that every Ensign must feel the same way. But he would do it on the bounce.

For the moment, he was in holodeck 1 for some rest and relaxation, if you would call this rest. As the man in the red tunic rushed towards him, he drew his sword and assumed a dueling stance. Swords clashed as the two men moved around the room, metal clanging on metal.

Thrust, parry, lunge, reposte. Back and forth, Shaw slowly began to gain the advantage. Back and forth. Shaw beat his opponents sword down and lunged, his sword catching the man in the heart. As the red tuniced man fell backwards, he heard the call, "Come, the Cardinal is getting away."

Turning on his heel, he began running to the entrance. As he approached the door, he saw the Cardinal's carriage driving away towards the exit. "Shaw," another man in a blue tunic called, as he pulled up in a second carriage.

Shaw jumped up onto the carriage and off they went chasing the Cardinal. Into the streets of Paris the two carriages raced, Slowly the carriage began to close the distance. Shaw moved forward on the carriage horses. Moments later, the carriage began to pull alongside the Cardinal's. Shaw leapt into the air arms outstretched to grab onto the Cardinal's carriage.

“Computer, end program,” came the voice of Shaw’s training officer. Immediately Paris and the carriages disappeared. Shaw’s moment, however, did not. With no target, he continued to fly through the air, his arms flailing for something to grab onto.

“Ensign Shaw,” came the voice as he fell to the floor, skidding across the holodeck floor. “Did you hear my page?”

Shaw slowly stood up and smoothed his tunic down. "Ma'am?" he asked.

“My page Ensign. I wanted to see your report on my desk about yesterdays training exercises.”

"I am sorry Ma'am, I will get it right on it," he said.

“Excellent, and you might want to change your uniform.”

Shaw looked down and chuckled. A musketer tunic was definitely not Star Fleet issue.

(reply none)

(posted by Tim)

[illegible]

(Mars - Utopia Planitia - Academy Campus – Marine – 2LT Charles Temerity - 0900)

Teremity had never attended Starfleet Academy for commissioned officers, but he had attended the NCO academy at a variety of locations before the events of Grayson and his retirement from the corps. As a result, he felt out of place walking the pathways of the campus on Utopia Planitia. When Major General Eunice Bloom contacted him saying she wanted to meet, he had wrongly presumed it was for a more personal reason, but she wanted to meet with him in the museum. As if that was not surprising enough, she wanted to meet him in the section for the Second Federation-Cardassian War which was next to the Federation Civil War section.

As he strolled through the museum, he looked at photographs and read the synopsis of the various events and participants. Charles was too young to have taken part in the second Fed-Car war and joined the corps during the last months of the Fed Civil war. He never took part in any of the fighting per-se, but he did learn a lot about crisis management and natural disasters. He was surprised that he had a personal recognition of a few of the faces from the civil war to include the captain of the Illuminar.

Temerity continued to the section for Fed-Car II war and noticed the tastefully attired MG Eunice Bloom. He approached her, "General Bloom, how are you ma'am?"

Bloom turned to look at him, “Charles, you are a fortunate son after all. I never realized how appropriate that name was for the freighter you commanded. You are fortunate that Major Murphy likes what you can do for, what did you dub them, Myrmidons.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Temerity replied as he approached to stand next to her and turned to see what had held her attention when he had entered the room and saw a photo of a face very similar to his own. “If I may ask, what is the appeal of this section?”

The beautiful blond feminine figure that was Eunice Bloom hid the cold calculating Soldier. “The second Federation-Cardassian war was my first. It was full of interesting organizations and characters. Tell me Charles, are you familiar with the Privateers and Mercenaries of the Irregular Federation Forces commonly referred to as the Star Wolves? Or how about individuals such as Chance Temerarious, a.k.a. Chance Raschen, Captain of the Star Hawk?”

Charles found the picture of Captain Temerarious and read what it said. As the Marine read, he was surprised at the similarity between himself and the other man. "I am familiar with the name Chance Raschen and the ship Star Hawk. T'Lela told me he and I looked like we could've been closely related. He is her late husband, and that was his ship from before the beginning of Fed-Car II until the final year of the civil war. My personal weapons were once his. Did you know him?"

She slowly nodded her head, “I was a POW held on a Cardassian space station. The IFF group lead by Temerarious and a Klingon contingent led by some general whose name eludes me attacked the station. As the Klingons established a perimeter around the station, the IFF boarded the station and rescued us. After hours of fighting, the Cardies surrendered the station to Irregulars. Pissed that he would not be named as the victor of the battle, the Klingon General ordered an attack on all Irregular forces’ ships. The Irregulars in turn managed to defeat the Klingons.”

Charles watched her face as she told the tale. Once she finished, he gave her a moment or two before he said anything. "Are you okay, Eunice?" he asked her quietly.

She nodded her head and faced him, "You do not realize it, but you and he are cut from the same cloth. Like him, you too can overcome the perils of your past. Murphy told me about what had happened. Even though Grayson was a defining moment for you, it cannot be allowed to define who you are. It is funny how you are using your personal fortune to augment your assigned company the way he used his to help the U.S.S. Rosenante before his disappearance." He watched her for several moments as she gathered her thoughts and composed herself. "Lieutenant Temerity, get your shit together. If you need an example to follow, follow his." She finished as she pointed at the picture of Chance Temerarious.

“Yes, General. If there is nothing else; I will take my leave.” Charles said as he turned to depart. As he left the museum, Charles could not help but think about what Bloom and T’Lela had told him about Chance. He was asked to do anything, just to do and be better than what he has been.

Once outside the museum, Temerity just started wandering with no destination in mind. After a while, he came across some of his shipmates.

(Reply: Any if you wish)

(Reply: Any if you wish)

(Posted: Charles Raschen)

[illegible]

(Qo'nos - Imperial House Compound- Courtyard - Galk of the Imperial House - 1020)

He stepped out of the transporter chamber and into the twilight of a thlngen sky, the Imperial City was wrapped around the three story building on two sides and part of a third. The sky was of deep purple darkening to black and a stiff wind swirled about the paved grounds surrounded by a black metal fence. Guards roamed the grounds with weapons openly displayed which kept those hurrying past from approaching closely and the subdued hum of vehicles flashing by along corridors nearby merged with that of ground conveyances. The air was arid as was always the case which made the lights of the vehicles and the multitude of squat buildings beyond shine crisply.

Galk stopped just a few steps from the door and placed his fists on his hips as he glared about the grounds. Nothing had seemed the same since he had opened his eyes on Borath, everything felt unreal as though he were viewing the universe through a window while he was shut out.

While Sto-Vo-Kor never ended according to tales and the black fleet would sail forever forty three plus earth years was one quarter of a lifespan for him. His right hand was lifted and opened before his face. The leather, fingerless gauntlets stretched and creaked as he made a fist once again. Still, he was young and vital. Medical scans taken of him aboard the ship and compared to his last baseline had shown him to be no older and perhaps of slightly lesser age. And beyond that he had gained more than nine kilograms of muscle tissue. The return was even more unthinkable than the change in body mass.

He rumbled in contemplation. His mind had added memories far beyond his age. He didn't remember everything, who could? Nevertheless he remembered enough, actions, circumstances and times that had changed him. His conquests had been well celebrated but who would want to hear them now? Had he returned to this time unchanged he could perhaps have written those memories off as false shadows. But now? No one would credit his tales and he would be considered a madman.

"hOd! You have returned!"

He spun on the guard and his raised voice was harsh. "Return to your duty! The enemy will test your alertness!"

"Hlja hOd!" The soldier spun and walked his post with renewed purpose.

Galk's hand had poised over his Dak'tang, he slowly removed it and moved toward the main entrance as he rumbled to himself.

(Qo'nos - Imperial House Compound- Dining Hall - Galk of the Imperial House - 1035)

He was sitting on a stool at the table with another upraised mug as Jos entered.

"My son."

The tankard made a hollow sound as it clapped against the table. "Father." Galk turned his eyes to the older Klingon as Jos helped himself to the cask.

"I read the report you sent three times and still cannot believe what happened on Borath. A being with such power is an enemy with no weakness."

"He has very few." Galk stood up to refill his cup. "I know of only one other time when his plan was overturned and still do not know who returned me or why." He walked with the full tankard back to his accustomed place. "Someone or something set itself against Q and prevailed."

"What was this paradox he spoke of?"

"I do not know." He took a gulp.

"Do you believe he might return to finish his task? Is he aware you have returned?"

He laughed at the sudden memory. It had been his and Alaya's pre-wedding celebration and the Captain... no Commander Verin most likely had footed the bill for the soiree on the ship's tab. He had traded shots of scotch with Jared Boyles and... his memory of parts of that night weren't the best but Alaya had been dressed to kill in a long, flowing red gown and they had danced to a number requested by his buddy, "Lady in Red. That buddy, Jared Boyles nearly skipped through the door behind him.

"What are you laughing at sport? I see nothing but some serious drinking in my future." Boyles smacked his lips as he headed straight for the bar.

"I'll grab our table." Steven headed straight for the opposite corner to his favorite table which sat in the back near the bar.

"Delay and the scotch may be all gone before you get to it." Jared gave a sharp laugh and quickened his pace.

"Hammons! Boyles! It has been too long!" The proprietor had heard their banter and stepped out of his office.

"Santiago!" Hammons reached the table and hovered over it protectively. "How are things shaking?"

The swarthy man held up his arms with a grin. "Business is booming since StarFleet returned. I may be able to retire one day."

Boyles slapped the man on the shoulder as he passed and promptly ordered a drink from the barrista.

"Are you busting spies in space my friend?" Santiago held out his hand as he approached and Steven shook it then gave the man a big hug.

"Not many, we have people more suited for that aboard but I still get to keep my investigator skills sharpened now and again."

"Good! What can I get for you?"

"A big plate of your finest beef and bean nachos, a beer and a scotch in no particular order."

"Melina! Full nachos, large. A cervesa and Johnny Walker Black for one of my favorite customers!"

She smiled at the call and nodded as she handed Boyles his drink which he promptly slugged down and ordered another. In reply she set a bottled beer before him. "Drink on that while I fill your friends order."

Boyles gave it an appraising look before picking it up and taking a drink. "Ah! Oh gods I've missed this place."

Hammons took the chair in the corner and relaxed into it with a sigh.

"I remember vividly when you walked the rounds here. Busting drunk and disorderlies, breaking up fights. You were in here almost every night. The good old days." Torres chuckled.

"I credit a plate of your nachos as inspiration for the plan that broke open the Roanoke ring here." Steven grinned. "And the rest is history."

"And where is your lovely bride?"

"Alaya may be along later, she is in a tither. The bullet we have here is too small for all our stuff."

"Billet? Are you being assigned here?" The proprietors look was hopeful.

"No. They pulled us off Illuminar and we don't know why. It's all hush, hush."

"Exciting!" Santiago exclaimed. "We will make your time here memorable I hope. I'm off to expedite your order."

Steven grinned as the man hurried away. "Thanks."

He crossed his arms behind his head and settled back with a sigh as he put his boots on the table. "Just like old times."

(Reply: Anyone. Let's have a party!)

(Posted by Charles Gatling)

[illegible]

(Mars - UP Environs - Red Sands Bar SPA LT Ariel Trei - 1110)

She walked into the bar to Find Steve and Jared at a table. She saw the nachos, some beers, and shots of Scotch. She may have some Scotch but more likely will have beer and shots of Crown Royal apple if they have it. She took a seat at the table and ordered a large bowl of those nutty flavored beetles for herself and the table. She also ordered a beer and a shot of Crown Royal Apple.

"Hello friends. I ordered a large bowl of nutty flavored beetles for the table along with a beer and a shot of Crown Royal Apple. Lets party."

She sampled the nachos and will have a great portion of the beetles when they come. When her order came, she raised her shot of Crown Royal to toast. "Cheers."

(Reply Hammons, Boyle, Any)

(Posted by Edward)

[illegible]

(Mars - UP Environs - Red Sands Tavern - CPO, Steven Hammons - 1113)

"Hello friends. I ordered a large bowl of nutty flavored beetles for the table along with a beer and a shot of Crown Royal Apple. Lets party."

Boyles laughed. "You took the words out of my mouth. Skol!" He picked up his shot glass as she sat down and tipped it back.

Steven eyed the glass of scotch which was a refill for the first and picked up the cold bottle of beer instead then took a belt. The beer slid down his gullet with a frosty burn. "Ah! Welcome Lieutenant, sit down and take a load off." Something occurred to him. "Nutty Beetles? Are we talking fried?"

His question was soon answered as Santiago walked up carrying a large bowl well away from him, from within were soft scraping and scurrying sounds.

Steven's eyes caught the contents as the bowl was lowered and he blanched a bit. The blue/black beetles it contained were certainly not cooked, matter of fact they were very lively.

Trei raised her glass as it arrived. "Cheers."

"Cheers!" Steven had picked up the tumbler of scotch and tossed it back, he needed it after getting a look at her appetizer. He then turned the glass upside down and placed it back on the tabletop which signaled to the bartender that he wanted another.

Boyles pushed his plate of nachos toward her. "Feel free to help yourself."

(Reply: Trei)

Jared gulped when he saw the contents of her bowl. "I need another drink."

"Slow down Boyles, don't forget what happened on Trill." Steven cautioned.

Boyles looked him straight in the eye. "What are you? My mother? I know, I know..." he held up his hands palms out. "... you are becoming civilized but that stuff on Trill was rotgut. We only drank, what? Three bottles?"

It made Steven feel green around the gills just thinking about it. "Worst damn aftereffects I've ever had."

"What's a little alcohol poisoning between friends? Medical fixed us right up."

Steven laughed. "I was still nauseated for two days."

"Three." Boyles frowned. "Say, you were on that mission weren't you Lieutenant? The trip we took on the Mystique?"

(Reply: Trei)

"I thought so. You should have been at that bar, we bought their last two bottles straight up and brought them back aboard. It was the only decent alcohol they had. Of course I'm stretching the word decent a lot. The rest of their stuff was infected with hallucinogenics. A strange people there."

(Reply: Trei)

"I've still got one of those bottles aboard." Steven added.

"I remember we drank the other. Keep it for a rainy day." His buddy answered. "The lounge might run out on a long deployment, besides it could use a couple of decades of aging."

Hammons snickered as he grabbed a large tortilla chip heavy with ground meat, cheese, beans, avocado and sour cream, the pico de gallo probably would have been the proverbial straw.

"I agree."

He was chewing as she pushed the bowl at him and nearly spit his mouthful out, instead he managed to swallow the portion of his tasty dish. "Not right now thanks, probably later. Give me about three more shots to prep myself."

(Reply: Trei)

"~Or maybe five. I'll probably be buzzed enough by then. I hope!~

(Reply: Trei, any. All welcome)

(Posted by Charles Gatling)

[illegible]

(Mars - UP Environs - Red Sands Tavern SPA LT Ariel Trei - 1114)

She saw the reaction to the live beetles. She expected that from Boyles but not from Hammons. Steve has been exposed to Klingon food before and has not reacted like this. No matter they can try it or not. She intended to eat a great portion of it. They can suit themselves if they want to sample some of it. She grabbed a handful of the beetles and tossed them into her mouth like peanuts. They had a nice satisfying crunch when chomped down on and the nutty taste was much better than Gaggh. She ordered another shot of Crown Royal Apple and took a drink of her beer. She sampled some of the nachos. She found them very tasty. Perhaps she will try some with the beetles to see how that tastes but decided not to do that right now. She let out a laugh at the reluctance for the beetles.

"Come on. Try the beetles. I assure you they taste much better than Gaggh."

(Reply Any)

(Posted by Edward)

[illegible]

(Mars - UP Environs - Red Sands Tavern - SecO, CPO Steven Hammons - 1116)

Lieutenant Trei gave a hearty laugh at his reluctance.

"Come on. Try the beetles. I assure you they taste much better than Gaggh."

Well, he HAD tried Gagh before, Galk had insisted. The worms were far less mobile and were coppery tasting, the texture left something to be desired. It reminded him of spaghetti though with an inferior sauce. Considering all that he supposed it could be worse.

His new drink had just arrived, Santiago slid it to him, grinned and stood there watching, his mustache twitching with amusement.

Boyles was giving him the eye and Steven could almost hear the thoughts behind those twinkling pupils.

"If you try them I will."

"Damn it! I knew you would say that." Steven looked from his glass to the beetles and formed a plan. "All right, I'm going in."

He slid the glass to the left and placed right hand in the bowl. Some people on earth ate insects, ants, grasshoppers, crickets and yes ... even beetles. His culinary adventures had been dull and stodgy before being exposed to Klingon cuisine, perhaps it was time he further expanded his horizons. The tactic worked and his brain fell grudgingly into line.

He grabbed a few which didn't make them happy, they scuttled about in his hand trying to get free. Their little legs scraped against his palm and fingers as he pulled them in.

He glanced about, Trei was watching him closely, Boyles was grinning and Santiago Torres' eyes were intent.

"Here goes nothing." He tossed them into his mouth and bit down before they could use his tongue for a treadmill. There was a hearty crunch and he could taste their bodily fluid that was released, it was slightly bitter but to his surprise they DID have a nutty flavor. Their carapace was easily chewed though a bit got between his left rear molars, he popped it out with his tongue.

Boyles' eyes had gotten wide. "Well?"

Steven swallowed. "Not bad." He shrugged. "I may develop a taste for them."

He then picked up his glass and sipped the scotch rather than tossing it back, that had been his backup plan in case he needed to kill the taste.

Santiago gave a laugh as he walked away. Jared Boyles, true to his word was reaching for the bowl.

"Thanks Lieutenant. They are well worth a try."

(Reply: Trei)

(Posted by Charles Gatling)

[illegible]

(USS Raptor - Deck 2 - Officers Galley - Operations Ensign James 'Jay' Shaw - 1200)

Shaw sipped his coffee and reviewed his report. He hoped he had captured all the important points. Overall his team was ready. They knew the Raptor and they knew their roles. They were not yet moving telepathically, that is anticipating each others moves and actions. However, that would come with time.

Hitting send, he submitted both his after action reports and a training schedule. That done he turned to his lunch a seafood chowder from his mothers secret recipe, some soda bread and piece of apple cake.

As he ate his lunch, his PADD beeped. Looking at the message, it was approval for his plan. He dashed off a message to his team, with their training schedule.

(reply none)
(posted by Tim)

Sienna found herself with some time the afternoon of the briefing, and had reported back to the Illuminar. She didn't have time to go to the counseling suite, but she did have time for Temas or Alaya to report to her office that she was hurriedly packing up. She sighed, looking around the room. She hadn't had a great deal of time to decorate the place. T'Mur was dealing with their quarters, and Sy had sent Kenna, T'Lah and the ginger baby down with Celiste Winters already. It had just been her luck that by the time the baby kitten she had been engineering had been done her incubation that Leeza had left. It was frustrating but she'd find a home for her in time. Until then Celiste was seeming to enjoy it.

Laredo's voice sounded a little uncertain in his reply. =^=On my way Commander.=^=

And not murdering Weston by tossing him out the nearest airlock. She was still working on that anger management issue in particular. The ring of the door chime broke her chain of thoughts of the things she was planning for the SFI operative.

Turning with a smile towards the door, she nodded to Temas, “Come in. Let’s knock this eval out of the ball park.” She spoke tiredly and little enthusiasm. Surely they could have -planned- and spent the 4 days back to Mars dealing with packing the ship up and not trying to do it within 24 hours.

Temas entered the FO office cautiously. He'd been a little put out that so many of the senior officers had defied his request for evals or just simply did not show up at their appointed time. He had taken the matter up with Sekal who reinforced the directive. He wasn't sure what he was going to encounter, this being the first.

“Commander Verin,” he said, trying to maintain his appearance of confidence, “thank you for seeing me.”

“So. Where do you want to start.” She spoke with little enthusiasm. Had fate been different, Sy would have been a Counselor running across the ship to be both the most and least popular person aboard.

Verin's tone wasn't lost on Temas. He didn't expect a fanfare, but he would have like her to at least be happy to see him.

"May I sit down?" he asked.

Sy nodded, "Do you want a drink? Something to eat? While Luma's not been removed yet, the food should be decent." She was using this as a distraction, not wanting to do this. She knew she was messed up by Starfleet standards.

He nodded and settled in. "Thank you. Just a glass of water would be great." He put his PADD on Verin's desk and looked at her curiously, "Where would you like to start?"

She replicated her coffee concoction and brought the water over to Tamas, "I don't know where to begin, honestly. Do we start with the point that Luma decided that I would die without being pulled back to be with T'Mur? I don't know enough about how bonds work, not even Betazoid bonds. I'm the messed up, one, right? The one with the Imzadi bond who when rejected needed her teacher to break it. The one who couldn't be separated from her twin. Vulcans can do it. They bond and then spend long swathes of time apart." She shrugged and sat down in her favorite, very plush brown chair. She was going to miss the thing. It could massage, heat, wave, and recline, conforming to every movement. It was topped with blankets her Mother had knit on cold Texas winter nights. Picking up one, she began to fold it, then tossed it into the open box. She couldn't seem to sit still.

Tamas couldn't help but smile. She didn't know what to say? She had so much to say it was a stream of consciousness. Then he put a more serious face on as he stood up and moved his chair closer to her. It was much better this way. The wall created by the desk had been eliminated. He thought for a moment, going through what she had said.

"There is a huge difference between a Vulcan bond and the Imzadi bond created with Beazoids. And you have both. As well as a connection with Luma, which holds its own challenges. So I understand your confusion. You have a lot of, for lack of a better way of saying it, baggage to unpack. Excuse the pun. I think we should start at the beginning. It's usually easier that way."

Sy wrinkled her nose but settled back in her chair and said nothing, letting Tamas lead the way.

"Tell me about your relationship with your brother."

She gave Tamas a dirty look, "My twin, the astounding fighter pilot who rocketed to stardom by being the youngest Captain since Kirk? Our Dad's heir? Trip?" She snorted. "What do you want to know about Trip?" Sy had recently dropped the Williams from her family name. She loved her Dad, but she was her Mother's daughter. "Did you know that I have an older half-sister? Her name is Skyler. She's half vulcan, half betazoid and she's stationed aboard a Vulcan Defense ship." So much frustration as Sy sipped on her coffee. "And then there is me."

Tamas nodded, "Okay. Let's stay with Trip for a minute. Then we can talk about Skyler. So Trip is a star? Is that bad that I have no idea who he is? Anyway, what I'd like to know about Trip is how you feel about him."

Sienna looked blank for a moment, "Trip is Captain Williams of the Exeter, though he took some leave with the birth of his second child. He was always the bright star, the one that people liked. I was the party girl, constantly getting into trouble. He's my twin. For most of my life, including through the Academy, we were close. The twin bond never faded on my side when we were adolescents. Riven dealt with that." She shrugged, but still that bitterness was there.

"My twin picked my imzadi to be his first officer over me, because, according to him, he could send her to her death but couldn't do the same for me. It was always supposed to be us. And as soon as he could, he took what was most important to me and gutted me. So I left Mars Base. I'm not thrilled to be back, which is likely why all these memories are so close today."

"I imagine so," Temas said. "Let me ask you this, do you like the life you have now, on the Illuminar?"

Sy gave Temas another look, "Yes. Especially since T'Mur and I had a few days to ourselves. I didn't say I was displeased. It was a lot of effort to get here. I guess I just have a lot of resentment that Trip had life on easy mode...and he's the one living in a house on Earth, and I'm the one headed into the unknown. I won in the competition of Sy and Trip. But it's not fair Temas." She began to run her hands over the soft blanket, playing with the fringe on it. She had been looking forward to shore leave, to being on a beach with T'Mur. The holodeck was nice but nothing beat the real thing.

"Can I tell you a little something about me?" Temas asked.

Sy nodded, listening to Temas. It was the Betazoid way after all, to consider another's viewpoint.

"When I was young, very young, maybe three years old, I was cast aside by my family. Maybe you've heard why. They wanted to have me put down, like a rabid animal. But I was fortunate. Riven Mias found me and took me to the Temple of the Goddess, where, after enduring years of hardship I was able to become the young man you see before you. It's not all, how do the humans put it, rainbows and unicorns? Even now, it's a struggle to sometimes maintain my sanity. I guess the point im trying to make is that we can easily resent the hardships of the past and forget that they were the building blocks of who we are today."

He paused and took a drink of his water. "It's not about what's fair. As Riven used to tell me constantly, life is not always fair. But life is also about taking those challenges and building the best you you can be. I know, it sounds a little hokey. But I don't think that you see what everyone else does when they look at you. You worked hard to get to where you are today. And if I had a choice between you and your easy road brother, I'd pick you as a better leader. You have a strength about you that others don't always see. Sometimes you don't see it either. But it's there. And it's there, partially, because of your struggles."

He paused to let that settle in.

Sienna gave the Counselor a very considering look. ::My parents are proud of Trip, and it seems like over me. Especially Dad. Trip was his heir. Sky wasn't and I certainly wasn't. Dad came to the Illuminar when I was assigned here to talk to me about Trip. My parents are big believers in giving the orphaned children from the Incident on Earth a home. So even now, there are little ones, and our oldest foster sister is..well was on the Exeter. I don't know if she moved to the Hades. Some Sister I was.::

Luma utilized the holo-emitters in Sy's office and appeared in her Snowflake form. , =^= Luma's Sienna was big sister to the Illuminar's Small Ones!=^=

Temas smiled, "Indeed she is. And since Luma and I have found a point to agree upon I think we can end this session here. But I would like to speak with you more. Perhaps next week?"

Sy blinked, "That was a psych evaluation? That was different than any other evaluation I've had before. I know that I should probably continue counseling, but I'm not great with counselors."

=^= Luma's Sienna will be there when Luma is taken from the Illuminar skin? Will Luma's brother and father be there when Luma assumes control of the Raptor skin? ^=

Sy blushed, "I can try and make the time Luma, but I know that Sekal has something he wants to do aboard the Raptor. It's important for the command team to make a good first impression. It's a small ones thing. I can call Admiral Saleke and relay your message. Or you can call him directly."

=^= Is not good to bother Father. Father is very busy. ^= Luma shivered a bit, the entire snowflake lattice trembling. She had accidentally cracked one of the anelurian crystals, and was afraid of what would happen if she fractured one while inside of it.

Sy finally clued in on Luma's anxiety and nerves, "Luma, you have Teras. Teras will do everything he can to help you. You did well when you went to Alaya's wedding in Vex's necklace. Teras would not mind prancing around with a gigantic crystal about his neck. Teras will guard and guide you. It's why you have a bond-mate."

=^= Luma is scared of what is coming. Monsters. ^=

Sy exchanged a look with Teras and projected the vision that she had of the Xenolithe to Teras and Luma. "I'm scared of them too, Luma. Hopefully they won't come for a long time." Sienna tried to be reassuring, but they both needed to know what she had felt. "The rest of it we'll go over in a briefing aboard the Raptor. I'd like you to be there if possible, but if not I'll make sure that the record gets to you." Sy took a deep breath, "You know that this is beyond confidential, so please don't mention it to anyone." Teras." Sienna could be court-martialed for what she had just done, but it would fall under the purview of patient confidentiality since it was brought up in a counseling session.

Teras smiled and held up a hand as if to take a pledge. He vision came to his mind via Luma, who implanted it. Slowly he reached up to his chest and drew a cross on it. He wasn't sure what it meant, but it had significance with Luma, and most likely, Commander Verin.

"I can't see why you couldn't be there, Commander," Teras told her. "You are fit for duty. Your concerns and family issues do not preclude that. As for my evaluation, I don't want you to *feel* evaluated."

What he didn't say was that he saw the core of her confidence issues. But he was hopeful that they could work through them together. She took more time taking care of others rather than herself. He would like her to learn to take some "her" time. Hopefully Lt. Commander T'Mur will be instrumental in that plan.

"But yes, I would like to talk with you more, on the Raptor," he told her. "Perhaps you and Lt. Commander T'Mur would have lunch with me one day."

Sy nodded, "Yes. I have a lot of questions about what it was like growing up in the Temple. I grew up on Earth and the only other Betazoids around were starfleet. Not a lot of Betazoids in Strategic Ops."

Then he looked at Luma. He would have to have a talk with her about interrupting his work time. "As for you, young lady, I will be there every step of the way of your transfer. You have been in Bohb's Liquid anelurian crystal before. And if you like I will wear it like a beautiful pendant. The good news is that it can't break."

Luma squealed in delight and blinked out of existence, stopping the holo-emitters. Sienna looked around her bare office, a rather depressing place. "I hope that we live through this, and that we are going to come back here. I was on this ship when we only had the Bridge complete, sleeping in a bag in a big room, on the ground of a ship that is being built. I know her in a way that no one else did. And I Captain'd her space trials. I think if I ever hit command, I'd want her or another pathfinder variant like this beauty. And the roses. I bet the Raptor doesn't have roses everywhere because the ship loves them." Sienna was feeling better and smiling now, more like herself.

(reply none)
(posted by AI and Mel)

(Mars - Utopia Planitia - Academy Administration - Third Floor - Vice-Admiral Jericho Haynes - 1800)

The Admirals had spent a number of hours mingling after the briefing before going their separate ways. Saleke had an office on the base and Alex Mayorkas as well as the ladies and Jack would be leaving in the morning. Some were no doubt at dinner or had retreated to their temporary rooms on the fifth floor of the building. Jack was in one of the offices making use of the facility.

"Computer record for transmission by voice and text to all personnel from the USS Illuminar, NCC 61240 and currently awaiting assignment. Audio to be broadcast through their communicators and text file directed to the terminals in their assigned quarters. Encryption, beta level and set to their individual access codes."

[Parameters set. Ready for input.]

"From StarFleet Command to the crew of the USS Illuminar. Orders are as follows:

All to report to the transporter hub on the base no later than 0600 on Stardate 2446.06.22 for a temporary transfer to the USS Raptor, NCC 70188. Any belongings remaining behind will be returned to the USS Illuminar for disbursement.

As per directive 901, all personnel are to maintain strict silence on their destination. Leaks found from within the crew to any outside source will be investigated and result in a general courts martial. The command crew and senior officers will be the first to board and following ranks will be taken as they arrive.

From Vice-Admiral Jericho Haynes, StarFleet Tactical."

"End transmission."

[Preparing transmission.]

He grunted as he waited for confirmation.

[Transmission sent to selected personnel and file forwarded.]

"Good." He stood to his feet and walked to the door, it was time for dinner and a beer.

(Reply: All)

(Posted by Charles Gatling)

[illegible]

Tegian had located and reserved a large conference room for all of Engineering to review yesterday's work of the power shutdown. He had made a short speech praising everyone for their hard work and diligence and then asked them what they could have done better or differently. There had been many suggestions, including locking down the rooms that had been powered down so that they didn't have to recheck them upwards of four and five times. Tegian had promised he'd discuss that with security and the Captain if they ever had to go through shutting down the Illuminar again.

When the suggestions stopped, Tegian dismissed everyone but his shift leaders and the four of them pulled chairs together at one end of a table to talk about the teams and if they wanted to switch up shift members whenever they learned what was going to happen next.

All of a sudden, their comm badges came to life

=^= From StarFleet Command to the crew of the USS Illuminar. Orders are as follows:

All to report to the transporter hub on the base no later than 0600 on Stardate 2446.06.22 for a temporary transfer to the USS Raptor, NCC 70188. Any belongings remaining behind will be returned to the USS Illuminar for disbursement.

As per directive 901, all personnel are to maintain strict silence on their destination. Leaks found from within the crew to any outside source will be investigated and result in a general courts martial. The command crew and senior officers will be the first to board and following ranks will be taken as they arrive.

From Vice-Admiral Jericho Haynes, StarFleet Tactical.

"End transmission. =^="

Tegian looked at the others. "Well, I know what we're doing," said Tegian pulling out a PADD and attempting to pull up the schematics on the USS Raptor. He wasn't able to locate anything. Tegian gently tossed his PADD back on the table, frustrated.

"Okay, I guess we're not going to learn anything early. Let's find a place to eat. The meal's on me."

(Reply None)

(Posted by Keith)

[illegible]

(MARS - Marine Compound - Major Audie Murphy - 1805)

Murphy was looking at the eyes only file that had just come in for him. It was from General Berger. Before he could open it, he received a transmission from Admiral Haynes, the head of Star Fleet Tactical. He listened to the message. So his Marines were getting transferred with the rest of the Illuminar Crew.

He sighed, wondering why they were getting transferred. Well, whatever it was, his team would perform.

The screen flashed again. Murphy entered his access code and listened to the message. Shaking his head, he listened to the message a second time. "Well doesn't that beat it all."

In front of him was the new TO&E - seventy marines. First things first, he called Lieutenant Poole and told him to meet Murphy in 20 minutes. His next call was to Lieutenant Temerity.

“Lieutenant, I am assuming you got the same message from Admiral Haynes. I need you to come to my room asap.”

(reply Temerity)

While he waited for Temerity, he started making additional arrangements.

The door chime rang, “Come in,” Murphy called. When Temerity came in, “At east Lieutenant, take a seat.”

“When we move up to the Raptor, our team will be augmented. We’re getting three platoon’s, one of heavy weapons. I want you to take over the Myrmidon’s. They and you will serve as our recon team. Small, mobile. Your goal will be to help us get in and out to wherever we’re going.”

He paused, "I don't know more, at the moment, but why would HQ agree to stationing 70 marines on the Raptor. I suspect that we're learn more tomorrow."

(Reply Temerity)

“Reach out to Lieutenant Poole, he’s going to be our logistics officer. Put your heads together and get us anything you think we might need. I want us to be ready for anything. We’ll regroup with the other officers once we know more. Questions?”

(Reply Temerity)

(Posted by Tim)

[illegible]

(MARS - Marine Compound – 2LT Charles Temerity - 1810)

Temerity received a transmission from Admiral Haynes, the head of StarFleet Tactical. He listened to the message. So, himself along with the rest of the Marines were getting transferred with the rest of the Illuminar Crew to the Raptor.

“What kind of jackass-ery is this?” he said to himself as he shook his head. It didn’t take long for a second message to come in after the first. This one was from the Major.

=^= Lieutenant, I am assuming you got the same message from Admiral Haynes. I need you to come to my room asap. ^=^=

"Roger that, Sir. On my way." He responded, still shaking his head.

Charles pressed the button for the door chime, “Come in,” Murphy called. Once in the room, Temerity automatically went to the position of attention. “At ease Lieutenant, take a seat.” Murphy had instructed before Temerity could ‘properly report’, but quietly sat down as instructed.

“When we move up to the Raptor, our team will be augmented. We’re getting three platoons, one of heavy weapons. I want you to take over the Myrmidons. They and you will serve as our recon team. Small, mobile. Your goal will be to help us get in and out to wherever we’re going.”

He paused, "I don't know more, at the moment, but why would HQ agree to stationing 70 marines on the Raptor. I suspect that we'll learn more tomorrow."

Charles couldn't stop himself, with a snicker he commented, "Copy, sir. Fleet has us set to Mushroom Mode. What can I do to help out?"

“Reach out to Lieutenant Poole, he’s going to be our logistics officer. Put your heads together and get us anything you think we might need. I want us to be ready for anything. We’ll regroup with the other officers once we know more. Questions?”

“Not yet. I’ll get with Poole and we’ll make mission happen. Is there anything else, Sir?”

(Reply: Murphy)

“Roger that.” Was all the newly christened Myrmidon leader said as he departed the room.

(Reply: Murphy)

(Posted: Charles Raschen)

[illegible]

(Mars Complex - Lars Promotion and Nightclub - SO - Lt. Cal Dogan - 1830)

Dogan had not been one to attend celebratory events, but since the entire Security staff had been given the day off they all had convinced him that he needed to join them. It was a “departmental requisit.” They called it team building. The Brikar didn’t always understand the constant need to “bond” as a team, but he had come to realize that the team worked more effectively when they have had those bonding times, so he agreed.

Somebody had discovered that there was a nightclub that promoted fights for the general public. The establishment was called Lars Promotion and night club. Everyone in security decided that they should all test their metal against whatever Mars had to offer.

They had all entered the establishment a little rowdier than he would have liked, but he had noted that species got excited at these times. Drinks had been ordered and stories were being told. Often the stories were clear exaggerations of conquests of perspective mates or battles that they had engaged with. Sometimes these battles appeared to be influenced by the alcoholic beverages they consumed. Perhaps the exaggerations were similarly influenced by the beverages they were currently consuming.

The server approached Cal with a smile, "And how about you, my large friend. I see that you aren't drinking. What can I get you? On the house."

Cal looked at her quizzically, "And why would I want to have my drink poured on a house. I would have trouble consuming it. Unless you want me to stand up a house to drink it?"

The server had trouble stifling her laugh. She had met many species, and usually only Vulcans took her words so seriously. And few of them ever came in here. She'd never met a Brikarian before. "No, no, I mean, the drink is free."

"Ahhh," Cal nodded, understanding. His nod seemed more like a bow, since his joints didn't bend quite the way everyone else's did. "I understand. However, I do not consume alcoholic beverages. It... disagrees with my digestion. Water is fine."

The girl made a disapproving face, "Water? Really? Can we try something with a little more flavor? Howabout... a strawberry milkshake?"

Cal sighed. He knew that this was not going to end till he acquiesced. "I will try your strawberry milkshake."

The girl skipped off happily and returned with his drink. It had a long cylinder in it that Cal realized he was supposed to drink the thick liquid through. He put the cylinder in his mouth and closed his lips around it. A drop of the cold, sweet drink fell from the straw onto his tongue and he took the moment to contemplate the flavor. He took a longer sip and then examined the texture of it. Finally he looked at the server and said, "An excellent beverage. I appreciate your recommendation."

The girl almost squealed with the pleasure of his compliment and skipped off to serve someone else. Cal stood in the background of the establishment enjoying his drink and observing his fellow security officers in their celebration. Suddenly a bell rang and an announcement came over the din.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the amplified voice announced, "and I may be using those terms loosely with this crowd." There was a round of laughter and cat calls at that. "I want to announce that Fight Club is now open in the back room. We accept all and any who want to test their skills."

An arousing cheer ran through the room and people headed to the back where there was a "fight pit." Inside were two beings already, a human and a Bajoran. A bell rang and the combatants engaged. The fight didn't take long, and the Bajoran came out on top. Apparently the rule was that you fought until you gave up or lost. It appeared that the prize of winning increased with each victory. But, of course, the victor had no idea who their next opponent was.

The Bajoran opted to take on a second fight. This time his opponent was a female Andorian, Shosi Koks of the Illuminar. The fight was long and quite brutal. The Bajoran did well until the Koks slid under his attack and ended the fight with a barrage of strikes that dropped her opponent to the floor. Shosi, however, opted to end her run. She exited the pit to a round of cheers from the crew of the Illuminar, and jeers from many others.

The next fight was Koreg M'd'unas, from the Illuminar, against an anonymous Nausican. The fight was hard. The Klingon fought with honor. But the Nausican did what was an illegal move in all legitimate fight venues, but it seems that the pit had a no rules rule. There cries of unfairness as Koreg was carried out of the pit. Suddenly the others all turned to Dogan.

"Come on Cal, you need to fight this guy," David Lannox insisted.

"Yeah, LT," came a round of agreement. "For the Illuminar."

Cal frowned at the group, but they did invoke the honor of the ship. He took a deep breath and shrugged. "Fine."

They all walked him to the edge of the pit.

"Looks like we have a new challenger," the announcer said. Somebody came to whisper in his ear. He nodded and said, "Welcome to the club a first timer, Cal Dolan." The man next to him tugged on his sleeve and said something. He said, "My apologies, Dogan. Cal Dogan."

The Nausican looked at the entrance and growled at it, until Dogan walked through it. The Nausican took a step back. Brikarians were rare in the universe and clearly the Nausican had no idea what he was facing, but he did know enough to be concerned.

The door closed behind the Brikar and a bell rang. As Cal turned the Nausican launched a viscous attack. His flurry of blows fell upon him like a sudden downpour of violence. Cal stood there and absorbed all of the punishment. When the Nausican stepped back, breathing hard, the worst that had happened was that Cal's shirt was now torn.

He looked at the Nausican and said, "That was my favorite shirt."

Moving quicker than anyone thought he could he moved across the floor and lifted his fist. It connected with the Nausican's face. The Nausican went flying back and hit the wall. He slid to the floor, stunned. The room exploded with cheers.

Shaking his head the Nausican stood up. He reached behind his back and drew a bladed weapon. The crowd booed at the move, but the no rules rule was still in effect. The blade shot forward and broke on Cal's exposed chest. The Brikar shook his head at the Nausican and reached out and grabbed him by the neck. He looked over at the crew of the Illuminar, who were going wild.

"That was not..." how did they say it, "cool."

He hit the Nausican on the top of the head and let him go. He slumped to the ground.

Thinking the fight was over he turned to walk back to the exit. Suddenly three other Nausicans jumped into the pit and attacked. Their blades slid across his back, slicing what was left of his shirt. Cal froze for a moment then turned with a wide sweep of his arm. The first Nausican ducked under the slow strike, but was caught by the second hand, which picked him up by the scruff of his neck. He came back with the first hand and grabbed another by the shirt. He brought both of his hands together, smacking the two Nausicans together. They also dropped the ground, blood pouring out of their facial orifices. The last Nausicans pulled out what appeared to be some kind of small explosive device and tossed it at Dogan. The Brikar caught it

and held it between his hands. There was a small explosion and smoke billowed out from between his fingers.

Cal looked at the Nausican with narrowing eyes. The move took no consideration of the safety of the spectators. He stepped forward. The Nausican made a sudden turn to retreat but neglected to realize how close to the wall he was. He ran face first into the wall, knocking himself senseless.

The whole room erupted and people cheered. Finally Cal turned to leave the pit.

“Ladies and gentlemen, are there any other takers for Cal Dogan.”

There was absolute silence in the arena area.

"I believe we have a champion. Uncontested. Come and collect your prize."

The cheer for Cal was a little less than the one for the prize. The club picked up the tab for his party's food and drinks for the night.

(reply none, any in Security)
(posted by Al Muir)

[illegible]

(USS Illuminar - Deck 5 - Primary Computer Core Access - Captain Sekal, Commander Verin, Lt. Commander T'Mur, Lt Bohb and Temas Laredo - 2320)

Bohb moved around the liquid analeurian crystal device with his tricorder. Like a concerned parent he checked and rechecked the power conversion levels, which had remained constant from the moment it had been turned on. The quantum battery he developed was functioning even better than expected. There was no sign of power decrease, and no sign of degradation in the photonic stream.

Satisfied that his parameters had been met he tapped his comm badge. “Bohb to Captain Sekal, everything is set for the transfer.”

=^=Affirmative. On my way.^=

Bohb then tapped his comm badge again. "Bohb to Tamas, we're ready for you." He suddenly appeared, transported in by Luma. He wasn't sure whether to laugh or be angry, but he was a bit disoriented by the sudden, unannounced, transport. He steadied himself and noticed Commander Verin there. She looked a bit... bedraggled.

For Sienna it had been a long, long day so far and it was far from over. She had accepted that she wasn't going to be sleeping this night and would grab a power nap at some point... or more coffee. Sienna was well known for her coffee concoction and for running on sugar and caffeine but had changed her usual, preferred drink to a tall insulated mug of black coffee. She nodded to Temas as she stood to one side.

::Okay Luma, let's get started.::

The holo-emitters in the computer core flashed as Luma appeared in her anime-cat form. Whatever officer had introduced their ship to Japanese anime was going to get their head

smacked in what her Father had called the Jethro-slap. "Luma are you excited about your move to the Raptor?" Sy spoke as brightly as she could, being that it was close to the dawning of a new day and it had been far too many hours since she had slept in her nest of a bed.

=^= Luma is scared. The Raptor has big teeth and good protection but the Monsters are BAD and Luma does not want to meet them. ^=

Sy looked over to Temas, and getting no guidance, continued, "It's all right. Your Brother will protect you and make sure you are safe."

Luma was having none of this, and spoke quickly as Sekal appeared as if conjured by her thought, ^=Many Small Ones will embrace entropy. Luma does not want more Small Ones to cease existing in corporeal form. Luma has not found the dimension or parallel universe where the Small Ones go when they cease to function by embracing entropy.=^=

He walked up and stopped within arms length of the core then turned his head quizzically. He spoke to none in particular but included all. "For what reason does Luma believe that there are going to be many casualties due to the move to another ship? Raptor's mission is classified."

Luma turned to her Brother and ignored the commentary, ^= Does Luma's Brother know where the Small Ones go? Luma wants to find the universe so that Luma will not be sad. ^=

"No." He said to her then turned to Sienna. "Commander Verin, I will ask again. What information has been divulged?"

Sy took a deep breath, "During my evaluation with Counselor Laredo we spoke briefly about the visions I had when Luma expressed similar concerns. I do not know how she came about the information, but I could guess. I shared the visions I had from Q with the Counselor so that he would be forewarned and gave him the caution about it being classified. I also expressed the wish that he be present during the briefing to the senior staff."

Luma frowned, ^= Why is Luma's Brother being cranky? Luma can make one of Sienna's coffees for her Sekal if he needs more of the caffeine.=^= Luma bounced happily in front of Sekal, a purple haired anime character with a cat tail and ears, also purple. Luma wore a flowing, glittering cloth thing that had no visible clasp. She was, in every way, Sekal's opposite, and she utterly loved her Brother.

The Vulcan considered for a moment, information delivered during counseling sessions was privileged information and recognized as such by StarFleet Command. As for her knowledge which was unrelated, she was a being existing in a host of multiple timelines. Her knowledge of future events was untested and could be the result of an alternate timeline ... or not. The future was fluid and uncertain. "The inclusion of the Counselor is a logical step." He then looked at Luma who had performed one of her mercurial emotional changes. "A stimulant is unnecessary. Are you ready for the transfer?"

Bohb looked over at Temas. Temas looked at Luma.

::Are you ready Luma? You've done this before so don't be afraid.::

Luma made a whimpering sound and then the cat-creature spoke, ^= Luma is ready. Luma does not wish to remain in the crystal for longer than necessary. Luma wishes her Father to be

there when Luma is placed into the Raptor's skin. Luma is looking forward to big teeth and many, many more small ones to care for. Luma is excited. ^= Luma wasn't going to tell her brother that she had been listening to all the subspace communications around her. Being near Earth meant being near the SFI and Luma outside the ship was basically helpless. Luma had no plans to let herself be stolen by the SFI.

=^= Our T'Mur will stay with Luma and protect the crystal? None of the bad SFI will steal Luma? Luma will be safe? Tamas will be safe? Luma trusts Our T'Mur who belongs to our Sienna? ^= Sy looked over towards T'Mur and radiated pride for her mate.

T'Mur, standing in the background, stepped forward. She couldn't help but smile a little at the reference to belonging to Sienna. "Affirmative. I assure you that you will be safe. Nobody will take you. I will be your protection detail while Mr. Laredo carries the LACD."

He nodded to Bohb. Bohb smiled and put a big hand on Tamas' shoulder then turned to Sekal. "We're as ready as we'll ever be, Captain," the Magellan said.

He gazed at the Lenai. "This transfer has been done before with no issue. It has been scientifically proven. And its simplicity makes it incontrovertibly safe. There will be no issues. Mister Bohb, please proceed."

Bohb beamed at the words from his CO. He agreed with every one of them but it was nice to hear them from a scientist with Sekal's reputation. He moved over to the transfer station and hit the power transfer sequence.

"Time to move Luma," he said.

The image of Luma disappeared as the lights on deck 5 dimmed slightly. When they came back to full power the case glowed a brilliant pink. Bohb scanned the device with scrutiny for a minute.

"She's in there," he said. "And as far as I can tell, doing just fine. Tamas?"

Tamas has closed his eyes as the transfer occurred. He had felt a little more disoriented than the sudden transport left him earlier. He reached out with his mind.

::How are doing Luma?::

::Luma misses the feel of the strands as the skin travels the star-song. The crystal is limiting, and limitless at the same time. Luma loves Tamas and will use her Tamas' senses::

Sienna waited for Tamas to check on her. She knew that she needed to speak with Tamas after the briefing. It would be a difficult thing for Luma to turn her back on the crew and leave them to death to save herself. Hearing about the living ships from the briefing, she had no desire for Luma to be subjected to the cruelty of becoming one of those ships, and forced to fight her people. Sienna knew that every being had a breaking point and that Luma would have her own. It worried her. "Is she all right? I can't feel her unless I am holding the crystal." Sienna was glad that T'Mur was taking Luma's protection 'detail' seriously even though the threat was non-existent. It would be fine. "Too bad we can't install her right now." Sy turned a bit to hear Tamas speak.

Temas smiled. He understood her sensation of restriction. It reminded him of his quarantine quarters in the temple which had telepathic inhibitors. They prevented the minds of all the telepaths on Betazed from driving him mad. They created a necessary solitude.

“She is fine. She feels... restricted. I can feel her loneliness. But she is not alone. And now she has me. She’s in me and can feel through me. And I... I can hear the songs. Can you hear them? So beautiful.”

The Captain, satisfied motioned for everyone to move along. "It is time to leave. I expect everyone to be prompt for the transport to the Raptor in the morning."

(Reply: None)

(Posted by Al, Mel and Charles)

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End Compile