

Commodore Eric Johnson was a stoic man. In his brief tenure as commanding officer of the *USS Arcturus*, he had been verbally harangued, physically assaulted, and emotionally drained. Having faced and defeated death several times, especially during the incident when he had nearly been incinerated by Berthold and Delta radiation before receiving command of the *Arcturus*, he had acquired much steel.

But not all of his stoicism could help him today. Johnson had just learned that his best friend and shipmate, chief engineer Peter Timinar, had been approved to transfer to *Starbase 12*, where he would participate in starship command training. Most reluctantly, Johnson had agreed with Timinar's decision to accept the offer. It would certainly bolster his friend's already impressive career, but this did not mean that he would have to like it!

Johnson and Timinar spent their last day together reminiscing about their Academy days, then working out their mixed emotions in several wild games of Zero-G racquetball. Timinar had decided to beam down to *Starbase 22* at the same time as the waves of crew members who were going on liberty to cheer their shipmates toward victory in the upcoming skatsball tournaments. The *Arcturus* team was destined for greatness, Timinar knew, especially since the extroverted newly assigned chief medical officer Dr. Athena Arcadian had assumed leadership of the team.

Timinar had decided to watch his friends and now-former shipmates play, then leave during the victory celebration (or consolation party) so that Johnson would not feel his loss too strongly. The Commodore could fool most people with his veneer of stoicism, but he could not fool the man with whom he had practically grown up!

Maybe Johnson's sadness and outrage at the thought of losing his best friend had contributed to the terse, almost callous way in which he had treated Arcadian during one of their recent conversations. He knew that he would have to apologize to the woman he loved.

Luckily, time is always 'The Great Healer.' Arcadian's exhaustive preparation for the current year's tournament kept her too busy to remember Johnson's treatment of her. And besides, unknown to her paramour, Arcadian had already figured out why he had been so upset and had allowed him his needed catharsis.

Johnson opened his eyes. Leaping from his bunk, he stripped and headed for his shower. After a recent incident involving the sonic shower, he decided to allow himself the luxury of a water-based shower. Besides, he resolved, he would wash away his past along with his dirt and dead skin!

"Time to grow up, Johnson!" the Commodore commanded himself. "Everyone has to move on sometime. Besides, Pete'll be back in six months!"

Several minutes later, the pajama-clad, emotionally exhausted Eric, having been replaced by the smartly dressed, mentally alert Commodore Johnson, strode into the corridor and headed for the turbolift. Arriving on the bridge moments later, Johnson assessed his watch section.

"Good grief!" he thought. "Who are these people?" He noticed a vaguely Caitian-like female manning the navigation station, a human or human-like man sitting at the helm station, and what was most definitely a Caitian male manning the science console.

"Commodore on the bridge," the helmsman called out when he noticed Johnson's presence.

As he stepped toward the center seat, Johnson noticed the lone security officer present. He – at least Johnson believed it was a he – was wearing Marine insignia, but his body was covered by a specially-designed armor which hid even his face.

"What?? Since when do we have a Zaranite on board?" Johnson thought to himself, wondering just how many replacement crewmen he had received! The *Arcturus'* stop at *Starbase 22* served multiple purposes. Primarily it was so his ship's skatsball team could participate in this year's annual tournament. But while the ship was in port, they were also scheduled to participate in crew rotation – losing some members of the crew while gaining others – including chief engineer Peter Timinar. And with several senior members of the crew transferring, it meant junior members of the crew were moved up into more important positions where the Commodore has never seen them before. He realized that he would have to meet some of these new crew members, just as he had decided to interview several key personnel shortly after taking command of the starship. Meanwhile he searched for one – just one – familiar face. Finally, he found one. And immediately wished he had not.

Space, the Final Frontier...
These are the voyages of the starship *Arcturus*!

Star Trek: Arcturus

“Evolutions” By Michael S. Cohen

The familiar face in question was that of Cygnian chief communications officer Aerina Lorrass. While she was extremely intelligent, physically attractive, and eminently qualified for her job, Lorrass was also haughty, arrogant, short-tempered, insubordinate, sarcastic and sexist.

Sure enough, as Johnson entered the bridge, the Cygnian was standing over a young man, her arms crossed and her back arched.

“How many times must I explain even the simplest facet of this job, Morrison?” Lorrass asked in a loud voice simply dripping with condescension. “Even a male can usually understand such basic technology. Shall we attempt it again or should I send a female to wet-nurse you through it?”

Johnson decided to rescue the red-faced, hapless young crewman.

“Lorrass, you’re relieved!” he ordered as he approached the communications console. “Confine yourself to your quarters until further notice, and read up on protocol.”

Lorrass, who had not realized the commodore was on the bridge, was visibly stunned.

“Do you want to perpetuate this fool’s ineptitude? Sir??” she demanded. “Your precious protocol requires...”

“When and if I ever allow you back on this bridge, you’re re-assigned,” Johnson cut the Cygnian off. Then to emphasize his point, he added, “Assistant chief communications officer Lorrass. Dismissed!”

Johnson normally loathed the thought of publicly disciplining a crew member – being an adherent to the philosophy of ‘Praise in Public, Criticize in Private.’ But Lorrass definitely needed a lesson in humility! He had never resorted to demotion before, but in this case...

Once Lorrass had left the bridge, Johnson turned his attention to ‘Morrison.’

“Don’t let her demoralize you, Mister...?”

“Petty Officer Second Class Gary Morrison, sir” the man stated. “I...” He stopped, flustered. Johnson smiled slightly.

“It all seems pretty complicated, Petty Officer Morrison. It just takes getting to know where everything is. Just do your best and, above all, disregard her nonsense. Consider that an order.” Johnson then returned to his seat, but not before giving the young man a reassuring pat on the shoulder.

Meanwhile, Aerina Lorrass fumed in the turbolift.

“How dare he!” she spat. “Give a male a position of slight authority and he immediately forgets his place! I think a lesson is in order, Eric Johnson. Yes, a very stern lesson!” And Lorrass smiled.

* * *

Speaking of lessons, a very young man was busy studying his, and doing so most diligently. Still, young Galen DuLac was having trouble absorbing all of this new information.

“By my troth, M’Lord, there is so much to learn!” the overwhelmed boy was saying to another individual. “‘Course-plotting,’ ‘astrophysics,’ ‘astrogation,’ ‘astronautics,’ ‘racial customs and etiquette!’ Methinks I shall go mad!”

His associate responded by grabbing DuLac’s arm, lifting him with a casual ease and flopping the lad most ungracefully onto his buttocks!

Inappropriate behavior? Not when the incident in question was occurring in the rec deck gymnasium during a martial arts lesson. DuLac's opponent assisted him to his feet.

"This lesson is terminated, Galen. It is illogical to continue while you are preoccupied. You are fortunate that we are studying the dance-art of Vasumi, as your condition would have induced fatality in Kasumi," the muscular, brown-haired Vulcan gently admonished. Chagrined, DuLac bowed.

"I shall endeavor to improve, M'Lord," he promised.

"You shall indeed," was the Vulcan's unusually supportive answer. "However, the title 'M'Lord' is incorrect. If you must entitle me, 'teacher' is logical. Otherwise, I am Solak."

"Forgive me... Solak."

"That, too, is incorrect. No forgiveness is required, for no wrong has been enacted."

Before the conversation could continue, another man walked up to the duo. "Ah, there you are, Galen! I have a message for you."

The man who had approached was John O'Brien, DuLac's assigned cabin mate. The pairing apparently suited both individuals, for their shifts were almost diametrically opposed, offering maximum privacy. It was unfortunate, though, that DuLac and O'Brien had never really had the chance to become acquainted. Or was it unfortunate?

DuLac noticed that O'Brien had positioned himself between the young officer and Solak, rudely blocking the Vulcan's view as he only faced DuLac. DuLac, though, did not forget his own manners.

"My abode mate, John O'Brien, to thee do I present Lord... er... Teacher Solak of the Marine Corps. I proffer likewise to thee, O' Solak."

While Solak prepared to offer the Vulcan salute, O'Brien simply grabbed DuLac's arm.

"Right," he said gruffly, not even sparing the Vulcan a glance. "Make that two messages! Come on!"

O'Brien dragged the astonished boy out of the gym while Solak could only watch, raising his right eyebrow. A moment later the pair entered a turbolift. O'Brien immediately pressed the lift stop button.

"Now you listen to me, boy," O'Brien warned. "Don't ever go near that trash again. Stay away from all of his kind!"

O'Brien's meaning eluded the naive boy.

"But, John O'Brien, well do I know that Marines favor warfare, but still are they honorable. What be thy grievance?"

O'Brien shook his head. This kid had a lot to learn!

"Galen, it's not the fact that he's a Marine. It's that he's a Vulcan!"

DuLac had never encountered prejudice before. Why would this man hate all Vulcans? His insatiable curiosity was aroused.

"What villainy hath been wrought by all of the Vulcan race, Good John?" he wondered.

"They exist, Galen," came the retort. "Take a look at this."

O'Brien pulled a picture out from a flap in his uniform and showed it to DuLac.

"That's a Romulan," O'Brien ranted as DuLac looked at the pointed-eared humanoid that looked much like Solak. "Just another name Vulcans use. Surely you heard about all the Romulan atrocities at the Academy?"

DuLac nodded, unable to deny this fact. Surely Solak – who had been so patient and understanding with him – could not be involved with Romulans? Solak was honorable. Romulans – DuLac had heard – used Devil-magic to make their chariots of the air invisible. Solak fought only when provoked. Romulans struck innocents without reason.

"Surely thou cannot mean Solak...?" he began.

"Yes, Galen. Solak," O'Brien responded. "Romulans look like Vulcans, right?" DuLac nodded. "All Romulans are against the Federation, right?" Again the boy gave affirmation. Science Specialist O'Brien continued his most un-scientific diatribe. "Vulcans and Romulans don't just look the same, they ARE the same. It's a fact!" And while what O'Brien was saying was an extreme exaggeration, the completely bewildered youth could not know that! "So, if they're the same and Romulans are evil, then... Well, think about it. Check out my notes on the other races, too. Stick with your own kind, Galen," the bigot concluded. "Human colonies, that's one thing. But keep

away from those bug-eyed Andorians, the fierce Caitians, the over-sexed Deltans and all the rest! They'll only give you grief. Take it from one who's been there!"

'No! This could not be!' DuLac thought to himself. *'Surely there were heroic nonhumans! Solak had been so kind, even if he did seem to dislike emotions... Then there was assistant chief engineer Briana Lithir. The Cygnian had been willing to answer his questions about her race, even if she had seemed angry before performing witchery on the wrench she had bent... But then, there too was the villainess Lorrass... Could Sir John be right?'* Desperately, DuLac thought of something.

"Thou mentioned a message whenst thou entered the room of honor..."

O'Brien clapped his right hand to his forehead. "You're right! I wanted to tell you that the last mail shipment included a package for you from Avalon. I've got to go, but think about what I've said. The first thing you must learn, Galen, is to consult your elders... Human elders. You'll benefit from their guidance. See you later."

Hours later, DuLac entered the quarters he shared with O'Brien. There it was; a package from home! He controlled his mounting excitement, then reached for O'Brien's journal. He felt so wicked, reading a man's private thoughts. But then again, Sir John had told him to read it. He'd even left a note!

What he read in the note astonished him. O'Brien had been attacked by a Caitian during his high school years. Impossible! Caitians were renowned for their love of peace and beauty. From what DuLac had learned since leaving Avalon, violence was usually unthinkable to them! The next entry mentioned a 'terrorist' attack by a group of Andorians. No! No! NO! How could fighters with such an honorable name as 'Warriors of Andor' take hostages like cowards, maiming or killing five students?!? DuLac felt something was wrong in what he was reading! And what was this? Two Tellarites and two Vulcans had stormed the place where the Andorians were holding their prisoners, which included O'Brien, and killed two of the hostages while letting the knaves escape?!

DuLac slammed the book shut and reached for his package. Surely Sir John was wrong! But what he had written was so compelling! DuLac needed to clear his mind, so he opened the package. Inside was a letter written in calligraphy along with a computer tape and an exquisite crystal vial containing a brown liquid. He read the letter:

Brother Galen, it began. All is forgiven. We hope that thou wilt extend thy forgiveness as well. I pray thee, drink of this fine mead and propose with me a toast to the health of the family. Please play the tape after thou hath felt the mead-warm thou. With eternal love; Thy brother, Arthur DuLac.

DuLac was delighted. His family had been so wroth with him for having had the temerity to wish to visit the stars. His father, Tristan, had allowed him to leave, true, but not without a stern message warning him of possible disinheritance. With a glad heart, DuLac opened the vial.

"To the glory of our mighty Lord of Heaven, the health of all good people, the heritage of Clan DuLac, and to the prosperity of the noble sky-craft Lords: Matheson, who graciously allowed me to serve him, and Johnson, he who holds fief to me now!" He then drained the vial in one gulp as was proper.

Having finished the mead, DuLac rose. ...Or, at least, he tried to rise. The room was spinning rapidly.

"Oh, Holy Father!" he cried in anguish as he held the sides of his head. "I learned mine lesson with that vile 'Saurian Brandy,' but surely can I hold mead, can I not?"

Apparently he could not. He managed to stand, but his legs threatened to collapse under his weight. This was no time to quit! He had to prove to the new chief of operations that he was not a child requiring protection, as the cat-like woman seemed to believe. He staggered toward the door, but it was no use. He struggled back to the table, hoping perhaps his brother Arthur's tape would calm his nerves. He shoved the tape into the nearby computer console and played it.

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On another deck, Marine Major Achilles Carey Copeland was angrily reviewing his troops.

"These scores are disgusting!" he thundered, holding a stack of printouts that his assistant, David Maddox, had reviewed. "Some of you hardly passed! Why the hell don't we just surrender to the Klingons now?! Get out of my sight! Dis-MISSED!!"

With a hearty but chastened, “Sir, yes, SIR!” his Marines began to file out, followed by his security team. An unspoken pecking order had come into being since the youthful Marine had joined the *Arcturus* crew. Somehow, it now seemed fashionable to be a Marine, whereas it had before been considered a haven for roughneck, illiterate brawlers prior to his arrival.

Almost as an afterthought, Copeland cried, “Halt!” The entire group froze. “Seldon, Trent, and Phobos, front and center! The rest of you, go!”

The three named Marines exchanged silent looks tinged with fear as the remaining crew members left. As Copeland approached the three, they assumed the stance of attention. Copeland was struck by the disparities of these three men. They were all human, but that was where the similarities ended.

Hober Mallo Seldon could only be described as ‘average.’ Standing 1.68 meters in height, the native of the merchant paradise planet Antares was truly of average build, average appearance, and seemingly average intelligence. As such, he possessed an astonishing ability to blend into almost any crowd, a trait that had saved one important mission several months earlier. In point of fact, his intelligence was far from average. He was – Copeland knew – clever, suave, even manipulative. His Antarean background enabled him to acquire any needed object – a ‘cumshaw artist’ as it was known in centuries past – making him a man after the Tamurilian’s own heart.

In contrast, Vespasian Trent of Izar, the planet which claimed Starfleet’s greatest hero, Kelvar Garth, as one of its citizens, was lanky at 1.91 meters in height, strikingly handsome, rigidly disciplined, and unbelievably agile. The feats he could perform with his favorite weapons; throwing daggers, Capellan kligats, and especially whips, shocked and impressed even Copeland at times.

As for Tristan Phobos of Terra, ‘strange’ was the only proper word to describe this man. Standing 1.7 meters tall, he had jet-black hair and a thick moustache that would never have met Marine regulations. Luckily, Starfleet was not so rigid. Hailing from New Haiti, Louisiana, Phobos had become quite popular with his tarot card and palm reading sessions and astrological chart drawings, but it was also rumored that he was extremely superstitious, as confirmed by his roommate’s report of horseshoes, four-leaf clovers and hex signs all over their quarters.

Copeland addressed Seldon first. “At ease,” he ordered. Seldon complied, shifting to parade rest. “I’ve decided to move you to support services. Chief Braacht has already agreed to take you. Pretty flattering, as he is a Tellarite, and hard to please!”

Seldon’s eyes widened and his jaw dropped slightly. His Marine discipline finally failed him.

“Sir! Haven’t I done my job?? How can you just throw me over...”

“Ten-hut!” Copeland barked, cutting Seldon off. The Major stared at the man in front of him for several seconds, then broke into a smile. “Look, ‘Fingers,’ you’ve done a great job. But I need you over in supply. When supplies run low, somebody’s got to climb the... ah... ‘fence.’ Know what I mean?” He gave the obviously insulted, emotionally bruised man a knowing wink.

It took a moment, but realization finally hit Seldon. He was not being rejected, as he had been by his parents (if only in his own opinion). Instead, he was being given a golden opportunity to exercise his outstanding ability to obtain anything of need for the right price.

“Sir, Yes SIR!!” he cried with new enthusiasm before Copeland dismissed him. The Major then turned to Trent.

“I hear you’re taking the Marine test. Glad to have you aboard.” Trent shook his head.

“Permission to speak candidly, sir?” he requested.

Now it was Copeland’s jaw that dropped. ‘Speak candidly?’ Trent hardly spoke at all! He generally let his weapons speak for him. “Permission granted,” Copeland finally responded.

“Sir, I’m taking the test for conditioning, not to transfer into the Corps,” Trent began. “There’s no way I’d ever want to be a Marine... with respect, sir.”

Copeland’s indignation was aroused. Here was another Fleet snob who probably thought that the Marine Corps was beneath his dignity. Copeland resisted the urge to strangle the man.

“Just what’s wrong with the Corps, Mister?” he demanded.

“Sir, the Marines are high-tech ground-pounders. I’m fast, not strong. I’d never be happy using a phaser rifle when I could be using this!” Trent slapped the coiled whip on his belt.

Copeland’s anger dissolved. Trent was no dogmatist. The Marines were simply wrong for this individual. But the Major hated to waste this talented man in security. Maybe…?

“Then you’re saying,” Copeland asked, “is if you could stick with the weapons you like, you’d join the Corps?”

“Sure, why not? If I pass the tests,” Trent replied. “I’d love to be where the action is, sir!”

“I’ll see about finding a place for you, ‘Bullwhip,’” Copeland vowed. “Don’t worry. Dismissed.” As Trent exited, Copeland immediately began to consider ways of fulfilling his promise, as Trent would be quite an asset to the Marines. While he was thinking, the Major suddenly realized that one more person needed to be dealt with.

“Phobos,” Copeland addressed. “I saved you for last so I wouldn’t have to embarrass you in front of your friends. You’ve done a pretty good job up to now, but the last two days you’ve barely hit standards. What’s the story?”

“Sir,” Phobos answered with a thick French accent, “Zere eez a problem. I have been..er..under ze weazaire since..ah…”

“Since you lost this?” Copeland reached into the flap on his uniform, withdrawing a chain with a furry cylindrical object on it.

“Sacre Bleu! My rabbit’s foot!” Phobos reached for it like a dog snapping at a bone.

“Forget it! It’s going out the airlock!” Copeland retorted as he pulled back his hand, returning the talisman under the flap of his uniform and out of reach to Phobos. “From now on, no more rabbit’s feet, four-leaf clovers or coins! Grow up! Dismissed!”

Phobos stared longingly at his superior officer, hoping that the Tamurilian would relent. Quickly recognizing that he would not, Phobos ran for the door.

With the meetings concluded, Copeland’s shift was finally over. He headed for the crew lounge for some much-needed unwinding time. At one table, Copeland noticed an attractive, muscular Cygnian woman sitting with several engineering manuals in front of her. “Ah, just the person I need to see!” he remarked to himself.

“Hi,” Copeland greeted her as he approached.

Briana Lithir raised her head.

“Oh, hello, Major Copeland,” she responded formally.

“C’mon, I’m Carey,” Copeland invited.

“Then I’m Briana. Sit down.” Copeland did. “You look exhausted,” the Cygnian divined.

“You got it!” came the reply. “I’ve got SOME crew down in security. I’ve got my Marines pretty well settled, but security is something else. I’ve got a snuck-up snob, two brown-nosers, a guy who can use a whip like nothing I’ve ever seen who won’t transfer into the Corps, and a certifiable lunatic who insists on carrying a rabbit’s foot!”

Lithir could not help herself. Nearly spewing her coffee, she began to laugh hysterically. “A rabbit’s foot?!? You can’t be serious!” she exclaimed.

“Dead serious,” Copeland confirmed with a nod. “And that’s not all. His roommate, that records officer N’aghari, says the room’s full of four-leaf clovers, horseshoes, and silver coins. The guy’s nuts!”

Lithir stared at the diminutive yet powerfully built Tamurilian.

“N’aghari? He saved four of my people several months ago. Commodore Johnson says he walked right into a fire and wasn’t even singed! Why would a man like him room with such a dunsel??”

Copeland shrugged. “Assigned, I guess. I saw N’aghari at one of the Deck 7 parties. Nothing bothers him. Probably couldn’t care less who he rooms with.” The Marine paused. “Oh, speaking of parties, that was a pretty dirty trick you pulled with Rusty,” he said with a glare.

Lithir batted her eyelashes in her best impersonation of Copeland’s girlfriend, First Officer Kira K’tal Tefellaran Smith of Orion. “Who, me?” she squeaked.

Copeland’s irritation turned to raucous laughter. “I guess I had it coming after that hangar deck bit.” Lithir nodded, smiling. But Copeland’s amusement quickly faded as he pulled out an electronic clipboard. “Get a load of

these scores,” he ranted. “One of the new guys couldn’t even pass the basic security test. Why’m I stuck with him? And what the hell’s a ‘Xelatian’ anyway?”

Lithir shrugged as Copeland had.

“I was raised to be a diplomat, but I’ve never heard of them. However, I think I can solve your problem with your refugee from Elba 2.”

“What’ve you got up your sleeve this time?”

“Who, me?” Briana squeaked again. She gathered her books, waved, and walked to the door. Then she paused and turned back toward Copeland. “Wait! I think I know someone who would know about Xelatians.”

“Who?” Copeland asked.

“Bael,” Lithir replied. “He’s a sociologist, after all!”

Copeland shuddered. He remembered his last meeting with the Efrosian.

“I’ll get the thermal blankets,” he sighed as the two officers left together. As they neared a turn in the corridor, Copeland headed for Bael’s room among the officer’s quarters on deck 5, all the while wondering just what fate fellow jokester Lithir had in store for ol’ ‘Trisk’ Phobos. On the way, the Marine stopped in his own quarters, spending several minutes with his beloved German shepherd puppy before grabbing a thermal suit and bracing himself for a ‘chilly’ reception.

Several minutes later, Copeland arrived at the Efrosian’s door and activated the door chime. “Enter!” replied a booming voice. Inhaling deeply, Copeland entered the quarters. Sure enough, the room was bitterly cold. Ice patches had already weaved beautiful patterns around the stark, bare quarters.

“...Hi, Bael,” Copeland said, shivering despite his thermal suit and dense body raised in a 2-G environment. Bael Vaahst-O’hrne-Dagon’s only answer was a nod.

“Can you tell me what a ‘Xelatian’ is?” Copeland asked.

Bael simply stared at Copeland for several seconds, his ice-blue eyes unblinking. Copeland wondered if he should repeat the question for a moment before the Efrosian finally replied, “Xelata is a water-world whose octopoid people recently joined the Federation.”

“Octopoid. So they don’t do too well on land?”

“They cannot survive upon land without life-support equipment and anti-gravitational devices for locomotion.”

“So that’s why Corporal ‘Virl’ couldn’t pass the tests,” Copeland realized. “I’ll have to give him special water tests instead of the usual exams. Say, I’ve always wanted to learn water combat.” The Major turned to leave as he said, “Thanks a lot, Commander.” Then he remembered another golden opportunity that Bael’s knowledge offered. “Can I ask one more thing?” Bael gave no reply, so Copeland assumed this to mean ‘yes.’ “What about Zaranites? I’ve got a Marine recruit who just got on the ship at *Starbase 22*. He always wears armor. Can’t even see his face. I don’t understand the guy one bit!”

The Efrosian typed something on the keyboard he specially had made for him. ‘*Weird,*’ thought Copeland. ‘*He won’t even talk to the computer.*’ Moments later, a picture appeared on the monitor screen.

“The armor you speak of is a protective environment for the ‘Beega’ insects Zaranites must wear against their skin,” Bael explained, glancing at the computer image of Arkoth D’Kethlorr, the only Zaranite aboard the *Arcturus*.

“WHAT?!?” Copeland exclaimed, a shiver running down the Marine officer’s spine. “Are you telling me this guy WEARS bugs?” Bael nodded subtly.

“To relax,” were the Efrosian’s only words.

Now Copeland almost choked. “RELAX?!?” he yelped. “Half the time he’s asking me to let him kill something. The guy is violent, even for a Marine!” Then, after a pregnant pause, Copeland turned and left the stateroom, realizing when Bael said no more that the conversation was over. As he returned to the warmth of the corridor, Copeland thought to himself, ‘*Talk about confusing people! Bael is about as understandable as the Vulcan language without a universal translator!*’

* * *

On another deck, Briana Lithir was preparing to unleash her ‘Prankster’s Wrath’ upon Mr. Phobos. Gathering a sack full of equipment, she headed to Phobos’ quarters, assuming that he would not be there. “I’d better talk to N’aghari about this,” she considered. She arrived in front of the correct door and pressed the chime. At first there was no answer. After pressing the chime once more and considering her options, the door suddenly swished open and standing just inside, resplendent in priestly or mystic robes, his ebony face almost glowing inexplicably, stood N’aghari. He looked at the Cygnian with mild curiosity for a moment before inviting her inside.

As Lithir stepped in, she noticed one side of the room was bedecked with four-leaf clovers, horseshoes, family portraits, coins, and rabbit’s feet. Three ancient hex symbols had been scrawled into the wall.

“Oh, Goddess,” Briana thought. “The billeting officer will have a fit!”

N’aghari’s side of the room was a sharp contrast. His side boasted beautiful tapestries hanging on the bulkhead, a collection of exquisite musical instruments in one corner, a handcrafted bed comforter covering the bunk, a home-made altar, and a shelf upon which the Haitian had placed eight gray jars. One of Lithir’s occasional bursts of curiosity manifested itself intently.

“N’aghari, what are those jars for?” she asked in an almost child-like manner. She immediately regretted her inquisitiveness, but she could not help being fascinated by this heroic, extremely complicated man, and if N’aghari was offended, it certainly did not show.

“The jars hold the spirits of my deceased family,” the dark-skinned human explained in his soft, gentle manner. “They died in an accident and were never properly laid to rest. I care for them until their proper disposition is possible.”

This sounded absurd, but coming from a man who could walk unharmed through flames, Lithir was unsure what to believe. Instead, she returned to the point of her visit. “N’aghari, a couple of us want to... pull a joke on Phobos. We want to teach him a lesson about all this superstition nonsense.” She gestured toward Phobos’ side of the room. “Would it be okay with you?” she inquired with uncharacteristic timidity.

“Such activity should not occur in my presence,” N’aghari remarked firmly. Dejected, Lithir nodded and prepared to leave until the records officer added, “So I think I will spend the next few hours in the gymnasium.” As he spoke, he rose from his seat and headed toward the cabin door.

Lithir’s lips broke into a grin, her regard for this man increasing exponentially. N’aghari exited, allowing the Cygnian to begin her devilry. An hour later, Lithir exited the shared quarters, admiring her handiwork. It was only then that she noticed several crew members standing behind her! Whirling, she saw a group of what appeared to be cat-like Caitians curiously watching her. The lone female of the three, whom Lithir recognized as Lieutenant Cala, stepped forward and took a closer look through the open door of the quarters.

“Ah,” she said, her voice sounding strangely mechanical through the vocorder she used to speak aloud, her species – the Cathen, who had only recently joined the Federation – normally using telepathy to communicate. “*A woman after my own heart.*” Lithir was relieved to realize Cala was apparently another member of the unofficial ‘Prankster’s Club’ that had been informally created aboard the *Arcturus* since the start of her deep-space mission.

Lithir regarded the three crewmates curiously. She quickly realized that Cala’s two companions were indeed Caitian, and it was obvious from looking at them that they were not related by clan. M’Rakshasa was a recently-assigned science specialist who had just completed his duty shift and had already shed his Starfleet uniform for a far more comfortable harness his species preferred to wear, yet even out of uniform, he was impeccably neat, his orange-gold fur neatly combed and golden eyes shining bright.

In sharp contrast, the second male Caitian, communications technician Pensador M’Pazz, had unkempt black fur and dark blue eyes. He was wearing a standard Starfleet duty uniform, but it appeared as if M’Pazz had been sleeping in it for the past week!

Lithir started to explain why she was setting up Phobos’ quarters like she had when Cala exclaimed, “*I would love to assist!*” The Cathen’s outburst seemed to surprise Lithir until Cala explained that she was a telepath and that it was nearly impossible for her to block out others’ thoughts. Lithir nodded in understanding, though she was still displeased.

“*My offer still stands, Mister Lithir,*” Cala almost pleaded. “*I would love to help you.*”

Lithir's good humor quickly returned, and the idea that had suddenly occurred to her was too good to pass up.

"Okay, here's what we'll do ..."

* * *

A short time later, an unusual-looking crewman rushed out the door of one of the science labs, a vial of bubbling yellow liquid held in one chitinous hand. He was a little upset, verging on depression, and never noticed the porcine crewman rushing the opposite way down the corridor.

KLOOONNN!!! The pair literally bounced off one another, landing in a most undignified fashion on the deck. Fortunately, the vial in the first crewman's hand did not break. The duo regarded each other.

"Why don't you watch where you're going, you two-legged bumblebee!?" the short Tellarite demanded.

"If you would loszzze a few hundred poundszzz, this wouldn't keep happening, you obeszzze szzzwine!" railed the 'bumblebee,' actually an insectoid being from Kaferia, also known as Tau Ceti III.

The argument became so loud that several crewmembers rushed over to break up the inevitable fistfight.

The Tellarite and the Kaferian glared at each other before noticing the growing crowd. The Tellarite began to laugh.

"Hold it!" he cried, holding up his hoof-like hands. "We'd better quit while we're ahead, Khazakh!"

The insectoid nodded. "I appreciate yourrr company, Maachzarrrrr," K'hat-K'hazan-Kzzintraachalzzitzzz responded. "But even our uszzzual banterr juszzzt doeszzzn't help today."

The crowd that had gathered began to disperse, realizing that these two weirdos apparently were friends. Meanwhile, Maachzarr of Tellar regarded his roommate.

"What's your problem, Khazakh?" the Tellarite probed. "Can't find a volunteer to taste your latest potion?"

Khazakh shook his head. "My 'potionszzz' might aszzz well be waterr, forrr all the good they do," he answered despondently, glancing at his vial.

Maachzarr glared at his friend, now truly angry.

"Now listen here, 'Igor'," he bellowed. "If you give up on yourself now, I'll kick your Char-t'aakh-stir all the way to the hanger bay!"

"What differenczzze will it make?" Khazakh retorted. "Beszzzideszzz, Tellariteszzz arren't vvviolent."

Maachzarr shrugged. "Details, details!" he said as he brushed off his uniform before plodding off.

So dejected was the Kaferian that he never noticed the figure stalking up behind him. With a loud cry, it lunged and attacked Khazakh with a large blade. The weapon cut through the Kaferian's uniform, but apparently could not penetrate or slice through the insectoid's tough exoskeleton. The blade slid across the upper of Khazakh's two left arms, slicing off the top of the chemist's vial and spilling much of the liquid onto the floor.

The attacker noticed that Khazakh had not been harmed by the blow, thanks to his chitinous exoskeleton. With a bloodcurdling scream, the attacker fled before Khazakh could catch more than a glimpse of the fleeing humanoid.

"I'll never underrszzztand theszzze people," he sighed.

As Khazakh stood up, he nearly tripped over himself on the gymnasium trampoline. It took a moment for the Kaferian a moment to realize he was still in the corridor outside the science lab. The Kaferian looked down feeling the deck with his right foot. It sank down several centimeters. To Khazakh's shock, the deck had become rubbery! He stared at the broken vial still in his hand. He stared at the deck again. Suddenly, Khazakh's body quivered. He dropped the vial, spilling the remaining liquid. A moment later he was leaping up and down on the now-spongy deck.

"IT WORKSZZZ! IT WORKSZZZ!!!" the scientist exulted. "Szzzucczzzezzz at laszzzt!!!" He then quickly returned to the lab, intent on making more of the mysterious liquid.

* * *

Achilles Carey Copeland stalked through the hallway, his thoughts flowing with a thousand fantasies of how to murder that spoiled rich jackass of a First Assistant. After his bone-chilling experience with Bael, Copeland had decided to warm his insides with some coffee. Unfortunately, he had encountered Security Chief Kyle Sterling III in the same lounge. As the First Assistant had done once before, he'd proceeded to alienate his superior officer with his blue-blooded holier-than-thou attitude.

Copeland had left the lounge quickly, not wanting to cause a scene in front of the twenty shipmates present. Now, in the almost empty corridor, the Major was free to vent his anger, if only in the privacy of his thoughts. How he prayed that someone would start a fight at that moment.

He quickly got his wish. POW!! Someone crashed into him from one of the side corridors. As he shook off the pain in his shoulder, Copeland's ire increased when he recognized the new adversary.

"Lorrass! Move the hell out of my way," the Marine demanded.

Aerina Lorrass' own fury increased. First she was insulted by that pompous male Commodore, now this microscopic little teenage male?!

"Carey, I strongly suggest that you and the other males learn to respect your betters," she purred dangerously.

"Better?!?" Copeland repeated incredulously. "I said move, or I'll move you!" Copeland warned her.

"I do not obey children, especially little boys such as you. Do not force me to administer an obviously-needed spanking."

Copeland glared at the Cygnian. "Try it, Lorr-ASS. Make my day! Not that a horse-face like you could..."

That did it! Copeland's insult was interrupted by a tremendous blow from the enraged communications officer. At least, it would have been tremendous had it not been blocked with contemptuous ease.

"At last! An excuse!" Copeland muttered almost joyfully as he leapt onto Lorrass, his fists and feet flying. It took nearly a minute before three security guards arrived and tried – and failed – to separate these two enormously powerful combatants. Two young ensigns were passing through and they noticed the melee.

"Oooh! Ringside seats!" one cried to the other. They propped themselves up against a bulkhead and relaxed, wishing for some popcorn.

A fourth guard arrived on the scene, pulling a coiled object from his belt while a tall, crimson-attired white-haired man approached from behind Lorrass.

KA-THAK!

The new guard's whip entangled the Cygnian, much to her indignation. Simultaneously, the white-haired man interposed himself between Copeland and Lorrass.

"STOP!!!" Bael V'aahst-O'hrne'-Dagon's voice thundered. Both warriors stared at him, Lorrass still struggling against Vespasian Trent's whip. Bael might not have been as strong as Lorrass or as adept at fighting as Copeland, but his size, build, heritage, and truly-demonic face daunted even these two! Reluctantly, the fighters separated.

"This has not ended, little man," Lorrass sneered toward Copeland as Trent released her. She then stalked off.

"S...Sir?" one of the security guards stammered as he moved closer to Copeland. "I'm... sorry... but I weell have to report zeas."

Copeland's anger dissipated as he remarked, "Oh, golly jeeppers. Another demerit? Big fat hairy deal!" He then likewise turned and left.

Phobos contacted Commodore Johnson on the bridge to inform him of what had occurred, while Trent and Bael left together, the Efrosian nodding his approval while Trent re-holstered his whip.

"Same shift?" Trent asked.

"For today," came the Efrosian's strange response as the pair walked to the turbolift.

* * *

As the duty shift ended, Phobos returned to the quarters he shared with N'aghari. He stopped short in the corridor when he noticed something out of place.

"Mon Dieu! What eez zat??" A huge tarpaulin had been placed in front of his door with a sign above it. Obeying the 'Do Not Touch' sign (It was bad luck, after all, to defy a sign), he stepped around it and entered his quarters.

The first thing Phobos noticed was the eight gray jars that had been mostly out of sight on N'aghari's shelf, now prominently displayed on the center of the room's table.

"Sacre bleu!" Phobos cried. "I knew ze man was a Devil-worshipper!" He crossed himself vigorously in the manner of his faith, fingering an ancient set of rosary beads as he stumbled backward toward the door, his face ghostly-white. He suddenly paused as he heard the CRACK! Phobos looked down, noticing for the first time the bulge in the floor. He lifted the carpeting and almost screamed at what he saw. His hand mirror, normally stored in a drawer in the shared head, was in a million pieces. "Oh, no!" he cried to himself. "Seven years of bad luck!"

Scrambling back out of the quarters, he exited, forgetting all about the tarpaulin outside the door. He slipped on the tarp, falling down on his back. It was then he noticed he had exited his stateroom directly under a huge ladder! He screamed, then screamed again when he noticed the upside-down horseshoe nailed to the bulkhead above his door.

Phobos scrambled to get back on his feet and rush back inside his quarters, intent on not coming back out as long as humanly possible, until he heard a mechanical-sounding voice call out, "Yoo-hoo!" Phobos whirled around to see two Caitians and the Caitian-like Cathenian navigator pranced directly across his path, costumed in completely black uniforms and singing joyfully as they waved at him. Phobos fell back to the deck in a dead faint.

As Cala and her cohorts rushed away to the nearest turbolift, a suddenly-sympathetic Briana Lithir emerged from her hiding place not far down the corridor and entered Phobos' room, returned N'aghari's jars to their proper place on the shelf, grabbed some objects she had left in the security officer's quarters, and placed the two silver mirrors and three four-leaf clovers around him, also righting the horseshoe as she exited. She then patted the poor clown, wishing him good luck. She should have reserved the charms for herself, however.

An unseen figure emerged from its own hiding place. With an incoherent battle-cry, it sliced into Lithir's shoulder blade, just as it had attacked Khazakh, the Kaferian scientist only minutes before. Only Lithir's marvelous intuition saved her from instant death. Bringing her Cygnian strength and constitution to bear, in spite of her severe injury, she struck her attacker, stunning the would-be killer momentarily.

"You picked the wrong target, Mister!" Lithir hissed, advancing on the on the semi-conscious man. "You're going to... No!" She stared into the villain's face. "Oh, Goddess! NOOOOO!!!"

The horrified engineer fainted just as the sound of feet rushing down the corridor could be heard approaching. Lithir's attacker quickly recovered and dashed off in the opposite direction.

* * *

On the bridge, Commodore Johnson was fuming.

"It's bad enough that self-important Cygnian Lorrass disgraces herself and humiliates me on my own bridge, now she goes and picks a fight with Copeland?!"

The Commodore's rant was interrupted by the whistle of the ship's intercom and female voice saying, "Medical to bridge!"

"Johnson, here," he responded after practically punching the button.

"Doctor Morgaan, sir. I'm on deck seven. Assistant Chief Engineer Lithir has been stabbed. Her condition is serious but stable. We're moving her to ICU as we speak. Security specialist Phobos was found nearby, dazed but unhurt. He claims to know nothing about the incident."

"Confine Phobos to his quarters for now, Doctor Morgaan," Johnson ordered his Capellan Chief Surgeon. "Have there been any other attacks?"

"Besides the recent fight between Copeland and Lorrass? No, sir," the doctor replied. "Further instructions?"

“None. Just take care of Lithir. Let me know when she’s able to talk. Johnson out.” He then activated another control on the arm of the command chair, activating the ship-wide intercom. “All hands, this is the bridge. Possible intruder alert. One of the crew has been attacked on deck seven. Suspect unknown, but is armed and dangerous. Approach anyone or anything you cannot identify with caution. I repeat, approach with caution! Anyone witnessing any kind of attack is to notify me directly. Johnson, out.”

Mere seconds later, the intercom whistled again. Johnson thumbed the control and commanded, “Report!”

“Commodore, thiszzzz iszzz K’hat-K’hazan’Kzzintraachalzzitzzz, szzzirr,” an insectoid voice buzzed. “In reszzzzponszzzzze to your reszzzzcent requeszzzzt, I wish to report that I waszzzz attacked by szzzzsomeone with a bladed weapon szzzzeveral hourzzzz ago very closzzzzze to my duty szzzztation on deck five.”

“Who did it?” Johnson inquired. “Who was responsible?”

“I don’t know, szzzirr. I did not szzzzee who it waszzzz before he ran away, but what I szzzzaw waszzzz a human male, szzzzlightly taller than average height, carrying a large knife or szzzzworrdd with which he attempted to attack me. I only szzzzaw him from behind as he made his eszzzzcape.”

“Are you hurt?” Johnson asked with concern.

“I am uninjured,” Khazakh replied. “The weapon could not penetrate my exzzzoszzzkeleton, szzzir.”

“What is your duty station, Mister... ?” Johnson hesitated to speak his crewman’s unearthly and painful name.

“I am a ship’szzz chemiszzzt, szzzir,” K’hat-K’hazanKzzintraachalzzitzzz replied. He did not fail to notice Johnson’s hesitation. “Shipmateszzzz often call me ‘Khazakh’, szzzirr.”

“Thank you, ...Khazakh,” Johnson replied. “Bridge, out.” He then slammed the intercom button, grateful to be rid of that grating voice. “Just great! I thought I’d caught that saboteur!”

* * *

Bael V’aahst’O’hrne’-Dagon and Vespasian Trent emerged from the turbolift onto the bridge, relieving their respective colleagues. The odd duo were always marvels of punctuality, their arrival signaling the beginning of Delta shift. As the watch shift settled in, the bridge was now manned by Bael at sciences, Trent at the security station, Kalin Kale of Alpha Centuari at helm, and a three-armed Edoan, Xelisna, at navigation.

Communications specialist Penji Fil of Catulla suddenly addressed Johnson. “Sir, I have an incoming priority message from *Starbase 22!*”

“On screen, Mr. Fil,” the Commodore ordered. A moment later the image of Admiral Andrea Donovan appeared on the main viewscreen.

“Commodore Johnson, you are ordered to cancel your current mission and return to *Starbase 22*. A shuttle will dock with the *Arcturus* upon arrival,” the Terran woman spoke.

“What’s the situation, Admiral Donovan?” Johnson inquired.

“Politics, Commodore. Politics,” Donovan growled. “I don’t want to make it even worse than it is. Just get to *Starbase 22* as soon as possible. Donovan out.”

* * *

En route to *Starbase 22*, the man who would be a murderer struck again. Unnoticed, he stalked for a victim in the starship’s gymnasium. ‘Ah!’ he thought to himself, watching two members of the crew finishing their workout. ‘*The three-armed, three-legged orange-skinned monstrosity would be perfect!*’

“See ya later, Xavier,” the human said to his alien companion as he grabbed his gear and headed toward the corridor.

“Thanks for the workout, Smith,” the galaxy’s friendliest Edoan responded as the doors swished shut behind the human. Xavier was left alone, or so the Edoan believed.

The assassin leapt at Xavier from behind some workout equipment, his blade gleaming in the light. Xavier ducked, barely in time.

“Hey! Are you crazy?” he demanded, assuming a boxer’s stance.

The assassin leaped at Xavier again, his blade slashing the air but failing to find its mark. The Edoan battered the human man with lefts, rights, and middles in a whirlwind of blows. Xavier defended himself well, but it was to little avail. The seemingly-indestructible man finally raked Xavier’s face with his blade, blinding him. Xavier stumbled back, and the human was upon him in moments, mercilessly beating the Edoan with the butt of his weapon. Once Xavier offered no more resistance, the assassin raised his weapon above his head, prepared to plunge it into his victim’s chest right where he assumed the Edoan’s heart would be. It was then he heard approaching voices and scrambled toward the corridor on the opposite side of the gym, his parting words a shout of, “Die, you living obscenity!”

“Ooh,” the Edoan groaned. “Did anybody get the number of that shuttlecraft?” Darkness then overcame him.

* * *

Back on the bridge, *Starbase 22* was just becoming visible on the viewscreen.

“Commodore,” Penji Fil announced. “Admiral Donovan on subspace for you again.”

Johnson pressed a control on the arm of his chair and said, “Yes, Admiral?”

“Commodore Johnson, please assemble departmental representatives in your hangar deck in ten minutes. Full dress uniforms! Donovan out!”

Johnson stared dumbfounded at the viewscreen, where a beautifully decorated, non-Starfleet shuttlecraft could be seen departing one of the starbase’s docking bays.

“What in hell is going on!?” Johnson fumed, puzzled why his starship would be called away from its mission and now his department heads were required to greet an arriving shuttle. He resignedly gave the order over the intercom, then turned the bridge over to his first officer, Kira K’tal Tefellaran Smith, before rushing to his own quarters to change into his dress uniform.

Nine minutes later, Bael of the science division, David Maddox of security, Xelisna of operations, newcomer Lieutenant Marsha Thorne of engineering, Penji Fil of communications, Athena Arcadian of the medical department, and Braacht of support services were standing at attention in the hangar deck, each dressed like Johnson in their finest dress uniforms. Even Rear Admiral Bryan Ackermann was present, more due to his own curiosity than any official order.

As the *Arcturus* crew stood rigidly, the elaborately decorated civilian shuttle passed through the open hanger doors and the atmosphere retaining field, touching down in the center of the large open bay. Seconds later, the shuttlecraft door opened and nine Cygnians; six females and three males, exited the craft. The six women assembled directly in front of Commodore Johnson while the males stood quietly to one side, awaiting their apparent superiors’ commands.

Then, almost as if on cue, the door to the hangar deck opened and Aerina Lorrass entered, ornately dressed and even haughtier than usual. It was then that the most elaborately dressed of the Cygnian women addressed Johnson.

“Commodore Eric Johnson, I am Lady Alyssa Lorrass of Sword-Clan Lorrass. I have come to retrieve my daughter.”

Alyssa Lorrass handed the Commodore an electronic clipboard, upon which was displayed a set of orders from Starfleet Command. Johnson was stunned. Could Lorrass’ family have so much influence in the Federation that it could even command Admiral Donovan??

Johnson quickly read through the orders, verifying they were legitimate and complete. Then, with a mixture of relief and rage, he turned toward his now-former communications officer.

“You’ve been nothing but a thorn in my side since the day I took command of the *Arcturus*, Lorrass. Now I only have four words for you; Get off my ship.”

If she recognized Johnson’s ire, Lorrass expertly ignored it. Instead, she snapped her fingers and the three males trotted to her side.

“You two, take my bags and place them on the ship.” The two male Cygnians Lorrass had addressed looked all about, then looked questioningly at her.

“Fools!” Lorrass raged, “They are outside.” The two male Cygnians then started moving toward the now-closed main hanger doors. “No, you idiots! The other door!”

The duo stopped mid-step and turned around, headed for the proper exit. How silly it was of Lorrass to have forgotten that Cygnian men were only semi-intelligent, like well trained Terran pets! Lorrass then greeted the Cygnian women warmly, particularly her own mother, before turning to face the crew.

“Farewell, Eric,” she cooed. “With proper female guidance, perhaps someday you may make an adequate ship’s commander. And tell Carey that he fought fairly well... for an infant!”

Seconds later, the two male Cygnians returned to the hanger deck, laden with luggage and packages, their spines near ready to snap.

“Put those in the shutt... The big ship,” she commanded the males impatiently.

As Lorrass’ baggage was loaded aboard the Cygnian shuttle, Lady Lorrass spoke to Johnson again. “We understand that you have another Cygnian aboard. I would like to speak with her.”

“I would love to accommodate you, Lady Lorrass, but Mister Lithir is in sickbay, unconscious,” Johnson answered.

“Why?”

“She was assaulted,” he found himself compelled to admit candidly.

“When?!?”

“Earlier today.”

“By what means?”

“She was stabbed.”

“Then she will be awakening very soon, Commodore. Take me to her.”

Johnson stared at the Cygnian woman. Was she a psychic? Or an idiot? Shrugging, he gestured for Lady Lorrass to follow, then walked to the exit. It took several minutes for the Commodore and the Cygnian entourage to reach sickbay, and to Johnson’s surprise, sure enough, Briana Lithir was already regaining consciousness! The Commodore inquired his engineer’s condition from his chief surgeon.

“She will be fine, sir,” Morgaan assured Johnson. “The wound was not very severe.”

Alyssa stared at her fellow Cygnian as the engineer slowly opened her eyes.

“Ah, welcome back, Daughter-of-the-Rose.” Astonished, Lithir forced herself to sit up on her elbows.

“Greetings, Sword-Keeper Lorrass,” she responded politely, if somewhat weakly.

“I trust you will find and serve justice upon the assailant, Commodore?” Lady Lorrass half-asked, half-demanded. Johnson simply nodded.

Lady Lorrass and her entourage turned to leave when Lithir’s weak voice caught her attention.

“Sword-Keeper, may I request a favor?” The regal woman nodded.

“Would it be possible for me to... borrow one of your staff to assist me? I’ve recently received several packages from home, and I would be honored to have Cygnian help arrange my quarters.”

The Lady Lorrass nodded, then ordered, “Krona, assist her!”

Lithir had recognized Aerina Lorrass’ brother, Krona, the only male among the Cygnians visiting sickbay, and hoped he would be the one chosen to help her. Krona was incredibly handsome, with his golden mane and tail and those bright green eyes; eyes that were not as glazed by stupidity as those normally seen of the other Cygnian males! Yes, Krona would be worthy of getting to know better, as dim-witted as he might be, though it was obvious Aerina Lorrass had a different opinion of her brother.

“Hah! Krona help?” she questioned. “He’s the stupidest of the three that accompanied you here, Mother. How fitting!”

“Now, now, Aerina,” Lady Lorrass scolded her daughter. “We can do this service for Clan Lithir without the sarcasm.”

Lithir thanked the Lady Lorrass, then moved to get out of the biobed, much to Doctor Morgaan’s consternation.

“You’re not going anywhere, Mister Lithir,” Morgaan ordered. “You still need to rest and heal.”

“Aerina,” Lady Lorrass said, looking at her daughter. “I am sure you know where to find Daughter-of-the-Rose’s quarters. Assist your brother!”

Lorrass could be heard grumbling under her breath, but she led her brother out into the corridor, followed a moment later by the Lady Lorrass after she had offered her farewell. Meanwhile, Johnson was about to inform Dr. Morgaan about the report of the second attack reported by Chemist Khazakh when the sickbay doors swished open and a voice called out, “Make a hole! Get Doctor Morgaan, stat!”

Commodore Johnson quickly shuffled out of the way as an anti-grav gurney carrying Xavier was pushed in by a pair of orderlies, who rapidly moved the Edoan onto the ICU bed, where Morgaan immediately started examining the injuries to his face.

“Another attack?!” Johnson exclaimed incredulously. “What in hell is happening aboard my ship?!?” He then turned toward Lithir, who was watching Morgaan working on Xavier with an expression of sadness. “Lithir, did you see who did this to you?” he asked.

Lithir’s emotions boiled. It was too unthinkable! “Sir..., I... He...”

“Tell me!” Johnson bellowed. “Who’s after my people?!?”

The Cygnian sat upright, almost physically recovered but emotionally crippled. Tears trickled down her face and her voice cracked and finally died. She opened her mouth once more and the answer finally came, an unspeakable thought coming out in a barely perceptible whisper, but the word resounded in the Commodore’s brain like the roar of a photon torpedo.

“Galen.”

Johnson’s legs almost collapsed beneath him. How could it be possible? Galen? Sweet, naive, loyal, obedient Galen DuLac was a saboteur and an assassin!?

“My God,” Johnson thought. “Of all people! Who else among my crew can’t I trust!?”

As he raved in anger, Johnson moved toward the intercom mounted near the door and slammed it on.

“Security, this is the Commodore,” he boomed. “The ‘intruder’ has been identified as Galen DuLac. He is to be considered armed and dangerous! Send an armed team to the bridge in fifteen minutes!” Johnson intended to lead the team himself. That Judas had a great deal to answer for! “And to think I’d considered adopting him!” the Commodore growled to himself as he deactivated the intercom before moving to leave sickbay.

“Commodore?” a voice said from behind him. Holding back the urge to shout, he turned back around. Lithir was looking at him with pleading eyes.

“May I leave sickbay, sir?” she asked.

“Actually, Lithir, under the circumstances it might be better if you stayed...”

“I would really feel more comfortable in my own quarters, sir,” she added.

A frown briefly crossed Johnson’s face, but he noted the determined look on his engineer’s own. Finally he said, “Permission is granted to leave sickbay.”

“Thank you, sir,” Lithir said, gathering her belongings and leaving sickbay mere steps behind Johnson. She quickly made her way to her quarters, unconsciously checking each corridor intersection she passed through for anyone loitering about. Several minutes later she entered the door of her quarters and released a deep breath in relief.

It took Lithir a moment to remember she was not alone, but to her surprise only Krona was present in her room. Lorrass was nowhere to be seen.

“Krona, where is Aerina?” she inquired.

“Left,” the male Cygnian replied dully. “She not want to stay with me.”

It was only then that Lithir actually looked around, and to her surprise she was very impressed. Her quarters had been redecorated with a beautiful impeccable Victorian motif. She found herself sitting down on her bunk to admire the décor a moment before her manners reasserted themselves.

“Would you like something to eat or drink before we move the bunk, Krona?” she asked.

Krona nodded. Lithir moved over to her computer terminal and displayed a menu on the monitor screen, completely forgetting the intellectual level of a typical Cygnian male like she was dealing with.

“Some Andorian S’vass would be nice, Mistress,” he said, looking at the screen over Lithir’s shoulder.

Lithir retrieved the proper program card and inserted it into the slot of her food synthesizer, choosing a fine Terran wine for herself. She retrieved the two glasses and started to hand one of them to her companion when she suddenly realized Krona had obviously read the menu screen.

“Krona, how did you learn to read??” she asked in shock.

“I dunno,” Krona responded stupidly. “I just like S’vass. It’s good!”

Lithir shook her head, not accepting the answer. “Forget the act, Krona! I knew you possessed higher than normal intelligence for a Cygnian male the moment I saw your eyes.”

As Lithir watched, those same eyes first seemed to glaze over, then took on a feral gleam. His face grew taut and he reached toward his right boot, pulling out a hidden knife.

“You realize, of course, that I cannot let you live with this knowledge,” he hissed. “Too much is at stake!”

Lithir stayed calm as she said, “You’re right, Krona. And I may be your staunchest ally in this matter! I want to reverse the brain damage our men have suffered. It’s detrimental to Cygnet.”

Krona hesitated, lowering his weapon slightly. “Why should I believe that you would wish to return to patriarchal rule?” he demanded.

Lithir snorted. “Male rule? You men blew it once already! No, but I would like to see equality.”

“Equality?!?” Krona repeated with a mixture of derision and uncertainty. “Do you actually believe egalitarianism is possible? On Cygnet?”

Lithir knew she had him. “We’ll never find out if you kill me, will we?”

Krona relaxed. “I doubt I could have brought myself to do it anyway,” he laughed as he returned his weapon to its hiding place. “You are one of the few Cygnian women who don’t abuse the men. We need more like you, not fewer. All right, you’ve got my cooperation.”

* * *

While Briana Lithir was successfully preventing one murder, Eric Johnson hoped that he would fare likewise. Arriving on the bridge long before the security team, he sat in his chair. Always an intuitive man, Johnson had a hunch that DuLac’s next target would be the bridge.

Sure enough, mere moments later, DuLac stepped out of one of the turbolifts, his longsword gleaming in the artificial light. He advanced menacingly upon his surrogate father as Johnson slowly turned his chair to face him, the words he spoke confirming Johnson’s belief that DuLac was an imposter.

“You! You are responsible for this horror!” the ‘Avalonian’ howled, his eyes as feral as Krona Lorrass’ had been only moments before. Johnson noted that, once again, DuLac’s medieval-sounding Avalonian accent and patterns of speech had vanished under stress. Obviously, he was not a well-trained spy! “After you die, I will kill all of the non-Terran animals you invited onto this ship!” Johnson tried to grab DuLac’s arm, but the youth slashed viciously with his weapon, barely missing him.

Bael V’ahst-O’hrne’-Dagon and Vespasian Trent were advancing upon DuLac from opposite sides as Johnson distracted him, but a scream stopped Trent in his tracks. Bael was holding his head. Obviously, he had not recovered from his cerebral injury.

“Pain!” the Efrosian shrieked.

DuLac whirled. He stared into Bael’s demonic features.

“So, Satan! You come yourself at last!” DuLac screeched hysterically. Bael attempted to shake off the psychic pain he was suffering.

“Cease!” he commanded, as he had so effectively with Copeland and Lorrass earlier.

DuLac responded by slashing the Efrosian’s sternum with his longsword, leaving a gaping wound. KA-THAKK! Vespasian Trent had drawn his whip and expertly disarmed the aggressor. A pity that he had been seconds too late!

A pity for DuLac, that was. Johnson prepared to call for a medical team and to light a fire under the security team he expected would have reached the bridge by now!! He glanced at Bael and what he saw horrified

him. He had heard about this once before, when Bael had apparently tried to kill Athena Arcadian. The Efrosian's sky-blue eyes were turning darker, eventually assuming a deep red color. The Efrosian's ochre blood dripping from the wound in his chest instantly clotted. His already-pale skin turned cloud white, and Bael seized DuLac by the throat. Foaming at the mouth, the science officer began to crush the life out of the youth's body! Bael's now-red eyes flashed and swelled, giving him a truly demonic countenance.

Trent tackled Bael, freeing the nearly-dead DuLac from his grasp. Quickly getting to his feet, he prepared his whip, waiting for the Efrosian to rise and attack again. But he never did. Seconds later, the security team finally arrived, each of the guards looking around at the scene on the bridge with confusion.

"You're a bit late, gentlemen," Johnson seethed in spite of the fact they had actually arrived a couple of minutes prior to Johnson's forecast time. "Take them to sickbay. DuLac is to be restrained. When he's recovered enough, put him in the brig. I'm going to go search his quarters personally."

As the security team lifted up both Bael and DuLac and started to transport them to the starship's sickbay, Johnson paused for a moment and added, "Also, release Tristan Phobos from his quarters. I have a feeling he wasn't involved in these attacks to begin with."

"Aye, sir," the head of the security detail replied.

Johnson retrieved DuLac's sword and left the bridge, but not before entering the incident in his log, conferring a strong commendation upon Vespasian Trent for his heroics.

Moments later Johnson entered sickbay, leaving the search of DuLac's quarters for later. He was pleased to see that the Edoan engineer's injuries were minor and he was recovering. Even Bael was now awake, though to Johnson's shock he – like DuLac – was under restraint even though his face no longer displayed the insanity that had been evident on the bridge.

"Doctor Morgan," the Commodore said. "Why are you restraining this man?"

Dr. Morgaan walked over, a clipboard displaying patient records in her hand, and replied, "Though he is conscious and now calm, Commodore, he is also quite ill. He should have never been permitted to leave sickbay in the first place. I was able to minimize the original brain hemorrhaging he had suffered, but 23rd century medicine is still limited. He intended to leave sickbay as he did before. It would have killed him had I simply struck him down, so I lifted him back into bed and restrained him instead."

Johnson found himself marveling at the doctor's awesome strength. Bael was at least two meters tall and more than one hundred kilograms! Johnson then turned his attention back to his other issue.

"What's the story on DuLac? Or whoever he really is?" he inquired. "Is it possible he's a Klingon or surgically altered Romulan agent?"

Now Morgaan shook her head sadly. "No, Commodore. Something else is in play here. You will have to witness this for yourself." She motioned for him to follow her.

In the next room, two security guards were standing at attention in either side of a biobed where a fully conscious Galen DuLac was thrashing at his bonds.

"You, too, will die!" DuLac was screaming at his guards. "All of you will die like the vermin you are!"

Johnson moved closer and leaned over the youth. "Do you have any idea of what you've done, you bastard?" he said, uncharacteristically enraged. DuLac responded by spitting in his commanding officer's face!

"I have attempted to undo your villainy," he retorted. "Earth lives! We humans shall assume our rightful places again!"

"Is it possible he's a member of Terra Prime?" Johnson asked Morgaan as he accepted a towel and wiped the spittle off his face. "Does that xenophobic organization even still exist?"

"Look at this, Sir," Morgaan requested, pointing at the diagnostic panel above DuLac's head.

Johnson looked at the display, his early medical training helping him to discern a strange sight. Apparently, DuLac was indeed human, but his brain wave pattern suggested that – although he probably had not slept in days – he had the energy level of ten humans!

"Commodore, I've sedated him twice in the last twenty minutes!" Morgaan explained. "The earlier reading was twice as high! I don't know what he is, but he cannot be human, Terran, Avalonian, or otherwise. We must... By the Great Sword!"

To Morgaan's astonishment, DuLac had broken his bonds! But how?! Those bonds could hold a Vulcan! The alert security guards drew and fired their phasers at the escaping prisoner. Unbelievably, DuLac was staggered but not stunned! One of the guards flipped the now-charging DuLac over his shoulder, then applied a sleeper hold. Mercifully, DuLac fell at last.

As the guards struggled to return DuLac to the biobed and redouble his restraints, Johnson heard a raspy male voice speak from behind him.

"Captain...!"

Johnson returned to the main ward. It was Bael trying to speak.

"Forget it, Bael," Johnson said curtly. "This time, you're staying here until you're completely healed."

The Efrosian inhaled deeply. "Pain!"

Well, at least Bael was finally admitting to being imperfect, but Johnson did not need the Efrosian's obvious plea for sympathy at a time like this.

"Not now, Bael. The Doctor'll take care of you later." He turned to leave.

"The Ensign, Captain. Not myself! I sensed it on the bridge!" Bael forced the words, obscene as they were to him. His Efrosian faith strictly forbade waste, a law which applied even to words!

Sensed it?

"Since when are you a telepath?" Johnson challenged.

"Even I, a rudimentary empath, can sense such torment," Bael explained reluctantly.

"Torment? He's an imposter and an assassin!"

"Do not be certain, Captain."

Johnson wondered why Bael always addressed him by his old rank, but that wasn't important now.

"What are you talking about? And give me a full answer for once!" he sputtered.

"Release me. I shall confirm."

"Only if you return to sickbay once this is over, and stay until Doctor Morgaan discharges you!"

"Unnecessary!"

"It's an order! And I want your promise as well!"

Bael gave in at last with a single nod. Finally Johnson released him. Bael struggled to his feet and Johnson realized just how ill the Efrosian really was as he reached out to aid him to his feet and Bael did not even stiffen at his touch!!

The two men returned to DuLac's bedside. Bael tore open DuLac's shirt and placed one hand on the enemy agent's head, the other on his now-bare chest. Bael then closed his eyes. He shuddered several times and finally collapsed into Johnson's waiting arms.

Bael rose again, though with extreme difficulty. He nodded as he said, "There is a... foreign substance... within his body, as I expected. He is also... dying."

Morgaan, who had been watching the unusual interaction, immediately began to prepare a stimulant.

"No!" Bael bellowed. "That... is the cause... of the boy's problem! The substance must be... drawn out!"

The Doctor shook her head.

"Not possible. That would require a complete transfusion or full detoxification and he is far too weak!" Sure enough, though his encephalographic activity was still far too high for a human, his other bodily functions were showing signs of collapsing! "Maybe if I had the apparatus of a full planet-side medical facility, but not here in a starship sickbay!"

Even now, Johnson did not want DuLac to die. Not yet. He wanted this spy to face justice as the previous saboteur had not! No suicide pill would stand in the way this time!! One slim hope remained. Johnson just hoped that his amazing intuitive ability was working as he activated the nearby intercom.

"Lieutenant N'aghari, report to sickbay immediately!"

The Haitian man arrived mere moments later, almost as if he knew where he was needed.

"I am here to serve, Commodore Johnson," N'aghari spoke in his soft manner.

"How the hell did you get here so fast?" Johnson demanded, utterly astonished.

“It is the mystic way, sir,” came the reply. “Your stress and then your announcing of my name alerted me.” Johnson was in no mood to argue.

“Can you help him? Baael thinks there is a drug in his system. Probably Builders.”

Builders... Horrible, modern drugs, they enhanced physical power but at the sometimes-permanent cost of the user’s intelligence, or even sanity. The idiot ‘Avalonian’ obviously never expected to survive his murder spree!

N’aghari placed both of his hands on DuLac’s heaving chest and began chanting rhythmically. His own body began to heave, his ebony skin lightening to an almost yellowish tint.

Without warning, N’aghari lashed out and struck one of the security guards! The two guards leapt on him, restraining the man. ‘*Oh, no,*’ thought Johnson. ‘*Not N’aghari, too!!*’ thought Johnson.

Seconds later, the Haitian’s skin returned to its normal shade as the records officer appeared to recover.

“Please forgive me,” N’aghari requested. “I could not assimilate the drug quickly enough. It is horribly potent.” N’aghari turned to the chief medical officer and requested, “Doctor, please sedate me, then place my hands upon him. That will complete the task more safely.”

Morgaan glanced at Johnson, who nodded, bemused. She then prepared a hypospray and injected N’aghari with melanex, a fast-acting, short-lived sedative. N’aghari slumped. At that same moment, so did the still present but apparently forgotten Baael.

“Guards, put him back to bed, then you’re dismissed!” Johnson commanded.

“Restraint, sir?” asked one of the security officers.

“No. I have a feeling he’ll keep his promise. Morgaan, if he does try to leave sickbay, do what you have to do to keep him here.”

Morgaan nodded as she placed N’aghari’s hands back on DuLac’s body. Meanwhile Johnson walked back into the main ward and over to the engineer Xavier’s bed.

“How are you doing, Xavier?” Johnson asked.

“Not bad, sir,” the Edoan warbled in his high-pitched tones. Fortunately Dulac’s blade had missed Xavier’s eyes, blinding him instead with his own blood from a wound on his forehead. “For a kid, he sure packed a wallop!”

“Do you want to remain in sickbay? Take as much time as you need to recover,” the Commodore offered.

“Oh, no, sir!” Xavier cried. “Lithir would be lost without me!”

Johnson laughed for the first time in days.

“All right. I’m sure Doctor Morgaan won’t mind if I release you. Take it easy!”

The Edoan hopped out of bed and left sickbay, delighted to be free.

* * *

While Morgaan and N’aghari continued to work on DuLac, Commodore Johnson headed toward the Avalonian’s quarters. Overriding the lock with his command code, he entered the empty room, noting the opened package on one of the two beds, a stack of journals on the other.

Johnson immediately moved to the package. It contained a beautifully-penned letter, a computer tape, and an empty crystal vial. Johnson looked closely at the vial in the light, noticing there were white crystals on the bottom of it! He then began reading through the letter, hoping for a clue to the identity of DuLac’s employers.

As he read the letter, Johnson became confused. It sounded like the package and its contents had come from a doting brother. Was someone overdoing DuLac’s cover identity? Perhaps his superiors – whoever they were – had recognized that their agent was become erratic and decided to eliminate him.

Putting the letter back down, Johnson walked over to the other side of the room and examined one the journals left open on the other bunk. It was apparently written by DuLac’s cabinmate. After reading only through three pages, he slammed it shut in disgust. It was becoming evident where DuLac had learned his racist idiocy! A note attached to the cover of the journal stated, ‘Now you’ll understand, Galen.’ Was this ‘John O’Brien’ working with DuLac?

Then something occurred to Johnson. He read through the letter once more, focusing on one sentence in particular. Why would DuLac's 'brother' want him to play a tape after consuming a lethal drug? Final instructions?

Hesitantly, he inserted the tape and activated the computer. An image of a man dressed in religious vestments appeared. His face was stern.

"My Brother," the image said. "Thou shalt thank me for this, though thou shalt remember not my words when thy soul is cleansed. Thou art truly possessed of Satan to leave the godly ways of Avalon to return to the sinful world of iron chariots and foul machinery. I shall deliver thee!

"Since I cannot and would ne'er come to thy den of sin, I have placed the Elixir of Truth into thy mead. My will is thine now! Kneel before this, the image of truth, and pray for thy soul!"

To Johnson's utter disbelief, the man's face was replaced by images of Avalon, then grossly distorted pictures of starships and other modern technology, followed by intermittent flashes of red. Blips and chirps accompanied the images.

"Computer, slow down!" Johnson commanded. "Go frame by frame." The video resumed, much slower than before. What had appeared as red flashes at normal playback speed were actually ghastly pictures of demons, devils, and the mythological afterlife realm known as Hell.

"Reverse, then half-speed!" he ordered. The computer replayed the images. "Amplify sound!"

Now the blips and chirps became intelligible speech. "Avalon's is the only way! Return, Galen, or be damned! I command thee, destroy the evil vessel that thou troddest upon! Destroy! Destroy!! Set the captives' souls free! DESTROY! Thy life is forfeit, but thine immortal soul shall be free! OBEY!"

"Computer, end playback!" Johnson sat in front of the monitor screen, stunned. "Oh, my God!" was all he could cry. DuLac was no traitor! He had been the victim of a crazed brother and a bigoted, xenophobic roommate! DuLac must have read John O'Brien's journal and the garbage contained within while under the influence of whatever was in the crystal vial, then played the tape! That was why he had only attacked non-humans! Why he was spouting such vile and xenophobic utterings in sickbay!

Grabbing the vial, a nearly-weeping Johnson exited and sped back toward sickbay.

* * *

"Have this analyzed," Johnson said, handing the vial to Dr. Morgaan. "DuLac's been poisoned!"

"Have no fear, sir," a fully recovered N'aghari assured the Commodore, getting up from a chair he was sitting in near the corner of the room. "The drug is out of his system."

"Do you know what it was?" Johnson asked.

"It was a combination of natural herbs, sir," N'aghari explained. "The most identifiable ingredient was a drug used to induce suggestibility, a hallucinogen, and a highly potent stimulant. That explained the phenomenal strength he exhibited. The malicious intent of the originator also became known to me."

Johnson thanked N'aghari, then rushed to DuLac's bedside. The lad was sobbing hysterically despite his badly-weakened, almost critical condition.

"Sire!" he shouted upon seeing his commanding officer. "Kill me! I am truly a villain!" he blubbered.

"It wasn't your fault, Galen!" Johnson exclaimed. "You're no more responsible for this than you were in the gym that day when you injured me!" Johnson was referring to the time when DuLac had accidentally wounded him during a practice session in fencing, but the youth was inconsolable.

"I swear, when I am healthy, I shalt extinguish mine evil soul!" he resolved. In the first incident, DuLac had only forgiven himself when Johnson had extracted a service from him in the manner of his people. But this time, greater measures were in order.

"Morgaan!" Johnson called out. "I want restraints back on DuLac. As soon as he's okay, he's to begin intensive psychotherapy. Around the clock if necessary!"

"I agree completely, sir," Morgaan replied. "And there is an expert psychologist aboard the ship – Doctor Ian Valtirr of Delta-Four."

Satisfied that matters were finally settling down aboard his ship, Johnson departed sickbay. He had some loose ends to tie up. First, he visited Tristan Phobos, apologizing for having suspected him of being the mysterious attacker and confining him to his quarters.

“But, mon Capitaine, zere was no place I would rathair have been!” Phobos responded. “After my harrowing experience with zee laddair and zee black cats, I thought I would expiaire!”

Johnson shrugged, not in the mood to understand what Phobos was babbling on about, leaving the security officer’s quarters and heading to one of the nearby science labs. There he found John O’Brien.

“O’Brien, get packed!” Johnson called out as he entered the lab. “You’re getting off my ship.”

O’Brien stared at Commodore Johnson, his expression bordering on insubordination. “May I ask why, Commodore?” he responded.

“I saw first-hand how you influenced Galen DuLac. I read the journals you left for him to study. I don’t tolerate your kind of xenophobic filth on my ship, Mister!” Johnson thundered.

“With respect, my beliefs are my own affair! Sir!”

“Not when other individuals’ rights are violated! You are relieved!”

O’Brien was livid.

“On what grounds, Commodore?”

“On what grounds?? It’s bad enough that you’re so narrow-minded and immature, but you had to shovel that crap down DuLac’s throat! I saw that trash of a journal you fed him!”

“Reading other people’s private property without their permission or a warrant is a crime, Commodore!” O’Brien seethed. “I am well-versed in Federation law. I am also a direct descendant of John Frederick Paxton, the founder of the Terra Prime movement. As such, as a member of a sovereign political and religious organization, my beliefs are protected by Federation law. Try and remove me from this ship and I will take stern legal action against Starfleet and against you personally. You would most likely lose your command with just the accusation, sir,” he swore, forcing the final word.

“Fine! File your protest at *Starbase 22*, because we’re there, and that’s where you’re getting off!” the Commodore hollered. “Be in the transporter room in twenty minutes or the Marines will drag you there!” He then abruptly turned and stalked off.

Unknown to Johnson, O’Brien would use that twenty minutes to shocking effect. As the Commodore confidently entered the transporter room, he stopped short as he noticed that O’Brien was present but without his personal effects.

“Burning your bridges ahead of you, Mister?” Johnson mocked. “Fine. Get on the platform.”

“I don’t think so, Commodore,” O’Brien retorted before gesturing toward the intercom on the transporter control console. “Admiral Marc Simonetti is on the line for you.”

“Johnson! Report!” came a powerful, obviously-irate voice through the speaker.

“Johnson here, sir. I’m not sure why we’re speaking. I had nothing to do with disturbing you, sir,” the Commodore responded.

“Never mind that!” Simonetti roared. “What’s this nonsense about you kicking a member of your crew off the *Arcturus*?!”

“Sir, the *Arcturus* is one of the most diversely crewed starships in the fleet! I don’t need xenophobia aboard my ship! I thought that went out with the founding of the Coalition of Planets!”

“You have a great deal of authority, Commodore, but not enough to dictate a man’s beliefs. He stays on your ship!”

Johnson couldn’t believe his ears. “Admiral Simonetti, O’Brien instigated one of my crew to attack several non-human personnel! I think this goes beyond ‘beliefs’!”

“I’ve read the report your Doctor Morgaan filed regarding Ensign DuLac. From what I understand, the Ensign was already in a psychotic state when he was exposed to Mister O’Brien’s private correspondence. Do you have any proof that Mister O’Brien intended harm to any other members of your crew, human or not?” Simonetti questioned.

Johnson had to admit that he had none.

“Is his service record lacking in any manner?” the admiral continued.

“No, not that I am aware of,” Johnson conceded.

“Then his beliefs are protected under the Articles of the Federation, section one, article seven. He stays! This matter is closed! Simonetti, out!”

Once the intercom deactivated, Johnson whirled on O’Brien.

“I don’t like your attitude, Mister. I hate your attitude and beliefs. I find you even more arrogant than Lorrass. I don’t like the way you went over my head...” Johnson leaned closer to his crewman face as he growled, “And I don’t like you! Step out of line even once and you’re history!”

The smug look on O’Brien’s face made Johnson want to slug him. He resisted the urge.

“Under the circumstances, I obviously cannot allow you to continue sharing quarters with Mister DuLac. I’m having Lieutenant Braacht reassign your quarters to Room 18 on deck seven, where you’ll never hurt DuLac or anyone else again. And, Mister, just to be clear... Your life is going to be hell!” Astonishingly, O’Brien did not even flinch.

“Fine, Commodore Johnson,” O’Brien seethed. “Throw the kid to the wolves! As for my life, if there’s any nonsense, I’ll have charges filed against you so fast, it’ll make your head swim!” O’Brien smiled sarcastically. “Permission to leave?”

Johnson nodded curtly, saying, “Get the hell out of my sight!”

* * *

Alpha shift had begun, and Commodore Johnson had been up for a full twenty four hours. His eyelids were growing heavy, but snapped back open as the intercom buzzed.

“Maddox here, sir. The party from Cygnet is ready to depart. Your orders?”

Johnson sat bolt-upright in the center seat. Lorrass! He had forgotten all about her! At least he would have SOME satisfaction today!

“Tell them their vessel has permission to depart in four and a half minutes. I’ll be there in five.” Johnson was about to deactivate the intercom when a diabolical idea occurred to him. “Maddox, have Copeland waiting for me when I arrive! I want him to see this! Bridge, out!”

Exactly five minutes later, Johnson entered the hanger bay control booth, where Major Copeland was already waiting.

“What’s up, sir?” the confused Marine officer inquired.

“You see that shuttlecraft preparing to depart down there?” Johnson asked.

“Yes, sir. What about it?” Copeland replied.

“It’s a special shuttle.”

“Special? How so?” Copeland asked curiously.

“Its occupants.”

“Who?”

“Lorrass.”

“So... LORRASS?!?”

“Lorrass.”

“For good?”

“For good.”

“Oh, sir, I...!”

“Permission granted.”

Copeland’s jaw fell. “Oh, come on, sir! Can’t I...” Then realization hit him. “Sir!! Tell me you just said...!”

“Permission granted!” Johnson repeated.

FOOOOSH!! Copeland was out the door in a flash.

Johnson leaned over to look down at the hanger deck. Sure enough, the Ready-5, a small Marine fighter craft kept ready at all times for near-immediate launch, lifted off the deck and flew out through the open main hanger doors the Cygnian shuttle had passed through just moments before. As the fighter moved beyond where Johnson could see it, he activated a monitor screen on the control console, displaying the area of space beyond the *Arcturus*. Johnson could see the fighter easily catching the shuttle, maneuvering around it and heading back straight for the front of the craft! Johnson's smile widened. He could just imagine the screams!

Content, Johnson left the control booth and headed to sickbay to visit two special patients. Entering, he was relieved to see Bael resting on his bed without restraints. Apparently the Efrosian was a man of his word. Then Johnson had an idea.

"Mister Bael, I need your help," the Commodore began. "I need a legal expert. That bigot's got to go! You're a sociologist; use the computers to determine who's the most qualified on this ship."

The Efrosian complied, hoping that the answer he feared but expected would not emerge. Unfortunately, it did.

"Extrapolating all criteria, there are two such qualified individuals," reported the metallic female voice.

"Specify!" Johnson ordered.

"Communications specialist Lieutenant – formerly Commander – Eklavdra D'Estaigne is an expert in Federation law regarding criminal action."

"Computer, pause!" said Johnson. "Formerly commander? Why was D'Estaigne demoted?"

"At her own request after being severely injured during an intelligence mission, Archanis sector," the computer answered. "Transferred to communications rather than accept desk assignment..."

"Pause!" Johnson ordered again. Requested a reduction in rank herself? Johnson figured he needed to talk with D'Estaigne one of these days... In the meantime, "Computer, resume. Who is the other...?"

"Computer off!" Bael shouted.

Johnson glared at the science officer.

"What do you think you're doing, Mister?! Computer, resume. Voice command for myself only!"

"Captain! There is no other qualified individual aboard this ship!" Bael beseeched.

"You just follow orders," Johnson ordered. "You're bordering on insubordination again! Computer, who is the other legal expert aboard this starship?"

The computer responded, "Lieutenant Bael V'ahst-O'hrne'-Dagon, Assistant Chief Science Officer."

Johnson turned to stare at the Efrosian.

"Why the hell didn't you tell me?!? You come aboard my ship and leave the impression you shouldn't have been capable of even graduating the Academy. Then, in less than a year, I find out you're an expert navigator, scientist, fighter, medic, and now I find out you're practically a lawyer!" Johnson had had enough of Bael's omissions! "While you're a member of my crew, you're going to fully disclose your areas of expertise. You're a man of your literal word, so these are your parameters: I want a full report! Every skill you have, going as far back as grade school. Nothing held back! Mental acuity! Medical history! I mean everything! This is a direct order!!"

For the first time since Johnson had met him, Bael's face showed true emotion.

"Captain," he protested in anguish. "You have no idea of what you ask!"

Johnson was amazed. "What's the matter with you!? Why do you ignore your shipmates? Why do you treat everyone like they don't exist?!? Why can't...?"

He halted in mid-sentence. Good grief! The man was fighting back... tears!!

"Do you believe I desire this?!?" Bael said with a sob. "I am a Warrior-Priest! I... have no rights; only obligations and restrictions! You have good people aboard this vessel, Captain, and I can never... Ask no more! Please! I have said enough to condemn me already!" He turned away. Johnson gained a new sympathy for this obviously-tortured man.

"I'm... sorry, Bael," he offered. "Listen, why don't you use your legal abilities and help the good people aboard this vessel? I want O'Brien off my ship! Legally!!"

"Yes... Captain," Bael responded, sitting down in front of the computer interface. Gratefully, Bael began his research. As the Efrosian started his work, Johnson stepped away and entered the secure ward next door

to visit another tormented man. However, Galen DuLac was not alone this time. A slim, bald man was also present, holding his hands over DuLac's head. Both were weeping bitterly. Johnson watched silently from the doorway for several minutes until the pair were done with their session.

Doctor Ian Valtirr turned, noticing the Commodore for the first time. His tears almost magically stopped, replaced by a wide smile as he stepped over.

"Ah, hello Commodore Johnson!" he said enthusiastically.

The two men shook hands and Johnson relaxed visibly; the Deltan man's warm nature was infectious. Johnson thanked the nearest deity that Valtirr was not a female Deltan. He remembered his experience with Iona Hanlon the first day they met. What a goddess!

He broke from his reverie, asking, "How's Galen, Doctor?"

Valtirr's smile faded.

"He is badly traumatized, sir," he responded sadly. "I refuse to give up, but there is a long way to go. Also, I am 'Ian,' sir. I wish a more friendly rapport with my shipmates; even a stodgy Commanding Officer." He grinned again disarmingly. Johnson laughed.

"All right; 'Ian', then. And you call me Eric. Might as well keep the Doctor/Captain tradition going." Johnson then sobered. "Take as much time as you need, Doct... Ian. I want Galen back on his feet. After all, in spite of what has happened, he's a damn good kid."

"I agree, Eric," came the Deltan's reply. "Rest your fears. Deltans do not surrender easily."

"Carry on, then, Ian," Johnson said, turning back toward the primary medical ward, glad to be able to actually like someone on this ship! He moved back over to where Bael continued to work at the computer and activated the intercom located there.

"Lieutenant Braacht, report to the sickbay. Johnson, out."

While awaiting the starship's billeting officer, Johnson turned to Bael.

"How are you doing, Bael?" he inquired.

"Moderately effective progress, Captain," the Efrosian replied, obviously exhausted.

The 'Captain' shook his head.

"Your condition, Bael, not... oh, forget it! What've you got? I'm especially interested in what Starfleet regs say a starship's CO can and cannot do..."

The sickbay doors opened, interrupting Johnson, and admitting a stout, porcine male.

"Lieutenant Braacht, reporting as ordered, Commodore!" the Tellarite offered loudly.

"Ah, Braacht," Johnson greeted with a smile. "Did you finish the assignment I gave you last night?"

"Yes, sir! And, may I say, sir, no assignment has ever given me such pleasure!" The normally-belligerent Tellarite was positively beaming.

"Excellent! Bael here is going to be handing you some legal documents to, ah, 'cement' your work. Carry on, gentlemen." Johnson left, leaving the bewildered duo staring blankly at each other.

* * *

A workout, breakfast, sonic shower, and change of clothes later, Eric Johnson walked onto the bridge and assumed his position in the center seat. Faces more familiar to the Commodore were manning the various duty stations, but it didn't matter. Many of his newer crew members were as competent, and definitely as zany as his older crew was. A mischievous smile appeared on his lips as he thought about what was occurring on deck seven, wishing he could be a proverbial fly on the corridor bulkhead with that bigoted son of a... bigoted father!

At that moment, the object of Johnson's wrath was likewise angry. John O'Brien was lugging a roomful of personal belongings to his new 'private' quarters. Eric Johnson had left standing orders that O'Brien was to receive no assistance or equipment to aid in his move.

"Our esteemed Commodore is asking for serious trouble," he fumed. Then the intercom whistled.

"Attention all hands," Johnson's voice boomed. "Galen DuLac is recovering in sickbay. I ask for your understanding. Because he had been poisoned both physically and mentally, he has been found not responsible for

his actions. It is my hope that with physical and emotional therapy, and your compassion, he will be welcomed back on duty as the fine young member of the crew he has always been.”

“On a lighter note, all off-duty personnel are invited to deck seven to attend the... ah... ‘moving party’ for Mister John O’Brien. You may find it enlightening... and entertaining. Johnson, out.”

O’Brien’s face turned beet-red as a crowd of people started gathering in his path.

“Why don’t you stop gawking and start helping?” he screeched. The crowd shook its collective head, smiles on many of the faces, both human and not.

Eventually, O’Brien arrived at Room 18. A paper sign attached to the door read ‘O’Brian, Jaan.’ Obviously, the misspelling was deliberate and another malicious act! Oh, O’Brien vowed to himself, how Johnson would pay!

He tried to open the door of his new quarters. It would not budge. Perspiring profusely, he finally managed to force the door open physically. The interior of the room was dimly lit. On the right side, an obviously dilapidated bunk awaited him beside a broken old desk and a three-legged chair. Most of the deck – at least two-thirds of the room – were covered with dried plaster and thermal concrete! And on the dilapidated desk, a battered computer terminal that looked like it had been salvaged from an old NX-class spaceship rested precariously near the edge.

Tossing his belongings inside the room, O’Brien moved over to the desk and activated the terminal. “You’re history, Monster-Lover! History!” he raved. “Computer, contact Admiral Simonetti!”

“I’m fine, how are yoooo?” the computer cooed in response.

“Computer, I want Simonetti on subspace! NOW!” He banged on the terminal.

“OW! Well, if that’s how you’re gonna be, who needs ya?” the computer remarked before switching itself off!

Disgusted, O’Brien threw himself onto his bed.

CR-R-R-E-E-A-K! Someone would not be getting much beauty sleep here!!

Feeling something under his Swiss cheese-like blanket, he lifted it. There lay several printouts that looked like legal briefs.

‘Articles of the Federation,’ one prominently highlighted page stated. ‘Starfleet personnel assigned to starship duty are entitled to the following amenities: quarters (private or shared, depending on rank and vessel configuration) with an assigned bunk, computer access terminal, a work desk, and restroom facilities (private or shared, depending on rank and vessel configuration).’

A beautifully handwritten note had been attached to the page in question.

You will note that the article never states the condition of said items. Should you try and file a complaint, you would have no case. With accuracy, Baael V’ahkst-D’hrrne ‘-Dagon for Eric Johnson - Commander U.S.S. Arcturus NCC-1807, who is unaware of these details.

A thought occurred to the xenophobe. ‘Restroom facilities?!?’ O’Brien looked around, finally noticing a slight crease in the plaster on the wall. Again straining himself to his limits, he managed to gain access to his ‘private’ bathroom, surveying the tiny space.

John O’Brien’s anguished screams filled the corridor.

The End