

Captain Eric W. Johnson leaned back in his command chair. It was his first real command and he was quite excited, though he would not allow the crew to notice it. *'Spoil my calm-as-a-Vulcan reputation?'* he thought to himself with a smile.

He surveyed the bridge of the Tikopai-class starship *USS Arcturus* – now his *USS Arcturus* – which had recently completed a refit so that her capabilities rivaled even those of her more famous sister ship, the *Enterprise*. Johnson's last assignment, the dreadnought *Ascension*, may have been a bigger ship, but was it a better one? *'No way!'* Johnson mentally exclaimed.

He decided to find out just how good his ship was. It was time to check out the most important components of a vessel – its crew.

"Mister Lorrass," he said to his communications officer, "patch me into ship-wide." Aerina Lorrass, the brawny yet attractive Cygnian complied, nodding to the captain that he was patched through. "This is Captain Johnson speaking. To those of you serving under me or aboard this vessel for the first time, welcome. To those of you I have 'inherited' or who have served with me before, welcome back. I'll want to meet personally with many of you, so Yeoman M'rrestach will schedule interviews in my quarters by department. I look forward to a productive and enjoyable tour of duty and trust that you will verify my faith that this crew is the best in Starfleet. Captain Johnson, out."

Did the captain hear faint cheering in the background? He certainly hoped so.

Johnson rose from the center seat and stretched himself as his efficient Caitian Yeoman appeared to receive the captain's instructions. He gave them, signed her always-accurate reports, then turned to his executive officer.

"Commander Kira, you have the conn," he said as he turned quickly and half-ran to the turbolift. Johnson thought he saw a grin on his first and chief science officer's face as he left. It would not surprise him, since Commander Kira K'tal Tefallaran Smith seemed to enjoy teasing her superior officer. She was a green Orion and quite open in her sensuality. Trained as 'Lodubyaln,' a slave girl, she knew how to use her body to excellent effect. This plus her emotion-altering pheromones could drive men wild.

Being a very practical man, Johnson ordered Yeoman M'rrestach to schedule interviews with the science department first. "Tackle the largest division first and the rest will seem easier by comparison," he reasoned.

Obviously, interviewing 500 crewmen would be an impossible task, but it seemed that certain personnel stood apart from others. As the famous Captain Kirk had his Spock, McCoy, and Scott; Eric W. Johnson would soon discover that he had some unique, to say the least, subordinates.

Space, the Final Frontier...

These are the voyages of the starship *Arcturus*!

## Star Trek: Arcturus

### "Phoenix Arise!" By Michael S. Cohen

Captain Johnson must have wondered just how much Yeoman M'rrestach knew about his private life, for his first interviewee turned out to be Biologist Athena Arcadian. A native of the colony world Alpha Centauri, Arcadian and Johnson had met before; 'met,' perhaps, being a strong understatement.

Eric Johnson had first encountered Arcadian when her father boarded the *Ascension* on a diplomatic mission, bringing his lovely daughter along. Almost immediately the two had formed a very strong relationship.

Johnson broke free of his reminiscence and smiled at his very dear companion.

"Mister Arcadian," he began mock-formally, "when do you intend to stop attending those Deck 7 parties and finish your officer's training?"

Arcadian smiled back as she replied, "Well, sir, my roommate's the one being slow. You know how those Deltans are. No one is going to split us up! I don't graduate till she does!"

Johnson admired Arcadian's loyalty to her fellow crewman, but was struck by recent changes to her patterns of speech. Gone was the formality and reserve normally associated with those from Alpha Centauri, and in their place had come animated gestures and a free smile more reminiscent of humans raised on Earth. And had he really seen her shake hands with another crewman the previous night!? There was no greater insult one could direct at a Centauri but to offer to shake his or her hand, yet Arcadian had apparently overcome this cultural trait.

The captain and the petty officer continued to exchange pleasantries until, their time elapsed, Johnson finally and reluctantly dismissed her. How he longed to hold her in his arms again! Instead, Johnson quickly composed himself in preparation for his next science specialist. He was immediately relieved, for this man was a Vulcan, a member of one of the most intelligent and efficient races in the galaxy. The crewman raised his hand and offered the traditional salute of his people before saying, "Petty Officer 3rd Class Samuk, reporting as requested, Captain."

Johnson was in the process of standing and offering his hand but quickly caught himself and forced his fingers into the well-known, and sometimes painful, Vulcan salute in return. To Johnson's amazement, the Vulcan offered the captain his hand!

"As you honor my race's customs, sir, so shall I honor yours," Samuk stated. "If you will permit me a moment to prepare my mind..."

The Vulcan meditated for a moment, then nodded. Unbelieving, the captain accepted the crewman's strong grip.

"You have an excellent record, Mister Samuk," Captain Johnson stated. "You seem especially qualified in computer technology. Have you decided on a specialty yet?"

"Negative, sir," Samuk replied. "I hope to examine all available opportunities, then choose the most logical course."

Was there... amusement... in the young Vulcan's eyes? Impossible, Johnson insisted to himself.

"Suppose I need to place you in an area you weren't considering? Would that pose any difficulty?" he inquired.

"No, sir," Samuk replied. "I am pleased to serve in whatever capacity you see fit. I simply wish to serve with honor."

"Excellent, Petty Officer Samuk. Welcome aboard the *Arcturus*. Dismissed."

Samuk again offered the Vulcan salute and left. Johnson shook his head. "Hope," Samuk had said. "Pleased to serve." The Vulcan was practically speaking a foreign language!

As the next science officer entered his quarters, Johnson must have thought that the room's thermal controls had failed. He suddenly felt cold; very cold.

The man stood two meters tall and possessed an obviously powerful physique. His face was stone-like; unsmiling, harsh, perhaps even hostile. Johnson would normally have felt at ease at this point. After all, Petty Officer Samuk had seemed to be a highly atypical Vulcan. Now here before him was the very essence of a Vulcan security officer. The only problem was that the individual standing before him was not a security officer, and he was certainly no Vulcan!

The officer's personnel file indicated he was Lieutenant (Junior Grade) Bael V'ahhst-Ohrne'-Dagon of Efros Delta. Efros Delta, an icy world with much in common with Andoria, had joined the Federation only eight years prior and its natives were only now finding places in Starfleet.

Johnson studied Bael's file, frowning slightly.

"I see from your personnel record that you've recently been promoted and assigned as assistant chief science officer," the captain said. "Yet your academic record doesn't indicate any great merit. I don't want it to affect your performance in such an important position on this ship, Mister Dagon."

Normally, it took a great deal to irk Captain Johnson. After his recent brush with death on the *Ascension*, during which he had suffered massive exposure to Delta and Berthold radiation, Johnson had learned patience and stoicism. He had had to – without those attributes, the agony alone might have killed him. In his present circumstance, however, Johnson was becoming annoyed. According to the Efrosian officer's file, he had previously served aboard the *USS Aerfen*, the military vessel once captained by the legendary Captain Hunter, now under the command of her first officer, Ilya Nicolievich. Nicolievich was considered a fine captain and had a reputation of keeping crew members for longer than the average tour of duty. In short, Nicolievich never transferred, nor allowed to be transferred, anyone he liked. Based on these facts, the Efrosian officer was obviously was a discipline problem!

Bael simply stared back into his new captain's eyes, continuing to say nothing.

"I trust, Mister Dagon," Johnson continued, "that any problems you may have had in the past will not continue on this vessel."

The Efrosian opened his mouth to speak. "Correct, Captain," he replied in a booming tone.

Johnson waited for Bael's excuse for his poor conduct aboard his previous command. He received none.

"At ease, Mister," Johnson commanded, looking up at the Efrosian. The man was insufferable. Johnson wondered how such an insubordinate, anti-social misanthrope as Bael V'ahhst-Ohrne'-Dagon even enter Starfleet, let alone become an assistant department head?? "Lieutenant Dagon, you will at least explain why you

transferred from navigation to sciences. I understand that Efrosians are among the best navigators now serving in Starfleet.”

“A poor record, Captain,” the Efrosian responded tersely. “My aptitude is the Social Sciences.”

Johnson gave up trying to get a complete answer from his new officer.

“Very well, Mister Dagon. Perhaps you can lower yourself to talk to me at another time? Dismissed.”

Unexpectedly, the Efrosian spoke again.

“Baael, respectfully, Captain.”

Johnson was becoming further irked. *‘The nerve of this man!’* he thought to himself. *‘He stands here treating me like an inferior, then has the gall to make a request of me?’* But before allowing his growing anger to show, Johnson stopped himself. *‘Perhaps here might be a chance to find out what makes Efrosians tick?’*

“All right... Baael,” Johnson said civilly. “I’ll show you some respect if you reciprocate. At least explain why how I address you is so important.”

Baael looked at Captain Johnson with icy blue eyes as he said, “I have not yet... earned ‘Dagon,’ Captain. Put simply, I am not yet... mature.”

*‘That seems to be the understatement of the year,’* Johnson theorized. It appeared that this new officer was totally narcissistic. If... Baael... expected his promotion and assignment to remain as they were, he would have to shape up ...fast.

“Very well then, Mister Baael. Dismissed.”

Baael tuned and left. As soon as his cabin door swished shut, Johnson immediately activated his computer monitor and studied the information on Efros Delta and its people provided there. Efrosians appeared basically human, but thousands of years spent on living on their arctic home world had caused them to evolve areas of protective fatty tissue on their faces, usually denoted by the white markings on their faces. Icy blue tended to be the predominant Efrosian eye color, while nearly pure white was the common hair color for males – believed to have allowed prehistoric hunting parties to blend in better with their arctic environment – while females generally tended to have black hair, and it was a social stigma for males to be born with black hair – considered a feminine trait, one that young males with such a condition were often banished from their tribes for.

According to the computer records, Efros Delta’s most unique aspect was the race’s intense secrecy concerning its religion. Precious little was known about Efrosian beliefs, and they seemed to be content to leave it that way. What was known was that a caste system existed, one in which spiritual leaders, the so-called ‘Warrior-Priests,’ were considered the most important members of their tribes.

Johnson checked. As he had suspected, Lieutenant Baael was an Efrosian Warrior-Priest. No wonder he seemed so arrogant! Or was it truly arrogance? Johnson’s eyes fell on a passage in Baael’s personnel record stating that Efrosian starship personnel almost exclusively specialized in helm and navigation or the medical sciences, yet Baael’s grades at the Academy were barely passing in all of these.

“Ah, ha!” Johnson exclaimed to himself. “It’s not that he is arrogant! He’s ashamed! Obviously Baael feels inadequate for being talented in only one field, and that particular field is considered beneath the Efrosian norm. That also explained Baael’s social deficiencies--most Efrosians interact freely with other races, but Baael does not feel comfortable doing so because of how he was raised.”

Johnson was pleased with himself for figuring out the Efrosian so thoroughly. Little did he know at the time how wrong he was. Meanwhile, he prepared for the next crew member. ‘Oh, no!’ he thought to himself as he looked at his schedule. ‘A Deltan!’ His fears were confirmed as, a moment later, Petty Officer Iona Hanlon entered his quarters. The woman was a goddess. Standing 1.7 meters, her complete hairlessness unconsciously caused him to think she was naked! But no, she was dressed quite correctly in her Starfleet uniform, her posture militarily perfect.

“At ease, Petty Officer Hanlon,” he forced himself to say.

Hanlon was quite desirable. Johnson commanded himself to remember that all Deltans radiated a pheromone-like aura which caused sexual arousal in most beings of the opposite gender.

‘*Sorry, Athena,*’ Johnson said to himself. *‘It isn’t my fault! She’s a Deltan!’* Captain Johnson then attempted to gather his thoughts. “Have you considered a specialty yet, Petty Officer Hanlon?”

“My interests lie within astrophysics, sir,” the Deltan woman responded. “I would like to experience many fields before entrapping myself. Is this acceptable?”

The captain nodded. “It’s always best to explore all options,” Johnson agreed. “Sciences is relatively well staffed at this point,” he added, apparently awaiting something else. After an embarrassingly long pause, he received it.

“Of course, sir,” Hanlon said finally. “My Oath of Celibacy is officially on record.”

Johnson regretted the awkwardness of the meeting. He was usually a very calm person. It must have been a combination of the Deltan pheromones and his prior interview with that snow-white haired Efrosian demagogue...

"I have... several things to which I must attend," the captain remarked diplomatically. "If you will excuse me, I would like to speak to you again when I am more available... I mean, when I have time. Dismissed."

"I understand, sir," Hanlon answered. "I understand more than you may think, my dear Captain," she added to herself with a giggle as she exited into the corridor. Not only did she have the advantage of the Deltan empathic skill, but she also happened to be the cabinmate of Athena Arcadian, the Captain's paramour.

Over the course of the next few hours, Johnson interviewed several other new specialists assigned to the science department, then took advantage of the free time M'rastach's scheduling provided to go the ship's gymnasium. Johnson enjoyed physical activity of all sorts, but his greatest love was swordsmanship. He was in luck, for as he entered the gym he noticed a fellow swashbuckler-at-heart practicing alone. Perhaps, the captain thought, the man would make a good sparring partner.

"Attention on deck!" someone across the room shouted, and everyone in the gym snapped to attention, making Captain Johnson immediately sorry he had entered. The gymnasium was no place for formalities. He instantly decided to follow in the footsteps of other starship commanders he knew as he walked over to the nearest intercom panel and activated it.

"Attention, all personnel," he proclaimed. "It is my standing order that military decorum be suspended in the gym and recreation areas aboard this starship. There is a place to be soldiers, but let's not forget to be people also."

As Johnson deactivated the intercom panel, everyone in the gym returned to what they had been doing prior to his entry. The captain walked over to where the crew member in the fencing uniform was resuming his practice.

"Can I interest you in a match?" he challenged informally yet correctly.

The man turned toward him, and Johnson was shocked to realize that even through the protective mask, he could tell his opponent was barely older than a boy. The boy looked surprised when he realized who had issued the challenge, but replied, "I would be honored, Sire!" His wording sounded odd, and he bowed in an archaic fashion.

"Fine!" Johnson replied brightly. "Just give me a moment to change."

The captain changed into a fencing uniform quickly, then joined the boy on the fencing mat, raising his sword in front of his face in salute.

"Before we begin," he said to his opponent, "tell me a little about yourself."

The boy bowed again before replying, "I be Galen, M'lord, Galen DuLac, a rider of this great metallic steed."

M'lord? Sire? Metallic steed? Johnson was perplexed. "Where are you from, Mister DuLac?" he asked.

"I hail from Sherwood of Avalon, Sire," DuLac replied.

Johnson had heard of the world, one of Earth's oldest colonies, founded by colonists who preferred the ancient lifestyle lived by Medieval Europeans, who shunned all modern technology once their colony had grown self-sufficient. While officially a Federation protectorate, the citizens of Avalon rarely if ever interacted with anyone beyond their own world.

"Avalon!? Impossible!" Johnson protested. "Avalon's people reject technology! How did you reach Starfleet Academy at all, not to mention passing all the 'modern' courses?"

"Thy words be true, Sire," the young man answered sadly. "I have always been... different." He then brightened quickly as he added, "Dragon-slaying be rewarding, but surely My Lord understands the far greater joy of exploring this vast black wilderness!"

Johnson smiled, enjoying his conversation.

"One of these metal sky steeds soars to Avalon yon and again for to check upon us. I begged the Lord... ah, 'Captain,' for passage away from Avalon, having heard magnificent tales of thy glorious academy! He took pity on me and allowed to serve as his page; 'Yeoman' as he dubbed me. He permitted this poor servant to study the master's vessel and found me of Knight potential as a 'helmsman' and 'navigator,' and so sponsored I to attend the fabled Starfleet Academy. I swore not to disappoint him, so I studied diligently. The Great God aided my endeavors and allowed me to succeed and be granted squirehood here, on an explorer craft. I vow to serve thee with joy and honor as I did he, Master... er... Captain. Forgive thy foolish vassal," he concluded sheepishly. "Thy... Your speech is still difficult for me."

Johnson could not help grinning. This young man's enthusiasm and awe were exhilarating.

"Don't worry about that, Mister DuLac," Johnson replied. "I don't think you'll be a problem. But would you object to my checking up on your background a bit more?"

"Nay, M'Lord," DuLac replied. "Thy servant hath no secrets from thee."

Satisfied for the moment that the young crew member was who he claimed to be, Johnson donned his vizard, the protective mask worn by fencers. DuLac did likewise.

"I hope your swordsmanship is up to the reputation I have heard concerning Avalonians?" the captain remarked.

"I shall attempt to give thee a worthy challenge, M'Lord," was DuLac's reply as he raised his sword in the en garde position. Within moments, the two officers were fighting, the fencing Épées clicking together repeatedly as each opponent feinted and parried back and forth. The kid gave Johnson a fight he would not soon forget, the youth's sword flying through the air, eventually striking the captain's shoulder-marker cleanly.

"Damn, one point already!" Johnson swore to himself. "This kid IS good!!"

Johnson's normally-controlled competitive nature asserted itself viciously. He had recently won at love with Athena. Now he would win at 'war.' Johnson's Épée blade met DuLac's so hard that sparks flew! The two opponents went at each other fiercely for several more seconds, until Johnson noticed DuLac seemed to be growing fatigued. The captain knew what was really happening, though.

"No, Mister DuLac!" he demanded. "Don't you dare hold back on me! Consider that an order!"

"As thou dost command, Sire," the chastened youth replied as he obeyed. Once more his blade struck the captain's with titanic force. Johnson grew excited. All the emotions of the day flooded his mind and spirit rapidly... perhaps too rapidly.

*'What a day,' Johnson thought. 'Athena, a humanized Vulcan, a enigmatic Efrosian, that goddess of a Deltan, this terrific kid. What a crew!! Almost too many things to think about at once... Oh, no!'*

Lights flashed before the captain's eyes and the room began to spin. An all too familiar warmth flooded his cranium and progressed to an acid-like burning. Johnson groaned as he dropped his sword. Worse yet, DuLac, who had not realized what was happening to his new captain, continued his thrust, aiming for Johnson's left shoulder. He sliced into the captain's arm instead. Johnson yelled as he fell to his knees. DuLac was horrified when he realized what had happened.

"My Lord! What have I done?!?"

As he fell prone on the gymnasium floor, Johnson forced his searing lips to move.

"No...! Sickbay...! Hurry...!"

DuLac raced to the nearest intercom, slamming his palm against it as he shouted, "Medical emergency in the gym, deck 8! The Captain is gravely wounded!!" Johnson was too incapacitated at the moment to notice that DuLac's Medieval vocabulary and mannerisms had vanished altogether! Meanwhile, as other members of the crew who had been in the gym rushed to Johnson's side to offer aid, DuLac staggered to the other side of the gymnasium, too ashamed to face the man he had nearly murdered.

Less than a minute later, a medical team from sickbay arrived. Leading the team was the tall, statuesque chief medical officer, called Morgaan by the crew, a corruption of her Capellan tribal name; Morgaan.

Dr. Morgaan tore off the captain's blood soaked sleeve with almost contemptuous ease. The doctor, like all Capellans, was quite strong. Instead of modern medicines, she placed strange roots and herbs she carried in a portable pack on his damaged arm, then noting Johnson's contorted, flushed face, placed a hypo capsule on his forehead, spraying the blessed relief known as hyronalin directly into his brain. Moments later, Johnson was able to open his eyes.

"Thank you, Doctor," was all he could say, until he saw something occurring out of the corner of his right eye. "Morgaan! Stop him!!" he ordered frantically.

Dr. Morgaan whirled around to see that DuLac had removed his protective fencing uniform and was preparing to plunge his sword into his abdomen!! The doctor ran three steps, then leaped into the air and tackled the boy, easily forcing the blade out of his hand. Morgaan then jammed a sedative-laced hypo into his arm. DuLac immediately collapsed.

"Take them both to sickbay," Morgaan commanded her orderlies.

Several minutes later, the captain regained full cognizance on one of the biobeds in sickbay. He looked at his wound, noticing for the first time the dead plant parts lying on his now-totally healed arm.

"I sure won't question Morgaan's plant therapies anymore," he said to himself. He then reached toward the intercom beside his bed and activated it. "Doctor Morgaan, I'd like to see you," he said. Morgaan soon appeared at his side.

"Where's Mister DuLac?" he inquired.

"The youth is in the other ward," she replied. "He is physically unmarred."

"Have his medical file sent to my monitor. I'm going to review that and his duty file. I've got to get into his head. One thing I don't need is a suicidal navigator!"

Morgaan wanted the captain to get more rest, but she could not deny that he was right. She accessed DuLac's file and set it up for Johnson to read at his convenience.

Johnson sat up slightly in bed before activating the small arm-mounted monitor and calling up the requested files. The files showed that Galen DuLac had petitioned the captain of the scout vessel *USS Hermes* to leave Avalon aboard his ship at the young age of fourteen. Proving his worth aboard the ship after several weeks, now-Petty Officer Galen DuLac had served as a yeoman, later a navigation trainee, performing loyally and unswervingly. Upon the *Hermes* return to Earth several months later, the captain had sponsored the young Avalonian teen's entry into Starfleet Academy in spite of his age and cultural background, where he graduated at the tender age of 18 a respectable 32<sup>nd</sup> of more than 150 in his class. The *Arcturus* was his first deep-space assignment since his graduation.

The more Johnson thought about it, the more positive he was that DuLac had been too young to not only attend the Academy, but to leave his homeworld in the first place, and the stresses of living in so different a culture from where he had been raised no doubt affected the boy's psyche. Johnson searched his mind for some way to restore DuLac's mental health. He could, after all, not afford a psychologically unstable crewman, especially a navigator.

Avalonians were originally Terran colonists who had settled the planet seeking a return to ancient feudal customs, which they believed were a reflection of simpler times, eschewing all of the comforts of modern technology once the colony had been successfully established. Avalon was famous throughout the Federation for the spectacular festivals its people held. And as with the warriors of old, Avalon custom demanded honesty, loyalty, and faithful service. Besides ancient trades like blacksmith and cordwainer, the average Avalonian was well trained in swordsmanship, the equestrian arts, archery, etiquette and ancient myths and legends.

The more he read in the files, the more Johnson found himself liking DuLac, for many of those traits and interests mirrored his own. To his delight, DuLac was an accomplished blacksmith, a favorite hobby of the captain's. He continued to read further. Finally he came across what he had been looking for.

"There it is! Something for me to use 'against' DuLac!" he thought. "He passed his Academy exams but has so-far refused to accept his commission. Technically he's still a midshipman. But why??"

Johnson climbed out of the biobed. His muscles were stiff but he found that he could move reasonably well. At least the crippling headache was gone. He crossed sickbay and entered the ward where DuLac was laying on a bed of his own. He noticed the tears dripping from the youth's eyes, splashing onto the sheet covering him.

Before Johnson could do more than pause at the ward entrance, DuLac noticed him standing there and attempted to jump out of the bed and run, but the precautionary restraints prevented his escape. Instead, the anguished boy turned his head in shame.

"Look at me, son," Johnson ordered. Slowly, DuLac complied. "Get this straight," Johnson said calmly yet firmly. "What happened in the gymnasium wasn't your fault. And right now I'm challenging your honor, young man. You will pull yourself together and serve as you vowed to do. Understood?"

DuLac looked up into the captain's powerful hazel-grey eyes.

"Sire, how canst thou trust the miscreant who nearly slew thee?" he asked despondently.

"You didn't try to kill me," Johnson insisted. "I have a... an injury, Galen. I was badly hurt several months ago. As a result of my injuries I get headaches at times. What happened in the gym was one of the most crippling I've suffered. How could you have known?" he demanded.

"I should have been more concerned for thy safety, Lord," DuLac insisted. "Nothing can assuage my horrible sin."

Johnson gazed into the boy's eyes. "Yes there is," he countered. "You refused an officer's commission. Why?"

"I attempted the examinations only to ascertain if I could pass," DuLac responded. "I not yet be worthy of such a lofty rank as 'ensign,' Sire."

"Well that is how you can erase your debt to me, Galen," Johnson pressed. "I need officers in all senior positions. Since, according to your customs, you now owe me a service, I charge you to fulfill it by accepting a commission at the rank of ensign and performing those duties with supreme diligence, Mister. Is that clear? Or does honor mean so little to you?" Since Johnson was once a medical officer himself before training for and transferring to the command division, he was knowledgeable in human psychology. He hoped DuLac would respond as anticipated. He was not disappointed.

"Honor be all, Master," DuLac protested. "If this be thy wish, then thy servant complies."

With a nod and a subtle smile, Johnson removed the restraints from DuLac's limbs. "Then get out of here and return to your duties. Sickbay is for sick people! Or are you a malingerer?"

DuLac kowtowed embarrassingly, then climbed out of the bed.

"I shall never forget thy mercy and kindness, most noble Paladin-Lord," the youth said before quickly departing. As the door swished shut behind DuLac, Johnson could not help himself. He threw back his head and burst out laughing until tears came to his eyes.

"Galen would have made a fine son," he thought. Perhaps Johnson would take the lad under his wing as a protégé?

Minutes later, Johnson returned to his quarters, though not without the obvious disapproval of Doctor Morgaan. He compensated by complying with her demand that he hold no further interviews for at least two days so he could rest.

"Oh, well" Johnson thought. "There'll be plenty of time to speak with the crew." He then sat down at his desk and activated the vid-com. His highly competent Orion executive officer appeared on the screen.

"Yes, Captain?" she asked crisply.

"You have the conn until further notice, Commander. Doctor Morgaan has me on light-limited for the next few days. Have our speed increased to warp six. It's time for a real shakedown," he ordered.

"Aye, sir. Increasing speed to warp six," Kira responded, then added, "Recover quickly, Captain."

"Don't worry, Kira," the captain smiled. "With a crew like we've got, I wouldn't dare stay out of action for too long. Johnson, out."

The monitor screen went blank and Johnson spent the next few minutes studying the revised schedule for his next set of interviews.

"Morgan never said I couldn't prepare for the next one," Johnson said to himself with a smile.

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Two days never seemed so long. Captain Johnson was bored, even a bit lonely. Doctor Morgaan had ordered him not to engage in any activity for two days while he recuperated from one of his radiation sickness attacks. Normally, he might have considered disobeying her. After all, he was the captain. The only problem with that plan was that not only did all ship's physicians have the right to relieve even a commanding officer of duty, but Morgaan was a Capellan. Rumors spread around the ship that anyone who refused a medical order from a Capellan doctor tended to find themselves in sickbay for a different reason!

Finally, after a torturous 48 hours of enforced isolation, his recovery period was over.

"Johnson to bridge," the captain called over the intercom. "What's our status, Kira?"

The ravishing green-skinned Orion first officer's face appeared on the monitor screen.

"Alpha shift ends in twenty five minutes, Captain," she replied. "All departments report normal status. Orders, sir?"

"Continue present course," the captain commanded. "Inform Archeology and Anthropology officer Avillion that I'll want to speak with her in my quarters in thirty minutes."

Commander Kira K'tal Tefallaran Smith acknowledged before signing off.

While he waited for his next crew interview to arrive, Johnson examined Avillion's dossier.

"At last," he crowed as he read the file. "A human!"

Alienor Arianne Avillion was older than the average enlisted crewmen, already 39 Earth years of age. Johnson figured her file might explain why. Alienor Arianne Avillion's family was a well-known and respected group of shipping merchants. The Avillions were so wealthy that they were able to buy and colonize the planet now named for them. No wonder Avillion was as old as she was, considering she was a relatively new enlistee! She must have had enormous family responsibilities before joining Starfleet. Johnson just hoped that Avillion didn't expect special treatment because of her family connections. Just at that moment, Johnson's door chime signaled.

"Come," he called.

The captain's quarters door slid open and in stepped Alienor Avillion, wearing a standard enlisted uniform. "Reporting as ordered, sir," she said simply, standing at attention.

"At ease," Johnson ordered, looking up at her. "I'm impressed with your evals from enlisted training," he complimented her. "I'm sure you'll be a great asset to the science department. I am wondering, though... Won't your family be needing you? The Avillion Shipping Corp is huge." Johnson spoke his words rather deliberately. Would Avillion take offense? Her answer surprised him.

"Sir," she began. "The very reason I signed up with Starfleet was to forget my family – at least the business part of it. I've always loved studying other cultures, and spending years on a shipping detail isn't going to get me anywhere! Why, just before you assumed command of the *Arcturus*, our landing party discovered something just like alluvial deposits..." Johnson cut Avillion off.

“As I said; at ease,” he smiled, amused. “You’ll have plenty of opportunities to report your findings. It’s obvious you’re happy with your assignment, so I’ll let you get back to it. It’s a pleasure to welcome you to my crew, Crewman Avillion,” he concluded, offering his hand. Avillion took his hand, shook it vigorously, then left upon dismissal. Johnson noted how rough and calloused her hand had felt.

“No spoiled rich girl there,” he realized with relief.

Johnson called for his yeoman, Mrrastach, for his next schedule. The efficient Caitian entered his quarters a few minutes later.

“Yourrr schedule is rready, sirrr,” she purred in the manner of her felinoid race, handing him an electronic clipboard. After dismissing her he examined his schedule. He was amazed, for Mrrastach had selected almost every crewman he would have chosen had he written the schedule himself. She had even left the largest department – security – for last, as he had intended. Was Mrrastach psychic??

Looking over at the chronometer displayed on his desk, he noted it was 100 hours. Beta Shift was underway. A moment later the door chime signaled again.

“Come in,” Johnson ordered.

The doors opened and a tall, slender young man entered.

“Petty Officer... DeCristofaro?” he read off the clipboard.

The man nodded before saying, “Aye, sir. Physics department.”

“Welcome aboard, DeCristofaro,” Johnson began. “Your records indicate you speak Klingonese. Are you fluent?”

DeCristofaro shook his head. “Nope,” he answered oddly. “The tougher Klingon words make you sound like you’re getting ready to spit on the subway tracks! Even Newspeak is easier. ...Sir,” he added.

Johnson was surprised. The man standing before him sounded like an uneducated country hick, yet his record spoke of a different man. Something did not make sense.

“A pity,” the captain forced himself to finish. “We know so little about them. I’d love to have some of their K’tinga ship design information we do have translated.”

“I’ll get on it, Cap,” DeCristofaro promised. Johnson then noticed that DeCristofaro’s eyes were barely opened.

“Is there a problem, Petty Officer?” Johnson asked.

“Huh?” the young crewman replied.

“You look as if you haven’t slept in a week. Report to your quarters and rest for at least six hours. I don’t need sick crewmen,” he commanded. DeCristofaro protested.

“I’m not tired. It’s just... I don’t see so well in bright light.”

Johnson immediately reached over to the controls and dimmed the lights. With a series of blinks, DeCristofaro’s eyes opened fully and he looked at the captain.

“Don’t be afraid to ask for help, Petty Officer,” he admonished lightly. “I’m not running a ship of martyrs. Obviously, I’ll belay the order to rest.” Johnson then returned his attention to DeCristofaro’s records. “I see you’re interested in the paranormal. I can’t say I believe in such things, but I’ll be curious to know what you discover, especially concerning this artificial intelligence theory of yours.”

“You got it!” DeCristofaro vowed before Johnson dismissed him.

As the door swished shut behind the young crewman, Johnson joked to himself, “I’ll have to get him and Avillion together. It said in her records that she’s interested in 20<sup>th</sup> century culture and artifacts. The way DeCristofaro acts, he almost is an artifact!”

Several minutes later, the next science division specialist arrived. “Amazing,” Johnson said to himself. “Three humans in a row!” Then he looked at the new arrival’s records and was shocked. According to the file, Petty Officer Jedvega was a Vulcan! He looked back at the new arrival, confirming his first observation; no pointed ears.

Jedvega assumed a position of attention, then remained still. Johnson studied her file for a moment before looking up at her.

“You’re one of the A & A specialists,” he began. The Vulcan woman nodded once. “I’ll be expecting especially detailed reports from you, since you work the same shift as the chief science officer. I’ll also want you to compare notes with the other crew in archeology and anthropology when possible.”

“Interaction is unnecessary, sir,” Jedvega finally replied. “You shall find my reports quite accurate.”

“That may be, Petty Officer, but I insist on multiple person efforts,” Johnson responded. “There’s an old human expression; ‘Two heads are better than one.’ I want everything double-checked. Consider that an order.” The young science specialist again nodded once.

Johnson noted an entry in Jedvega's record. "I notice that your sister is also assigned to the *Arcturus*, serving in archaeology. Would you have any objections to working with her at times?"

"Negative, sir," Jedvega answered. "Please be aware, however, that my half-sibling has a tendency to behave... illogically."

Finishing his interview with Jedvega a few minutes later, Johnson dismissed her. He then called up the next record, noting Yeoman Mrrastach had scheduled Jedvega's half-sister next. It was not surprising, considering Caitians were extremely family oriented.

Eliana Starchaser certainly did not look like Jedvega. The willowy Native American seemed to wear a continual smile, unlike her granite-faced sister. She exuded radiance and serenity with an almost infectious power.

"Welcome aboard the *Arcturus*, Petty Officer Starchaser," Captain Johnson greeted her.

"Thank you, sir," she replied heartily.

"I see that your father is descended from medicine men. Are you satisfied with sciences? I'd be happy to transfer you to medical if you desire," Johnson suggested.

"No, sir!" Starchaser retorted indignantly. "Mine are a proud, ancient people. Nothing is more important than tradition – except perseverance. I belong right where I am... SIR!"

Not expecting that particular reaction, Johnson changed the subject.

"I can't help being curious, Petty Officer Starchaser. Your sister is Vulcan. Or at least half-Vulcan. Why doesn't she have a traditional Vulcan female name? I thought all Vulcan women's names started with T-something?"

Starchaser grinned as she replied, "Well, sir, our mother has a strange sense of humor. Besides, Jed's not exactly your typical Vulcan, is she?" Johnson nodded in agreement. Jedvega looked totally human, after all. Starchaser continued, "To give her a Vulcan name would be, well, illogical, wouldn't it?" The captain found he had to agree before dismissing the petty officer.

Johnson checked his schedule once more. At last! The final two science department specialists he still had not met were due. According to their records, the two crewmen were both Vulcans, but that was where the similarities ended. One was a half-Vulcan, half-human ensign-designate; while the other, a full Vulcan, had been slated to become the *Arcturus*' assistant chief science officer until the unexpected rise of that sanctimonious Efrosian, Lieutenant Baael V'aahst-Ohrne' Dagon.

Johnson sent for the ensign first. The tall, thin male entered and gave the Vulcan salute before saying, "Greetings from all of Vulcan, Captain." Johnson returned the salute, if somewhat uncomfortably.

"I'm very impressed with your recorded computer skills, Mister Selek," the captain began. "And let me congratulate you on your promotion. Is the work challenging enough for you?" Selek nodded.

"A computer may be manipulated in a myriad of ways, sir," he responded. "There is yet much to learn."

Johnson was pleased. Selek's father had written a book concerning computer technology and programming that had become required reading at Starfleet Academy. He did not want his officers becoming bored or – as was common in earlier times – burned out.

"I noticed in your record that you speak Klingonese, Selek," Johnson continued. "Another science specialist's record indicated similar, but he told me he is not fluent. Are you?"

Selek shook his head as he said, "The opportunity to study Klingonese is rare in the extreme, Captain. I regret that I cannot be of assistance in that area."

"Don't worry about it," Johnson remarked, expecting but not receiving the usual 'To-worry-is-illogical' retort. "Since you've listed no preference, I'll assign you to Beta Shift since both Alpha and Beta generally supply personnel for landing parties more often, and I'll need someone competent to fill in on the bridge. Dismissed." Selek left. Several minutes later, the door chime sounded again.

"Come in," Johnson ordered.

Lieutenant (JG) T'Ashara entered the quarters. T'Ashara was one of the few personnel who had served aboard the *Arcturus* before its recently completed refit and had remained aboard the entire time.

"Obviously, introductions would be 'illogical', T'Ashara," Johnson began. "So let's just get updated. I note your commendation in botany, of course, and suggest that you go to starbase for command training as soon as possible." Johnson noted he was unconsciously speaking with Vulcan-like formality, then chuckled to himself. *'Too much Vulcan contamination, I guess.'*

"I intend to upgrade my studies with alacrity, Captain," T'Ashara responded. "However, I note with curiosity the promotion of another individual to assistant science chief."

"I wouldn't be concerned, T'Ashara," Johnson remarked, having wondered how that change had happened himself. "Keep up the good work and I'm sure everything will fall into place as planned soon. Dismissed." With a nod and a Vulcan salute, T'ashara exited the captain's quarters.

Having finally finished the science department meetings, Johnson walked to sickbay, hoping to find his confidante there. Sure enough, Athena Arcadian was present helping a patient exercise his recently fractured right arm. She was just finishing up with her patient when she noticed the captain standing by the door.

“Good afternoon, sir,” she said in way of greeting.

“Athena,” he said, dispensing with the military protocol. “I need to talk to you. Maybe you can help me figure this one out.”

Arcadian smiled and motioned the captain to a chair. “What’s puzzling you?” she asked.

“I normally always let my department heads recommend promotions. After all, they’re the ones who have to work with their staffs. But this particular case looks crazy to me!”

The captain paused for a moment, remembering that Arcadian had just started working in sickbay as part of the medical staff, having requested a transfer from sciences the previous day.

“By the way, how’s the transfer working out?” he asked, wondering if Commander Kira living up to her reputation as a taskmaster was the origin of the transfer request.

“It’s great, Eric,” Arcadian responded, comfortable enough to use Johnson’s first name since they were now alone. “Kira’s okay, but I’m a people person. It’s more fun to work with people than study bones and hearts and all. But what were you talking about? What case looks crazy?”

“Kira must’ve lost her mind!” Johnson replied. “She’s got T’Ashara, who has plenty of Starfleet experience, not to mention seniority, yet she goes and chooses some new Efrosian J-G who nearly flunked every subject he studied at the Academy and has worse manners than a Tellarite to be her assistant department head! If I can’t get a good reason, I’m going to have to override her choice. I’d hate to have to do that.”

Arcadian called upon her knowledge of ‘street psychology.’ She may not have had any formal psychological training, but arranging all those Deck 7 parties certainly granted her plenty of insight!

“Kira interacts with her department staff much more than you do, Eric. Maybe she sees something in Baael that you didn’t get a chance to see. Perhaps it’s as simple as she just doesn’t like T’Ashara? Or maybe Vulcans in general? Or she may be experimenting to see what Efrosians can do. We sure don’t know a whole lot about them. Or maybe she doesn’t promote people, but kicks them upstairs so she can dump them?”

Johnson grinned. He knew he could count on Arcadian to raise a situation he had overlooked.

“You’ve got a point! I’ll bet she thinks Baael’s just more expendable.” Then he stopped smiling. “He’d just better work out. There might be more to him than I’m seeing, but he really got under my skin the other day!” No way would Eric Johnson ever admit to being flustered, except to his dear friend.

*‘She’s always there for me,’* he thought to himself. *‘Maybe it’s time... No, can’t think about that now.’* Instead, he patted her shoulder and left with, “See you later.”

No sooner had Johnson started heading back to his quarters when he was accosted by another of his officers.

“Captain!” a gruff voice demanded. “I would speak with you!” Johnson did not need to turn around to know who it was. Only one member of the crew would dare to speak to him that way. Johnson took a deep, calming breath before turning to confirm his assumption. Yes, supply and billeting officer Braacht was standing there, upset as usual.

“What’s the problem now, Braacht?” Johnson inquired pleasantly.

The portly Tellarite moved a step closer to the captain and began his tirade. “How am I supposed to run this ship while your crew makes frivolous demands?!? First some human tells me she’s Vulcan and wants her cabin thermostat raised. Then you give me an assistant who almost got his fool head handed to him for calling Copeland a ‘kid’ and throwing him out into the corridor! Then...”

“Hold it!” screamed Johnson. He was not angry, but shouting was the only way to silence a raging Tellarite. Braacht was giving him too much to digest all at once. He paused to mentally review what he had already been told; The heat-loving Vulcan that appeared human must have been Jedvega. So she liked heat, as most Vulcans did.

Then there was Copeland. Ah, Starfleet Marine Captain A. Carey ‘Trouble’ Copeland. The captain of the *USS Konkordium* had recommended Copeland’s transfer to the *Arcturus*, raving about the security chief’s many commendations. Johnson had later discovered – too late – that Copeland had also accumulated a sizable number of demerits, mainly for brawling and conduct unbecoming an officer. How nice of *Konkordium*’s Captain Rosenzweig to neglect to tell him that tiny detail.

Johnson recalled his embarrassment the first time he met his new security chief. A boy had stopped him to ask for directions to his quarters. Johnson humored the boy for a time before finally threatening to contact Starfleet Security and inform his parents about his attempt to stow away aboard the starship when the kid refused to drop his ludicrous story about being a newly assigned member of the crew. It was not until the indignant ‘child’ finally

produced his identification: Starfleet Marine Corps Captain Achilles Carey Copeland of Tamuril!! Oops! Tamurilians hailed from a 2-G planet, rendering them much shorter than Terran humans. It was no wonder Copeland appeared so childlike!

Johnson allowed Braacht to continue to rant a little while longer. Normally, Johnson would never allow a subordinate to speak to him as Braacht was doing, but Braacht was a Tellarite. Johnson had to allow for that. Likewise, the other problem was that disciplining Braacht would accomplish little. Supply and billeting officers were not in the direct command chain, as they reported directly to the Starfleet Supply System command and were essentially entities unto themselves. Besides, good billeting officers were hard to find, and Braacht was good!! The pugnacious Tellarite had graduated with perfect marks in Economics and Business Management – a unique achievement. He had also written two books which were now required reading at Starfleet Academy. Braacht constantly found himself the object of a tug-of-war between several starship and starbase commanders clamoring for his services. He already had the reputation of having saved thousands of credits budgeted for every vessel he had served aboard, and his natural argumentativeness tended to minimize waste among the crew.

During Johnson's mental musings, Braacht had reloaded his verbal ammunition.

"As I was saying, no sooner had I straightened out the Copeland incident when that idiot quartermaster assigned a Vulcan and an Efrogian to the same set of quarters! And another thing! Why does Starfleet Command even call them quartermasters? That's an Army term! In a fleet service such as ours, a quartermaster deals with navigation! And to top everything off, that crazy three-armed tripod of an Edoan engineer came stalking up to my office demanding synthetic animal hide for a ridiculous noise-maker or something! Am I running a ship or a menagerie?!? ...Sir!"

Johnson sighed before answering, "Braacht, just continue the superlative job you've been doing. I trust your judgment completely. You know you have full authority to do what needs to be done."

Braacht brightened significantly. "By the Great Mother, I knew there was someone with wisdom on this ship! Let me cease this dilly-dallying and get back to my job! Good day, Captain!" he said before stomping off.

Captain Johnson sighed again. This was going to be a long mission.

\* \* \*

Hours later, Johnson was relaxing in the rec room. He needed to! The ranting of his bellicose Tellarite supply and billeting officer simply would not vacate his memory. But it was no use.

"Might as well finish the crew conferences," the captain finally decided. He took the turbolift up to deck one, but instead of exiting onto the bridge, he entered his ready room located in the space where other starships had docking ports aft of the bridge. Sitting down behind his desk, he perused his incredibly efficient Yeoman M'rrastach's schedule again. Ah, at last! The science division was completed! However, for as big and unwieldy as the sciences department was, at least it and the security departments were organized, while engineering was solid with Johnson's trusted friend as chief engineer.

The same could not be said for either communications or operations! Johnson was shocked at the attrition rate in communications. The records showed that the only personnel listed on the department roster longer than a few weeks were the Cygnian communications chief Aerina Lorrass and her assistant communications chief Tran Van Ky, and Van Ky had recently applied for a transfer to a starbase to pursue a teaching career! It appeared that the problem was Lorrass. The *Arcturus*' previous commanding officer had logged several complaints about Lorrass' complete intolerance of men. Johnson hated to do it, but it seemed that Lorrass would have to go!

As for operations, only one name among the helmsmen and navigators seemed to bear any merit, and he had already met that particular navigator – young Galen DuLac. Johnson sent for one of the helmsmen.

"*This is a helmsman??*" Johnson thought to himself as Korath Linar Stryker entered the ready room upon command, all two meters and one hundred thirty kilograms of him! His light brown hair fell to his shoulders in an almost mane-like pattern while his gold tinted eyes shined with intelligence; perhaps suspicion.

Johnson studied Stryker's record. What made him most interesting was his extensive knowledge of various martial arts and the fact that he was half-Cygnian. Full Cygnian males were only semi-intelligent, generally kept so by the dominant females on their planet, yet Stryker's record did not suggest any shortage in that area.

"Mister Stryker," Johnson began. "I don't mean any insult to you, but are you sure you're happy at helm? Your record and, frankly, your size suggest you'd make a great security officer."

Stryker smiled slightly. "I've been considering that too, Captain," he responded. "That damned helm chair is too small and I'm getting a bit tired of the horse jokes around the bridge. The only navigator who's any good is that kid DuLac and he's too inexperienced! You think Copeland would take me?"

Johnson frowned slightly. "I don't see why not, Stryker, but I'd like you to stay on the helm a bit longer," he responded at last. "As even you said, I'm short on good people there."

Stryker nodded. "I'll give it my best, sir," he promised. "But I'm walking out if there's any more nonsense! If I don't, I might kill someone."

Johnson nodded. By the looks of him, Stryker probably meant what he said. He dismissed the reluctant helmsman and sent for the first individual M'rastach had scheduled from the engineering department.

The first engineering officer to arrive was yet another Vulcan. Johnson was pleased that so many Vulcans were willing to serve under him, as most tended to serve aboard all-Vulcan crewed starships. However, at the rate it was going, the *Arcturus* might be one of those all-Vulcan crewed starships before too long.

The attractive half-human Vulcan woman was T'Veer, a recent transferee from the science department. She offered the captain a Vulcan salute.

"Live long and prosper, Captain Johnson," she offered. Johnson returned the salute.

"I hope you are fitting in well in engineering, T'Veer. However, I may need to call on your old skills in geology once in a while. Is this acceptable?"

T'Veer nodded. "It is always logical to retain a skill, Captain," was her response.

"Good," Johnson continued. "In that case, I'll also want to make use of your linguistics skills as well. I notice from your record that you speak Klingonese. I have some files in Klingon I need translated. Hopefully you can help?"

I will endeavor to do my best," T'Veer replied with a nod.

"Very well. Thank you," Johnson said. "You're dismissed. Please send Mister... Xavier in."

The half-Vulcan woman nodded. As T'Veer left, Captain Johnson studied Xavier's file. Incredible! Although he was only a petty officer, he had actually helped refit the *Arcturus*! His record showed that he had even nearly won the Zee Magnee prize for excellence in engineering!

A moment later, Xavier entered. Oh, oh! Xavier was an Edoan, a member of a very shy, introverted race. Indeed, the emaciated-looking three-armed, three-legged, vaguely-reptilian being looked as if he would faint in terror at any moment. Johnson spread his hands in a calming gesture.

"I understand that this is difficult for you, Petty Officer Xavier," he began in a soft, soothing voice. "I'll only need a minute or two, so just relax. I just need to ask a few questions."

"Fire away, sir," Xavier responded brightly. BRIGHTLY?

"Er... I'd like to... um... compliment you on your engineering skills for someone so young," Johnson said, somewhat unnerved by the Edoan's reaction. "I trust you'll take OTS soon? I need good engineering officers."

Xavier actually chuckled in a strange, high-pitched warble. "In that case, sir, if you need a new chief engineer, I'm always available!"

Johnson coughed, forcing back a laugh. "Let's take one step at a time, Xavier," he managed to say. "I take it by your behavior that you're not bothered by the noise from the Deck 7 parties?"

Xavier guffawed. "Bothered?" he asked. "Captain, I host most of those parties. My dad makes the best mixed drinks using Saurian Brandy in the galaxy!"

Johnson was too astonished to continue the interview. "Carry on, Xavier," he finally said instead. As the Edoan departed, Johnson thought to himself, 'Xavier shy? Introverted? Cowering in terror? Xavier was about as shy as a Tellarite was easygoing!'

The captain returned his attention to the schedule of crew interviews and after studying it for a moment found it odd that M'rastach had not listed anyone from the vital medical department. He reasoned that the staff would be too busy to waste time on interviews, so he decided to ignore medical for the present. There was one strange entry, however. A Terran called Naghari had been assigned to the medical department, but had been removed for "laziness" and reassigned as records officer just before the *Arcturus* refit.

"Perhaps I should talk to him," Johnson considered. "I won't have any malingerers on my ship!" But giving the idea a second thought, he changed his mind for the moment. For if Naghari was lazy, the next group of crew members on the schedule were quite probably the opposite.

Ah, security. Johnson was proud of his starship's security department. Not many starships could boast of having both fleet and Marine Corps security personnel. Young A. Carey Copeland, whom Braacht had mentioned earlier, had molded himself quite a diverse and capable team!

The first name on the list was Marine First Lieutenant and assistant chief of security David Maddox. Maddox's record revealed a strong aptitude at marksmanship. He would be a great complement to helmsman Stryker's hand-to-hand expertise if Stryker did indeed transfer to security.

Johnson looked up and noticed Maddox standing at attention at his door. His uniform spotless and neatly pressed, his protective armor polished and bright, and his helmet held in his arm at his side. Oh, yes, Marines had to be treated quite differently from fleet security personnel.

“Come in, Mister Maddox, and at ease,” Johnson ordered. Maddox entered the ready room, relaxing slightly to the parade-rest stance. “Congratulations on your promotion to assistant chief of security, Lieutenant.” Maddox smiled slightly.

“Sir, I sure had to earn it. Captain Copeland can be pretty tough,” he answered.

Johnson smiled, too. Copeland was only twenty-one years old, but the Marine Captain had already become both widely respected and feared.

“I noticed your specialty in weapons skills in your record, Lieutenant,” Johnson continued. “What about in hand-to-hand?”

Maddox automatically reverted to formal Marine speech patterns as he said, “Sir! We’re all trained extensively in all forms of combat, sir!” The response sounded almost ritualistic.

“Excellent,” remarked the captain. “I’d like to review sword techniques with you later on.”

“Sir, at your convenience, sir!” Maddox responded.

Johnson studied the young man standing before him. He knew that Maddox would be a fine officer, but he noted a particular gleam in the man’s eyes, as if he was awaiting action. Could Maddox be counted upon to restrain himself, or was he a shoot-first-ask-questions-later killing machine? That was something Johnson was going to have to determine over time. The captain dismissed him before calling for the next member of the crew. He sighed heavily as the next Marine interviewee arrived.

“Just great! Another Tellarite,” he groaned to himself softly.

“Private G’edd, reporting as ordered, sir!” the Tellarite nearly shouted as he came to attention.

“Private G’edd, welcome aboard,” Johnson began carefully, inviting the man to relax.

“Sir! A good Marine never relaxes, sir!” G’edd cried.

“Of course! The usual Tellarite charm. Fine.” Johnson sighed again. “I see from your background that your father is the Tellarite Ambassador to Vulcan. Can I count on you to be diplomatic when needed as well?”

G’edd raised himself to his full height as he said, “Sir! We Tellarites are the greatest diplomats in the universe, sir!”

Johnson quickly dismissed Private G’edd, still too full of memories of his supply officer Braacht’s argumentative ravings. He instead called for Lieutenant H’Lar.

H’Lar entered wearing a standard Starfleet uniform instead of the Marine-battle gear most of the *Arcturus*’ security department preferred, which was fortunate, since the helmet would probably crush H’Lar’s sensitive Andorian antennae. The blue-skinned warrior assumed the position of attention in front of Johnson’s desk.

“H’Lar, what is your security specialty?” Johnson asked to open the interview.

“Sir, I am expert with both the ushaan-tor and chaka and I have a strong martial arts background,” the Andorian answered softly and with a slight lisp, tilting his head toward the captain.

“Have either Copeland or Maddox given you a hard time for not being a Marine?” Captain Johnson wondered, since H’Lar was one of only a few fleet officers serving in security aboard the *Arcturus*.

“Actually, Lieutenant Maddox and I are quite friendly, sir,” H’Lar replied. “Of course, I can ‘eat or drink him under the table,’ as you humans would say. Copeland is rough. I guess he thinks I won’t survive in the Fleet. We’ll see...”

Johnson held up his hands as he said, “If you can’t work with Copeland, say so now. I won’t stand for infighting!”

H’Lar shook his head. “After basic training, Copeland is not difficult to handle, sir,” he asserted.

“Carry on then, H’Lar. And send in the next person,” Johnson commanded.

A minute later, the chime sounded. Johnson commanded they enter, and in stepped Logan Whitehorse, Marine pilot and corpsman. Whitehorse was an imposing figure in his marine uniform, his bright green eyes contrasting with his jet-black hair and somewhat Native American features.

“Corporal Whitehorse,” Johnson opened. “I see from your record you like to fly. You’ll have plenty of opportunities aboard my ship, but I trust that your reputation for recklessness is exaggerated.”

“Sir! Flying is never ‘reckless’ if you know what you’re doing, sir!” Whitehorse responded somewhat indignantly. “They call me ‘Scalpel’ out there, because my flying is as sharp as one, sir.” He failed to mention the fact that his call-sign was also in part due to his temper sometimes being scalpel-sharp as well, as he had once demonstrated by knocking his former employer unconscious for uttering a racial slur prior to enlisting in the Corps.

Johnson nodded, satisfied. “Very good, Corporal. Dismissed.” Whitehorse departed.

As the door shut behind the Marine, Johnson activated his intercom. “This is the Captain,” he said. “All department heads report to my ready room in five minutes.”

The Captain waited, excited at the prospect of working with this heavily talented but strange crew as they have travelled into a totally unknown sector of space on their shakedown mission.

Within seconds, chief of sciences and first officer Kira K’tal Tefellaran Smith arrived, followed shortly by security chief A. Carey Copeland. Even chief medical officer Morgaan quickly arrived, even though she could have been excused due to her being needed in sickbay. But Johnson was disturbed when the representative from engineering entered.

It was not that the Cygnian woman was almost too beautiful: tall, tawny, muscular, her eyes glistening with incredible intelligence. The problem was that Lieutenant Briana Lithir was not the *Arcturus*’ chief engineer.

“Mister Lithir, I was expecting Commander Timinar. Where is he?” the captain demanded, worried that something might have happened to his best friend.

“Commander Timinar is working on a delicate project, Captain,” Lithir replied in a melodic yet indignant voice. “He sent me in his place. He wants me to learn his departmental responsibilities.” She paused momentarily. “And with all due respect, Captain Johnson, I wish to exercise my right not to be addressed as ‘Mister’.”

Johnson hid his displeasure. ‘Great!’ he groaned inwardly. ‘Another female chauvinist like Lorrass.’ Outwardly, however, he nodded. Johnson had always used the term ‘Mister’ without malice. It was simply an ancient seafaring tradition carried on by Starfleet.

“You all may be seated.” Johnson’s dismay eased as he watched Copeland stiffly salute, turn on his heel, literally march to his chair, and seat himself crisply. There was something both comforting and amusing about the Marine officer’s presence, even if Copeland could be an occasional thorn in his side with his practical jokes!

Johnson began the senior staff meeting. “I’m very pleased with the caliber of the new personnel I’ve met so far. I just wish we had more...” He was in mid-sentence when he suddenly realized that chief communications officer Lorrass was missing! He immediately reached over to the intercom, saying, “Lieutenant Commander Lorrass, report to my ready room immediately.”

Lorrass arrived several minutes later. “Forgive my tardiness, Captain,” she said without being prompted. “Several of my staff needed a lesson in respect.”

‘They aren’t the only ones, Lorrass,’ Johnson fumed inside. “Sit down, Mister,” he ordered aloud, actually hoping to offend the Cygnian female by using the term. “As I was saying,” he stared at the Cygnian, who in turn was glaring at fellow Cygnian Lithir. “You’re to be commended for the efficiency you’ve shown in organizing your staffs and integrating our newest crew among them. Most of you have served under me before the refit, so I know I don’t have to doubt your abilities. Are there any questions or comments?”

Commander Kira spoke first, saying, “It has come to my attention that you don’t approve of my choice for assistant chief science officer, sir. But you know that you can trust my instincts. If Lieutenant Baael can’t perform to standard, I’ll be the first to remove him!”

Johnson simply nodded, feeling very relaxed all of a sudden. That is when he realized Kira was probably using her green Orion pheromones to dispel the aura of unease caused by Lorrass’ behavior. He could see that the department heads now looked more at ease, even the usually-rock-steady Copeland.

Next was Doctor Morgaan’s turn to speak. “Sickbay is under control, I am pleased to report. My new assistant Arcadian is an excellent motivator. Her treatments have allowed me to upgrade our only critical patient to fair condition.”

“Very good, Doctor,” Johnson complimented her warmly. “I know you’ll always keep the crew battle-ready.”

While that comment would normally have been considered inappropriate aboard a Starfleet vessel, Doctor Kryi Morgaan ‘Morgan’ Akaar was a Capellan, and as a member of a culture which valued individual strength and battle prowess, Morgaan acknowledged the captain’s tribute with a smile and a slight nod.

Engineering department representative Lithir was next to report. “Captain, Commander Timinar reports all engineering functions are at 100%. He also sends his warmest personal greetings.”

Johnson decided to test his assistant chief engineer, a relatively unknown individual to him. “Thank you, Lithir. But I’d like to know your opinion on the engineering staff.”

“T’Veer is very easy to work with, sir,” Lithir began. “And I have nothing but respect for Chief Engineer Timinar’s abilities and character. Petty Officer Xavier is extremely talented for a new crewman... and for a male,” she smiled impishly.

Intuitive woman, Johnson thought. Lithir had picked up on the captain’s negative opinion of Lorrass and had made an effort to show that not all Cygnian females were humorless bigots.

“Excellent, Lithir,” Captain Johnson answered. His eyes swiveled toward Lorrass, who was now obviously uncomfortable. “Communications division report?” he prompted.

Lorrass spoke haughtily. “Captain, with respect, you have given me nothing to work with! None of my staff, except my assistant communications chief Van Ky, can meet my most reasonable standards, and she has applied for a transfer! The males treat me as an inferior and make nonsensical equine jokes, yet it is they who lack the fortitude to remain for any length of time. Changes must be made! ...Sir.” She finally looked at Johnson instead of a very shocked First Officer Kira.

That did it. Lorrass’ bigotry and monstrous ego had finally gone too far. “I assure you, Lorrass, changes will be made... very soon!” Johnson snapped. Lorrass smiled triumphantly toward Kira, then swiveled in her seat, having missed the captain’s unstated meaning completely.

Johnson then turned to security chief Copeland. “Copeland,” he ordered. “Report!” Johnson’s seemingly abusive behavior was indeed being fueled by Lorrass’ obnoxious attitude, but the real reason for it was that crisp, short commands were given to and by Marines as normal protocol.

Copeland shot out of his chair and stood at attention as he replied smartly, “Sir! Both Marine and Fleet personnel are thoroughly trained and ready, sir!”

“Well done, Captain,” Johnson replied. He noticed an amused look in the young Marine captain’s eyes. It appeared that Copeland was not at all insulted by Johnson’s seeming rudeness, but it was clear that Johnson did not fully understand Marine procedures, at least to the degree of the Marine security chief!

The meeting of the senior officers was unexpectedly interrupted by the piercing whine of the boson’s whistle. Johnson hit the intercom without hesitation, saying, “This is the captain. Report?”

“Bridge, sir,” replied a strong though uneasy baritone voice. “Sensors have detected several unidentified vessels approaching us.”

“Go to yellow alert,” Johnson ordered. “Lorrass and Kira, you’re with me. The rest of you, alert stations!” Johnson, his first officer and communications officer waited a moment for the others – Copeland, Morgaan, and Lithir – to enter the turbolift and head for their respective posts. The three remaining officers then passed through the turbolift, waiting the few seconds it took for the lift to spin the hundred and twenty degrees to open onto the bridge. Captain Johnson, Commander Kira, and Lt Commander Lorrass moved to their respective posts, relieving the crew members covering their stations. Johnson surveyed the bridge crew as he took his place in the center seat. To his relief, Korath Stryker was manning the helm while young but capable Galen DuLac – now wearing the insignia of an ensign on the navigation grey strap of his uniform – was navigating. Johnson then realized that it had been DuLac on the intercom. Where had his archaic Avalonian speech disappeared to?? Johnson had been too badly injured to have noticed when DuLac’s speech patterns changed in the gym and was now experiencing it for the first time. Dismissing DuLac’s speech patterns for the moment, he noted the rest of the bridge crew. David Maddox was standing at the tactical station directly behind him while Bael V’aahst-O’hrne’-Dagon manned the science console with Kira standing close by.

“Status, Mister Galen,” Johnson inquired.

“Two ships approaching at sub-light speed. Range currently sixty thousand kilometers and closing, sir,” DuLac responded, still without a trace of Avalonian mannerisms. Was Galen an imposter, Johnson wondered?? DuLac continued his report, “One from the...”

Bael rose stiffly and looked toward Johnson with his clod blue eyes. “Six! Intercept! Spherical!” he interrupted. Johnson looked at DuLac, who shook his head in confusion.

“I’ll talk to you about ship’s protocol later, Mister,” Johnson snapped at Bael before returning his attention to the main viewscreen, where the approaching ships were just entering visual range. His attention was again diverted, but this time by Maddox.

“Sir! It’s confirmed! Four more vessels are just coming into sensor range. He’s right about the design too, sir.”

Johnson glanced at Bael in shock, then turned to Lorrass. “Open hailing frequencies!” he ordered.

“Frequencies opened,” Lorrass replied.

“Unidentified vessels, this is Captain Eric W. Johnson of the *USS Arcturus*. Please identify yourselves.”

Johnson’s answer came quickly, but not in the manner in which he had hoped.

CRACK! Several bright bolts rocked the ship.

“Damage report?” Johnson demanded.

“No damage, sir,” Maddox replied. “Shields held firm. Shall I prepare to return fire?”

“Not yet. Lorrass, get me engineering.” For once, Lorrass complied without a snide comment. A moment later a familiar voice came from the speakers.

“Engineering. Timinar.”

“Mister Timinar, warn me the instant we drop below 90% power,” Johnson ordered.

“I’ve got my best people here, sir,” Peter Timinar acknowledged. “There shouldn’t be any trouble. I’ll be in auxiliary control. There’s no better time to try out my special tie-in splicing, sir.”

In main engineering, Commander Timinar called for Petty Officer Xavier and four other crewmen. Meanwhile, a second barrage struck the ship.

“Shields still holding, sir,” reported Maddox.

“Stryker, fire a shot across the lead ship’s bow,” Johnson commanded.

The helmsman acknowledged before firing the ship’s phaser banks. Unexpectedly, one of the approaching ships maneuvered toward the beams.

“Captain!” Stryker cried. “That ship deliberately maneuvered into our phaser fire! They’re finished!”

“No,” contradicted Kira, who was leaning over the science console and looking directly at the readings displayed there. “Sensors still indicate six alien ships, sir, and one of them shows an energy increase. Those ships must be powered by phaser-like energy!”

“The alien ships are moving to surround us, sir,” Dulac reported as he looked at the indications on the navigation console. “Two are drifting away, though. Their armored hull is... changing, sir. I don’t understand.”

“They will ram, Captain!” Bael’s voice thundered.

“That’s crazy,” Maddox scoffed as he looked over toward the science officers. “Look at the size of them! They wouldn’t stand a chance against our shields.”

As predicted, the two lead ships began accelerating toward the *Arcturus*!

“Hard about!” Johnson commanded, but it was too late.

BOOM! The two ships crashed right into the *Arcturus* and bounced off the starship’s shields. Bael, Maddox, and Kira were all knocked to the deck, shaken but unhurt.

“Two shields are gone, and another one is buckling,” Maddox reported as he crawled back to his station. Just then, the voice of the chief engineer sounded through the bridge speakers.

“Captain, try a combination of phasers and torpedoes on the fifth and sixth ships! It’ll overload that reflective metal they’re apparently made of.”

Johnson gave the order. Moments later a dazzling array of light burst forth from the *Arcturus* as both a spread of photon torpedoes and bursts of phaser fire were launched. As Timinar predicted, one of the ships was struck and turned bright white before exploding. Meanwhile, more weapons blasted the *Arcturus*, continuing the senseless assault. The intercom filled with static after the most recent blast.

“Auxiliary control hit, Captain,” Lorrass reported. “Heavy damage!”

“Timinar?” Johnson called into the intercom frantically. “Pete!”

“Timinar here, sir,” the chief engineer’s distorted voice crackled through the speakers a few seconds later. “Warp drive is down. Xavier and I are about to give you momentary transwarp drive. It’s experimental, but it’s our only chance! Standing by for your order.”

Johnson quavered inside. Transwarp drive? After the debacle aboard the *Excelsior*... Still, he trusted Timinar with his soul.

“Go for it now!” the captain ordered.

The ship rocked. It vibrated madly. Bulkheads groaned. Stanchions creaked. Small electronic circuits arced and spat sparks. The stars flashed by too fast to be seen. Time stood still.

Suddenly, a terrific explosion could be heard over the intercom. Johnson jumped out of his seat and sprinted for the turbolift.

“PETE!”

Johnson fairly flew to auxiliary control. When the doors opened, Xavier was holding an unconscious Timinar in his three arms as he raced out of the room. He put the chief engineer down in the corridor and prepared to re-enter the inferno aux control had become.

“Are you out of your mind, Xavier?” Johnson yelled. “Damage control teams are on their way! Stay here! That’s an order!”

Xavier reluctantly agreed, and both men turned toward the stricken chief engineer. The nearby intercom whistled and a voice spoke though it.

“Captain Johnson. Stryker here. We’re clear, but we have no idea where we... Captain! Bael just...”

Suddenly the ship lurched. Johnson and Xavier were too busy to notice an ebony-skinned man rushing toward them down the corridor until they heard the auxiliary control door being opened with a horrible screech. To both men’s astonishment, the strange man bolted right into the flaming room!

“Idiot! No!” Johnson screamed uselessly.

“Eric...,” Peter Timinar’s voice groaned. Johnson turned away from the suicidal maniac and back to his best friend.

“Pete! Are you okay?” Johnson cried.

“Tell Lithir... activate circuits... 3-E-7-4-I...” Before he could finish, Timinar passed out. Johnson could not move as he held his friend and chief engineer in his arms. Instead, Xavier leaped up and shouted Timinar’s instructions over the intercom to engineering, then looked sheepishly at his superior.

“Well done, Xavier,” Johnson reassured him. “Get Morgan, stat,” he ordered, reverting to his old medical speech. The Edoan quickly complied.

As a medical team rapidly arrived, there was the sound of metal being smashed. Johnson whirled to look. What he saw stunned even the usually stoic starship captain. In the middle of the flames visible through the open door to aux control, the dark-skinned man had just crushed the door with his leg. He was walking out of the room, two unconscious crew men under each of his arms!! His body was totally unscathed, unlike the four nearly-charred crewmen. Even his clothes were only slightly singed! As the man emerged from the horrible scene, the ship also began to move forward.

“Captain, warp drive has been restored,” Stryker reported over the intercom.

“Lord Captain, we are now in familiar territory,” DuLac’s much-calm, and now culturally-correct voice added. Meanwhile Dr. Morgaan called for Johnson’s attention as well.

“They will need extensive care, but they will recover,” the Capellan woman said as orderlies carefully placed the five injured crew onto anti-grav gurneys and started to move them toward sickbay. She then looked at the mysterious individual who had carried the four injured crew members out of the inferno of aux control and said, “It appears I was wrong about you, Naghari.”

Naghari?? The crew member booted out of the medical department for laziness??

“How did you do that?” Johnson demanded of the man. Naghari replied in a thick Haitian accent, his voice calm, almost Vulcan-like.

“I am a... what you might call a mystic, sir. Like my ancient firewalking ancestors, I can resist the heat of flame and control my adrenal responses.” Johnson noticed that, even as he spoke, the man was starting to shake violently. “The effort is, however, costly, sir...” Naghari suddenly collapsed as Morgaan and several more orderlies rushed to his aid.

\* \* \*

Hours later, six bio-beds in sickbay were occupied, though Naghari appeared to be making a rapid recovery. Captain Johnson was present, as were Kira, Stryker, Maddox, Lithir, and Xavier at the captain’s request.

*Captain’s log, stardate 8421.9:*

*The newly refit Arcturus has sustained significant damage in an unprovoked attack by an unknown, hostile race. Seventeen crewmen died in this senseless assault, but because of the actions of some very special personnel, five other lives were saved.*

*I am recommending the Starfleet Medal of Honor be awarded to Commander Peter Timinar, chief engineering officer, and Engineering Specialist Xavier. Records Officer Naghari has refused to accept this award or the Dearest Blood Decoration citing personal ethics. I am acceding to his wishes, but since he is due for promotion in any event, I am recommending a swift promotion with the strongest commendation.*

*I also commend the following personnel for their exemplary performance: First officer Kira K’tal Tefallaran Smith, helmsman Korath Linar Stryker, assistant chief of security David Maddox, engineer Briana Lithir, navigator Galen DuLac, and assistant chief science officer Baael V’aahst-Ohrne’-Dagon.*

The last was a difficult decision for Captain Johnson. Baael could have faced disciplinary action for his conduct on the bridge. First he had spoken out of line, then actually knocked DuLac out of his seat and assumed control of the navigation station! However, his actions had granted the *Arcturus* crew precious time to recover from the casualties and inexplicably returned the vessel to its proper course when it had been hopelessly lost and headed for a previously unknown ion storm.

Johnson had considered his options and decided to cite the Efrosian, knowing that the attention would probably embarrass the severely introverted science officer. That would be punishment enough. Johnson vowed that whatever secrets the mysterious Efrosian was hiding, he would discover what they were!

Johnson dismissed the group before turning to talk with his friend Peter Timinar, congratulating him on his expertise that allowed the ship to escape its dilemma. A few minutes later, he left sickbay and toured the ship, observing several areas where the crew was frantically performing repairs. Already, much of the charred material in aux control had been removed and replaced and most primary systems restored to normal function.

“This wounded bird will get off the ground again, just as in the myth,” he said to himself as he turned to head to the bridge. She was a strong ship, had a solid crew; an almost-mythical bird indeed! The *Arcturus* would fly again – stronger than ever – especially with the new replacement crew members he would be receiving as soon as the ship returned to spacedock.

Captain Johnson decided a celebration was in order! The baptism by fire had been passed. They had survived. They would thrive!

Phoenix, Arise!

**The End**