

The orders had arrived a day before. Captain Lyal Richardson of the starship *Tian An Men* sat at his desk in the ready room and looked at them on his computer screen.

TO: Richardson, Captain Lyal - C.O. - *USS Tian An Men NCC-21382*
STARDATE: 47010.2

Effective stardate 47011.5, cancel all normal patrols and proceed directly to station *Deep Space Nine*, where – as of stardate 47020 – you will assume command of the Federation starship *USS Sarek NCC-72075*. Specific orders to follow. You are allowed to choose your Executive Officer. All other crew transfers will be handled by Starfleet billeting.

Captain Richardson, a twenty-five year veteran of Starfleet, could not believe the orders at first. He had served aboard the *Tian An Men* for almost seven years. The Miranda-class vessel was his first command, and for most of that time he felt he would never leave her. But a Galaxy-class starship! And the first to be assigned to the Gamma Quadrant to boot! The chance of a career. And he knew exactly who to ask to be his new First Officer.

* * * *

In her quarters, Lt Commander Yu-Fen M. Cosna was dressing for her bridge shift when the door chime rang.

“Come,” she said.

Captain Richardson entered the cabin, smiling politely at his first officer, and asked if he could sit down.

“What brings you here, Lyal?” Cosna asked.

“I had to tell you,” he started. “I’m going to be leaving the *Tian An Men*, Mic,” he said, using his first officer’s nickname.

“You’re what?!?” Cosna screamed.

“I’m leaving the *Tian An Men*,” Richardson confirmed.

“But... but why, Lyal?” Cosna stuttered. “What could make you leave this ship?”

Holding back a grin, Richardson hesitated a moment, during which time Cosna almost whipped out a phaser to shoot her captain.

“They’re giving me a Galaxy-class ship, Mic,” he said. “And assigning her to the Gamma Quadrant.”

“The *Sarek*?” she asked, her excitement building.

“The *Sarek*,” he confirmed.

“Congratulations!” she exclaimed. “When do you get her?”

“We’re on our way now. We transfer at *Deep Space Nine*,” he said.

“Then only a few days! We have to get everything ready. We have to...” She stopped, thinking. “Wait a second,” she said.

“What do you mean, ‘we’?”

“I mean, as in you and me. I still want you as my Exec. Come with me?” Richardson asked.

“Aboard the *Sarek*? You bet!”

Space, the Final Frontier...

Star Trek: Sarek

“Gamma Bound - Part II” By PJK

With contributions by Jo Ann Treadwell and Gy Dioguardi

“The orders just came through, Captain,” said Benjamin Sisko, the Federation administrator of the Bajoran station *Deep Space Nine*. “As of this stardate, you are re-assigned back to your old command, the *Tian An Men*. A new captain is assigned the *Sarek*.”

“I can’t believe this!” said Richardson, his hand running through his light brown hair with pent-up fury. “I’m assigned the ship two days ago... The command of a lifetime...! And they take it all away from me, just like that?”

“Just like that,” Sisko confirmed, his eyes showing sympathy his voice did not really convey.

Richardson paced the Commander’s office a moment, collecting his thoughts.

“Welcome to the wonderful world of Starfleet,” he grumbled sarcastically. “At least I still have my old command. I guess Mic and I will avoid getting homesick.”

Sisko hesitated a moment, then broke into the captain’s train of thought.

“That’s the other bit of bad news I have for you. *Sarek* still had not been assigned an XO. Cosna’s orders are permanent. She is still assigned to the *Sarek*.”

Richardson's jaw dropped.

"If I ever find the self-important, desk-bound paper-pusher that screwed me up so badly," he mumbled, "so help me I'll give him to the Cardassians."

"The Cardassians are very efficient," remarked Sisko. "I doubt even they would want whoever it was behind this mess."

Richardson nodded his head, saying, "You're right. Thank you, Commander. I'll speak to you again before *Tian An Men* is ready to depart. Good day, Commander."

"Good day, Captain," said Sisko, as he watched the angry officer leave and the office doors slide shut behind him.

* * * *

The *USS Arcturus* streaked through warp space, her course toward *DS9*. In the captain's ready room, Vice Admiral Johnson, a plastiskin bandage still covering a bruise on his face from his ordeal on Orthid IX, talked with newly promoted Captain Kalin Kale.

"Starfleet is allowing you to take a few of *Arcturus*' crew along with you, so you'll have a few familiar faces to work with at least," said Johnson, going over the orders on the computer screen with Kale. "But I told them no more than twenty. I've got almost a hundred casualties recovering from that attack at Orthid, and I'm not going to run my own ship with a skeleton crew."

"I understand, Admiral," said Kale. "I already have a few people in mind, and on my list. I just need your approval."

Kale handed the padd to Johnson. On the small screen was a list of fifteen names. Johnson started reading some aloud.

"Lieutenant Arbelo... Lieutenant Commander T'Veer... hmmm... Val'ri Raiajh? You're requesting a civilian for your crew?"

"Val'ri proved very helpful at Orthid, Admiral," Kale protested. "I believe I have need of her. And of course, her husband, Doctor Sylvan Xaran, would have to come along."

Johnson scanned the rest of the list, his eyes stopping at one name in particular.

"Doctor Athena Arcadian !?" Johnson eyed Kale dangerously.

"I was wondering if you would catch that," said Kale with a grin. "Read her background information."

Johnson, still steamed, called up the background file on the padd. To his relief, the words 'Just a joke, Admiral' flashed on the screen.

"One more, for old time's sake," said Kale with a smile.

Johnson shook his head, then said, "I'm going to miss you, Kalin."

"Same here, Admiral," replied Kale.

The intercom interrupted them, Captain Solak's voice calling, "Admiral, we are approaching station *Deep Space Nine*."

"Thank you, Solak," said Johnson.

"I'll be going, Admiral," said Kale, getting up from the chair.

"Just a second, Mister. You're not off the hook yet. Until you report aboard your new ship, you're still a member of my crew. I want you to command the docking procedure," ordered Johnson with a devilish grin on his face.

Kale and Johnson walked out onto the bridge together. Johnson walked up to his command chair, where he sat down. Kale, wearing the red uniform of a command officer, his four new gold pips shining on his collar, stood in the center of the bridge.

On the screen, still a few kilometers away, hung the round shape of the former mining station now designated *Deep Space Nine*. Even at this distance Kale could see a number of ships at or near the station. An Oberth and Miranda-class were docked at the lower pylons, while a Klingon Bird-of-Prey held station just off the main docking ring. A number of smaller ships, including a few Starfleet vessels, were docked around the perimeter of the ring. But the sight that caught Kale's attention were the two Galaxy-class starships docked at the upper pylons. Kale recognized the older of the two immediately.

"The *Enterprise*!" Kale exclaimed. "I served aboard that ship during my re-training cruise you know. They diverted her all the way here just for a crew transfer?"

"Not just any crew transfer," remarked Johnson. "Your new ship will be the first into the Gamma Quadrant for the purpose of full scale exploration. You're going to need the best with you."

Kale nodded, turning his attention back to the job at hand. The *Arcturus* maneuver above the docking ring of the space station, finally bringing the last remaining vessel docked there into clear view. That is when he really saw her at last.

Her graceful lines matched those of the *Enterprise*, from the sleek curve of her saucer section to the dynamic blue glow of her warp nacelles. She was beautiful.

...And she was his!

Kale shook his head, getting his mind back to the job still at hand.

"*Arcturus* to *DS9* Operations," Kale said. "Requesting clearance to dock."

"*Arcturus*, this is Ops," said a Bajoran accented female voice over the speakers. "You are cleared to approach and dock at upper pylon number three."

"Wonder which one that is?" joked Lieutenant (JG) Setton To'Lock Arbelo at the ops position as he took a reading of the only remaining available upper docking port.

Kale glanced at the hybrid officer, commenting, "Very funny, Monster. You know, you can be replaced by a computer."

"Not really," said Arbelo, his attention never leaving the ops panel. "Tests I took back at the Academy when we arrived in this century have shown that in many situations, I can out-think the ship's computer."

"Slow to thrusters, Mister DuLac," ordered Kale, ignoring Arbelo's last boast.

Arcturus drifted slowly down into the area between *DS9*'s upper pylons, her bridge crew carefully monitoring everything so not to collide with either of the other docked starships.

“Screen to docking port view,” ordered Kale. Arbelo complied, and the screen blinked to the view as seen from the *Arcturus*’ port dorsal docking port. Slowly, the pylon came into view from the bottom of the screen. As the port centered in the view, Kale ordered full stop, and DuLac complied.

Kale turned to Johnson.

“This could be done on automatic, you know.”

“Yes, I know,” replied Johnson with a smile on his face. He motioned with his hand for Kale to return to his job. Kale heaved a sigh of resignation and turned back to the screen.

“It’s your ship,” he muttered under his breath. “Helm, starboard thrusters, two meters per second.”

Slowly, the port seemed to come closer to the people on the bridge. Kale ordered the momentum slowed further. Finally the port filled the screen, and as a metallic click was heard throughout the ship, Kale ordered, “All stop. Lock docking latches and umbilicals.”

Kale realized Johnson was now standing next to him. He turned, and Johnson patted him on the shoulder.

“Well done. Best wishes on your new assignment. And good luck,Captain.”

* * * *

Less than an hour later, Setton To’Lock Arbelo and T’Veer walked along the Promenade aboard *Deep Space Nine*, window shopping.

“Do you expect to buy anything, Mister Arbelo?” T’Veer asked. “I noticed that you exchanged credits for some strips of latinum.”

“Never hurts to be prepared for anything,” remarked Arbelo.

From time to time, the pair entered stores along the Promenade. They entered a clothing store, checking the latest styles and materials before finally stopping by the Replimat.

“I understand we are both to meet with Captain Kale at 1930 hours tonight,” T’Veer commented as she ordered a light snack from the replicator.

“You, too, huh?” said Arbelo, a jumja stick in one hand. “I’ve heard about a dozen others from the *Arcturus* are invited as well. I’ve heard rumors since we left Orthid that some of the *Arcturus* crew may be moving to the new ship with Kalin. I’ve got a feeling those of us invited to this meeting are going to be getting a transfer.”

“Indeed,” said T’Veer as they paused in front of Quark’s Bar. Looking inside, they agreed to have a drink.

* * * *

“What do you mean, you’re not packing?” exclaimed Lt Commander Cosna.

“Like I said, Starfleet canceled my transfer,” explained Captain Richardson. “I’m remaining with the *Tian An Men*.”

“Great!” grumbled the young XO. “All my things! I’ve already had them transferred aboard the *Sarek*! Now I’ll have to go over and retrieve them myself.”

“Listen to me, Mic,” said Richardson. “**I**, as in **ME**, have been re-posted here. You’re still the *Sarek*’s Exec. That hasn’t been changed.”

“I’m not going without YOU, Lyal,” she protested.

“Yes, apparently you are,” Richardson explained, his eyes lowering to the floor. “I’ve pulled all the strings I could reach and then some, and they still tell me that you’re needed aboard the *Sarek* more than you are here.” He paused, taking a long breath. “I’ve already made arrangements. Lt Commander Tegama is now the *Tian An Men*’s first officer,” he sighed. “I hate losing you, Mic, but Starfleet’s not giving me a choice. I’m sorry.”

Cosna did not give a reply. She turned, storming out of the captain’s quarters before he could say another word.

* * * *

Kale stepped out of the aft turbolift, awkwardly holding a rather large shipping box.

A crewman making minor adjustments to a rear console noticed him first, and quickly announced, “Captain on the bridge.” The rest of the crew stopped what they were doing and stood formally before their new commanding officer.

“As you were,” Kale said. “I just wanted to take a look around, and drop off an item in my new ready room.”

As the crew returned to their work, Kale slowly descended the ramp to the command level. He placed the box in the seat to the left of the command chair. Looking at his new center seat, gently feeling the stiff leather, he admired it before lowering himself into it. The chair creaked with newness, but otherwise was the most comfortable chair Kale had ever sat on in his life.

After a moment of watching the test pattern appearing on the main viewscreen, imagining in his mind it was the stars of the Gamma Quadrant streaking by at warp nine, he again stood, grabbed the box in his hands, and walked through the ready room doors.

As the doors hissed closed behind him he looked around. The room had an uncomfortable sterility to it. With the exception of the painting depicting the starship *Sarek* superimposed over a portrait of Ambassador Sarek of Vulcan – the starship’s namesake – one arm raised in a perpetual Vulcan salute, the room was undecorated. Even the plants had not been placed into their stands yet.

“This should help a little,” Kale commented to himself.

He took the box over to a display stand that had been set up across the room next to the door to his private head. Releasing the latches on the lower side, he removed the box, leaving its contents on the stand.

The model depicted a frigate-class vessel, the design of which was well over a hundred years old. She bore the large black hull number *NCC-1238*.

"I made it, Mom," he said to the model. "A lot sooner than I ever expected personally, but a lot longer than anyone would have believed!"

He crossed behind the desk, and sitting down in the chair, propped his feet up onto the desk itself. He continued to talk in the direction of the model starship.

"Now I really know what your letter meant, Mom. There IS nothing like when she's your own."

* * * *

"You wanted to see me, Commander?" Kale asked as he walked into Sisko's office. The Commander was seated behind his desk, his own first officer and Bajoran liaison, Major Kira Nerys, standing at his side.

"Yes, Captain," said Sisko, as he stood and walked around the desk to join the new starship CO. "I needed to update you on our schedule." Sisko nodded to Kira.

"The *Sarek*'s mission officially begins on stardate 47028.7. The departure list for the day your mission begins places the *Sarek* last to depart the station after all the other ships, due to her provisioning and crew placement," Kira said. "*Tian An Men* and *Grissom* will depart the day prior to you, since they will not be participating in the departure ceremony. The *Enterprise-D* and *Arcturus-A* will undock approximately half an hour before the *Sarek* is scheduled for departure, at 1100 and 1115 respectively."

Kale's eyebrows rose in surprise.

"I expected the *Sarek* would be first, so everyone can witness the show," he said. "...And what ceremony?"

"*Grissom* has been recalled to *Starbase 74*," explained Sisko. "And the captain of the *Tian An Men* has his own reasons for leaving early. And you didn't think your ship was leaving the Alpha Quadrant without a little pomp and circumstance, did you?"

"The *Sarek* will be escorted to the wormhole's event horizon by the *Enterprise*, *Arcturus*, the Klingon ship *Pagh*, and the Bajoran heavy fighter *Trasa*," Kira explained. "We're going to give you a good send-off."

Kale smiled. The event was really more than he had expected. Nodding his head to Sisko and Kira, he turned toward the door. But before he could exit the room, Kira called out after him.

"Captain, I just have to say; Admiral Johnson informed us you performed the *Arcturus*' docking on manual. I was impressed. This is the first time we've had this number of large ships docked at the station at once, and nobody has ever docked on manual before."

"You can thank Admiral Johnson for that," Kale commented with a smirk. "His was of 'breaking me in,' so to speak."

"Well, from Ops, I never would have know it was a manual procedure," Kira added. "You did fine. I'm sure we're going to be hearing a lot about the exploits of the *Sarek* in the years to come."

"Thank you," said Kale.

* * * *

Lieutenant (Junior Grade) Jo Ann Tredworth walked slowly through the Promenade of *Deep Space Nine*, filled with a feeling of loneliness. Since leaving the *Fearless* she had not encountered anybody she knew during her transit to the station, and the shyness she had never really grown out of was no help in making any new friends aboard the *Grissom*, which had ferried her here for her new assignment. She feared the same might hold true aboard the *Sarek*.

As she walked past various shops, a feeling swiftly brushed past her mind. Puzzled, she stopped and looked around the immediate vicinity, but did not see anyone or anything that could have been responsible. Tredworth was about to dismiss the sensation when it again unexpectedly brushed past her consciousness.

As a full-blooded Betazoid, Tredworth was naturally empathic, but her abilities differed from the norm in some ways. With most anybody, she could read emotions and even thoughts. But from friends – close friends – she often experienced much more. When in the vicinity of someone she knew fairly well, she experienced a sense of closeness and warmth – similar in many ways to the bonds Betazoid families shared.

Reaching out with her mind, trying to sense the feeling again, it lead her around the Promenade to Quark's Bar. She entered the establishment, looking throughout the crowd within. When she saw the young man wearing the red Starfleet uniform standing at the end of the bar talking to the Ferengi bartender, she smiled.

"House always takes blue," said the Ferengi as the Starfleet officer shook the cup in his hands. He turned it over on the bar, and Quark smiled a sharp-toothed grin as the blue side of the triangle-shaped die was revealed.

"And we have a winner!" the Ferengi exclaimed. "Me!"

"There go my last credits for the month," said the officer as he looked with pain in his eyes between the die and the empty liquor glass nearby.

"Then better luck next month," said Quark, taking a nearby bottle off the bar and replacing it on a shelf behind him. The officer was too depressed to notice the slim woman walk up behind him.

"Buy you a drink, sailor?" Tredworth said. The man turned in surprise.

"Jo Ann?"

"Larry, I haven't seen you since the last shore leave right after I graduated almost two years ago. What have you been up to? And what brings you all the way to the Bajor Sector?" she asked.

“Well, until recently I was still posted to the *Adelphi*. But I put in for a special assignment I heard was opening up and received new orders a couple of weeks ago,” answered Lieutenant (JG) Lawrence Harcue.

The two junior officers had attended *Starfleet Academy* together, Harcue one year ahead of Tredworth. There they had met and become good friends. That friendship had lasted their separate postings, Harcue to the *Adelphi*, Tredworth to the *Fearless* a year later, after graduation. They had seen little of one another in the time since, save a brief week’s shore leave together at *Starbase 55* just before Tredworth reported to the *Fearless*, keeping in contact mostly through correspondence.

“Congrats on the new half-pip I see you have,” Tredworth said to Harcue while she sat down at the bar with him and motioned to Quark for two Argelian Belly-Punchers.

“You too ...Lieutenant,” Harcue said, pointing toward Tredworth’s pip-and-a-half with his glass after Rom had delivered the steaming drinks. “And what brings you to the boonocks?”

“New assignment to the starship *Sarek*,” she answered, lifting her own glass and taking a long sip from it. Harcue coughed, partly from the strength of the drink, but more from what the young Betazoid had said.

“You’re kidding!” he said. She shook her head. “That’s where I’m going!” he exclaimed. “Conn officer, beta shift.”

“Well that explains what you’re doing all the way out here,” she remarked. “I’m assigned to exobiology. You know... I’ll be the one to discover a new species of Tribble or something.”

Harcue cringed as what Tredworth said dredged up long-suppressed memories.

“After what happened in the Academy when you brought that furball into your dorm room, I’m surprised you can even say the word tribble! I think you’re solely responsible for them not being an endangered species anymore,” he said. “Besides, I thought you were training to be a ship’s counselor or something related like that? The way that folks at the Academy acted when testing revealed all your little talents, I thought they would demand it! Exobiology? Egad! Not me. Not ever.”

Tredworth laughed at the pained look on her friend’s face. “Our little tribble adventure wasn’t so bad. And the medical training required to become a ship’s counselor’s would have been more difficult for me. I participated in some classes on the side though, so I could be useful in emergencies. That was enough for me. I’m much too sensitive to make it my career.”

“Speaking of your talents, let me guess...,” he started saying, a suspicious look crossing his face. “You didn’t just happen to bump into me here. That’s how you found me, right?” She tried to smile innocently. Harcue just rolled his eyes.

“I hate how you always do that. But I bet nobody could cheat you in a game of Ferengi Tongo?”

“Sorry,” she said as the two eyed the card game taking place in the corner of the bar, “but I can’t read Ferengi.” The two laughed, both happy to know they already had a friend aboard their new ship.

* * * *

The ship’s bell softly wrung 1930 hours. About a dozen officers collected inside holodeck two aboard the *Arcturus*. Among them were Lieutenant (JG) Setton To’Lock Arbelo, Lt Commander T’Veer, Lieutenant T’Ashara, Ensign Penji Fil, Ensign Isaiah Ben’Taarch Tammuz, and Lieutenant (JG) Cathryn Pearson.

The heavy doors slid open once more, permitting the entrance of Lieutenant Sylvan Xaran and his wife Val’ri Raiajh, and moments later, Captain Kalin Kale.

“Computer, run program Kale4,” the new captain said without preamble. A large conference table shimmered into existence in the center of the room, its polished surface reflecting the yellow grid pattern of the holodeck walls and ceiling. Each seat had a name tag before it, and the gathered crew each found their place and sat down.

“I suppose you’re all wondering why I called you here,” said Kale as he took a seat at the head of the table. A murmur ran among the crew.

“A good-bye party?” ventured Fil.

Kale smiled at that response, and did not lose the smile.

“In a manner of speaking, yes,” he responded. “But not from me to you, but for all of us to the *Arcturus*. I would like each of you to consider joining my crew aboard the *Sarek*.”

A number of glances were exchanged and again the murmur started, this time growing to excited conversation as the crew debated amongst themselves about the idea of a transfer. Some were excited by the prospect of a new ship and a new mission. Others wondered if leaving the *Arcturus* would be considered a betrayal of Admiral Johnson. Kale sat back and watched the debates with interest. Very soon, however, the decision was unanimous.

“What is our new mission, Captain?” asked Pearson.

“The answer to that is why I’ve held this meeting on the holodeck, Lieutenant,” responded Kale. “Computer, run program Jacobyl.”

After a moment, a figure appeared near one wall of the holodeck, wearing a Starfleet Admiral’s uniform. The figure began to speak.

“I offer you greetings. I am Admiral Myers Jacoby, Assistant Chief of Starfleet Operations. All of you have received excellent evaluations and preliminary approval to be appointed to the crew of the Federation starship *USS Sarek*, pending your acceptance of these orders.”

The crew, restless with excitement, squirmed around in their seats. This was now old news. They wanted to hear further.

“Your new starship’s mission,” the admiral continued, “will be to travel beyond the Bajoran wormhole, on the Federation’s first dedicated attempt to chart and explore the Gamma Quadrant. Your mission, if all goes well, is expected to last ten standard years, after which the *Sarek* will return to the Alpha Quadrant for refitting and reassignment. This is Starfleet’s first extreme deep-space exploration mission, and you are among Starfleet’s finest.”

The holographic admiral started going into greater detail of the upcoming mission as he explained, "Before departing *Deep Space Nine*, the *Sarek* will be outfitted with several modified Danube-class runabouts, each outfitted to act as independent scout vehicles with their own dedicated crews. These 'Preliminary Survey Vessels' will chart and survey the sectors of space ahead of the *Sarek*, allowing your lone starship better opportunities to explore the Gamma Quadrant and fulfill Starfleet's primary purpose of seeking out new life and new civilizations. There are many unknowns within the Gamma Quadrant that *Sarek* must be prepared for. We feel that you all as a crew can easily handle them. We wish you the best of luck, *Sarek*. Starfleet, out." The figure faded from view. As it did, Kale rose and started walking around the table, placing isolinear chips in front of each person.

"These are your new orders," said Kale. "If you choose to accept them, they authorize promotions for those of you who are eligible for them. In my opinion, you've earned them. You have forty-eight hours to make your decisions."

Each of the new *Sarek* crew took their chip, some of them gazing at them with curiosity.

"I just wanted to say, please keep in mind," Kale started to say. "I didn't ask for all of you because we are friends or any sort of favoritism. I requested you on my crew because each of you has the skills and knowledge I need to successfully complete the mission ahead of us. I need you. The *Sarek* needs you. Please carefully consider my offer."

Each person sitting around the table looked at Kale, their expressions now serious as they began to truly realize what was being asked of them. Several nodded in agreement.

"Thank you, one and all," Kale finally said. "Dismissed."

* * * *

Several Days Later

The bridge of the *Sarek* was bustling with activity. A couple of technicians from *DS9* were placing the last isolinear optical chips into the starboard bulkhead computer processors under the personal supervision of *DS9*'s chief of operations, Miles O'Brien. Lt Commander Yu-Fen M. Cosna sat in the first officer's seat, going over loading schedules and personnel transfers on the computer screen mounted there.

Captain Kalin Kale and Lieutenant (JG) Setton To'Lock Arbelo entered from the forward turbolift, talking about the departure schedule. As they came near, Cosna looked up.

"Commander Cosna? I'm Captain Kalin Kale, the new CO," said Kale as he approached her.

Cosna looked up at him, stood with her hands behind her back, and very formally said, "Lieutenant Commander Yu-Fen Mickey Cosna, your assigned executive officer, sir."

Mickey. The name struck Kale like a sledge hammer. It was by coincidence the same as the first name of Petty Officer Mickey Ku, a member of the *Arcturus* crew Kale had had an intimate relationship with. Mickey Ku had been killed during Kale's last mission aboard the *Arcturus*, and he had taken her death very badly at first. It took the captain a moment to recover.

"Kalin?" asked Arbelo with concern, stepping closer to his friend and captain.

"I'm alright, Monster," said Kale, trying to turn his attention back to the petite Asian officer standing in front of him. "I'm sorry. Your personnel file didn't list you middle name and I... Well, that's not important. I assume you've been briefed on our ship's mission and capabilities, Commander?"

"Yes, sir," was the woman's terse reply.

Kale checked the padd in his hand.

"Cosna, Lieutenant Commander Yu-Fen M.," he read aloud. "Last assignment, first officer, starship *Tian An Men*, Captain Lyal Richardson, commanding. Good evaluations. Highly regarded by your previous commander. A perfect choice for this assignment."

"Yes, sir. If it says so, sir."

Regaining control of his emotions, Kale took a deep breath, then continued.

"Is there a problem, Commander?"

"Permission to speak freely, sir?"

Kale exhaled, then looked around at the crew around them.

"In the ready room, Commander," he requested.

The two officers entered the ready room, where staff people were placing tropical plants and ferns native to the planet Proxima Centauri into the pots. Kale asked them to leave the room for the moment. Then, once the door was closed, turned and faced his first officer.

"Permission granted, Commander."

"Sir, I did not request to be here. I have no desire to be here. I was happy with my post aboard the *Tian An Men*. The only reason I accepted this assignment is because Captain Richardson, a commander I have served with for over three years and whom I both respect and admire, was offered this ship as his next command. Then Starfleet took it away from him without so much as a 'by your leave' and just gave it to an untried rookie with a service record as short as my pinkie!" She took a deep breath, then continued, "No disrespect intended, sir!"

Kale pondered the situation. Here he had a first officer who did not want the position. On the other hand, as he well knew, Starfleet had required him to accept a first officer who was not from the *Arcturus* crew, and he knew for a fact from his daily briefings with Commander Sisko that no other qualified persons were available who could reach the Bajor Sector before the ship was scheduled to depart. Kale felt stuck between an asteroid and a hard place.

“Commander, lets bury this hatchet right here. Fair or not, I can see you hold no fondness for me, but I’m willing to try to get along with you if you’ll do the same,” Kale offered. “All I require is you do you job with as much professionalism as you displayed aboard the *Tian-An-Men*.”

“I’ll... think about your offer, sir!” she said, and with that, she strode out of the room. Arbelo then entered before the doors could shut.

“Is everything alright, Kalin?” he asked.

“Monster, I have a feeling this is going to seem like a very long mission. Our first officer doesn’t even want to be here. And did I tell you who Starfleet wants to add to our security department...?”

* * * *

They beamed aboard the *Sarek* in two groups of five. A look of surprise crossed the transporter operator’s features as they all marched out of the room single file. After consulting a wall panel to ascertain the location of the security office, they continued to march single file through the corridor, the only sound that of their uniforms as they moved.

Very shortly, they reached the security office and entered as the doors swooshed open. They formed two ranks as their leader approached the Catullan man sitting behind the desk. Still reading a report on the computer screen, the man was as yet oblivious to their presence.

“Lieutenant Penji Fil?” the leader asked.

Startled, Fil looked up at his questioner (and up, and up...) and could not hold back the distressed look that crossed his face.

“Y... y... yes,” he stammered.

“Lieutenant Kro’Toth, of the Imperial Klingon Defense Force. As we represent the Empire, we are assigned to your security force.”

“You... you are... ?” Fil stammered yet again, more a question than a statement, as he stared at the ten Klingon warriors standing before him.

“What are your orders?” Kro’Toth asked.

Fil wanted to scream ‘To leave me alone!’ but knew he could not do that.

“See the ship’s head billeting officer to assigned to quarters. Then report back to... (gulp) ...me at 0600 hours,” Fil ordered.

Kro’Toth gave a Klingon salute as the others snapped to attention. Then, one by one, they left the office. Once the room was empty, Fil slumped in his chair.

“Even after three years in this century, I still can’t get used to Klingons,” he said. “Especially the smell.”

* * * *

The Ensign made his way through the *Sarek*’s corridors, still not used to the size of the new ship, having spent the last year aboard the significantly smaller *Aries*. Finally reaching the security office in time to see a squad of Klingons heading in the other direction, he chimed the door signal.

“Come,” said Lieutenant Fil, sitting at his desk, again reading from his computer screen but this time looking up as his guest entered.

“Penji!” the Ensign shouted, rushing around the desk to give the Catullan a bear-hug.

“Jon! Good to see you!” Fil managed with his last breath. When the Ensign released him, Fil offered his hand to Jon Q. Laren, a friend he’d met during the year the *Arcturus* crew had spent retraining at the Academy.

“Glad I am to get here. You would’n believe what it took me to maik sure I was here on time,” Laren said in his Australian accent.

Fil offered Laren a seat, then took his own behind the desk.

“So, mate, when do I start the job?” Laren asked.

Fil’s smile lessened.

“As you Terrans say, I have some good news and some bad news... The good news is you’re still working here aboard the *Sarek* in my security department.”

“An’ the bad news...?”

Fil took a deep breath.

“I can’t give you the promotion. You’re still on my security team, but Starfleet has already assigned an assistant chief to me.”

“No worries, mate,” remarked Laren. “It’ll still be noice workin’ t’gether. So, who beat me out?”

“Some security officer named...”

* * * *

A-ZuRQuIL of KoHoTH, the planet more commonly known around the Federation as Capella IV, departed the *Grissom* and strode through the airlock into the station.

The most striking feature about the tall warrior, besides his honor sash of blue feathers, was the fact that he wore a long, flowing gown-like uniform – which was unusual even for female Starfleet personnel – instead of the standard Starfleet starship uniform. As he walked along, he drew several curious looks.

He entered a lift and took it to the Promenade, meaning to kill some time before reporting to his new superior, Lieutenant (JG) Penji Fil, aboard the *Sarek*. And besides, there was one holosuite program he had heard the local bar had that he was just dying to try out.

The lift doors opened onto the Promenade, and he exited and began his search for the place called Quark's. A disturbance in one shop caught his attention.

"How many times have I told you, if you continue to be so clumsy, I won't simply dock your pay... I'll take it out of your hide!" said an alien shopkeeper to a cowering employee. "Maybe this will get through your thick skull and you won't drop any more merchandise."

The shopkeeper removed a heavy-looking stick from a mounting on the wall and lifted it, intending to strike the employee, when a strong hand gripped his wrist. The shopkeeper turned to look at the stranger.

"Maybe if you were nicer to your employees," said A-ZuRQuIL, "they wouldn't be so nervous and drop things."

The shopkeeper turned his full attention to the Starfleet officer. The submissive employee took the opportunity to scuttle behind a counter out of sight.

"And what business is it of yours, Fed?" growled the shopkeeper.

"Anytime someone threatens or intimidates another being with physical force, I make it my business," replied A-ZuRQuIL.

The alien leaned closer, intending to intimidate the Capellan warrior, and said mockingly, "And what are you going to do about it?"

"This!" replied A-ZuRQuIL, and he planted a firm kiss right on the shopkeeper's lips. The shopkeeper was so startled by the action he dropped the stick and stumbled back into a display shelf, knocking a dozen fragile items off. They shattered on the deck, mixing with the pieces of the one item his employee had dropped earlier. The sudden loud sound brought the alien's attention back on his merchandise.

"My inventory!" he screamed. "I've lost over two cycles worth of income!"

By then, station security had arrived, drawn by the yelling and the loud crashing sounds from within the shop. Constable Odo entered first, assessing the situation.

"Been beating up on the help again, eh, Florum?" he said, eyeing the stick on the floor among the shattered goods and the employee cowering behind the counter. "We've warned you before. Now I'll have to confiscate your Waggi stick and fine you five bars of latinum. Be happy I'm not locking you up for the night!"

Odo took the stick while one of his deputies wrote a summons on his padd and presented it to the shopkeeper for a thumb scan. As A-ZuRQuIL walked out of the shop with Odo, the shape-shifter thanked him for his help.

"Last time Prundle dropped a figurine, Florum had him in the infirmary for two days," explained Odo. "He claimed it was an accident, conveniently no witnesses, so the best I could do at the time was issue him a warning. I'm glad you stopped him before Prundle got hurt again."

"Only doing what I thought was right," explained A-ZuRQuIL. "Can't have people beating other people for no reason."

The two walked a little way around the Promenade, A-ZuRQuIL explaining who he was and why he was aboard *DS9* to the station's chief of security. The two seemed to be getting along well until A-ZuRQuIL asked, "By the way, could you direct me to Quark's?"

"Quark's?" Odo questioned. "Why would you want to go there?"

The look of excitement on A-ZuRQuIL's face could not be hidden as he replied, "I hear he has this wonderful massage holo-program and I'm looking forward to renting a holosuite." The Capellan's eyes turned almost dreamy-looking.

The pained look on Odo's face said all that needed to be said.

* * * *

In one of the Runabout landing pads aboard *Deep Space Nine*, Chief Miles O'Brien approached another newly-promoted officer as he checked out a brand new vessel.

"The new mission module has been installed and tested," O'Brien said. "All systems are functioning. All that remains is transferring the two ships over to the main shuttlebay aboard the *Sarek*."

"Thanks, Chief," Captain Peter J. Koester replied as he finished his walk-around of his new command, the *PSV/USS Hudson*, a modified Danube-class runabout with a crew of five. Across the landing pad deck was located a second modified runabout, the *PSV/USS Cocheco*, whose own captain was performing a walk-around of his own vessel and discussing issues he was finding with one of O'Brien's Bajoran subordinates. "Ensign Bloom told me he detected a minor frequency modulation in the micro-warp drive, but figured he could tune the system for better performance once we're free and clear to navigate in the Gamma Quadrant. When can we perform the transfer?"

O'Brien consulted a padd he was holding before saying, "Lieutenant Dax is overseeing the final computer downloads to the *Hudson*'s computer core in Ops right now. Major Kira has the transfer of the Runabouts scheduled for 1600."

"Do I or any of my crew need to be present for the transfer?" Koester asked.

"No, sir," O'Brien replied. "My deck crew can pretty well handle everything."

At that moment, a human man wearing a blue science uniform and a silver Bajoran earring dangling from one ear exited the *Hudson* and started walking toward Koester and O'Brien.

"The sciences bay is locked down. We're all ready to go as far as I can tell," Lt Commander Virgil Dylan Kane remarked to his captain.

“Great, Exec,” Koester replied. “Chief O’Brien was just telling me the *Hudson* and *Cochecho* will be moved over to the main shuttlebay aboard the *Sarek* this afternoon. I’m heading over there and check in with their first officer, see if there’s anything we can help out with prior to the *Hudson* departing and starting our survey mission once we’re in the Gamma Quadrant.”

“Don’t volunteer us for any more work than you have to, Pete,” Kane remarked. “If you need me, I’ll be in *DS9* Ops. I told Nerys I would get together with her for a drink before we left.”

“I’ll call you if I need you, Exec,” Koester said. Then as Kane started walking out of the landing pad, Koester began asking Chief O’Brien about his experiences so-far in the Gamma Quadrant and about what their small ship might expect to encounter.

* * * *

The *Grissom* had detached from the docking port first, gently gliding down and away from *DS9*, followed several hours later as the *Tian An Men* followed suit. The two starships maneuvered slowly away from the station, then engaged their impulse engines and quickly moved away, on to their next missions.

Finally, on the morning the Gamma Quadrant mission was to officially start, the *Enterprise* detached from the upper port.

“Gently, Ensign,” ordered Captain Jean-Luc Picard, interrupting his reminiscing with his first officer about young Lieutenant Kale’s month-long assignment onboard his ship during the Klingon civil war, as he watched the station slowly lower away on the main viewscreen.

Lieutenant Commander Data turned in the ops seat to face his captain.

“We will arrive on station in five minutes, thirty-two point six seconds,” he reported.

“Then we just wait for the rest of the escort vessels to assemble,” remarked Commander William Riker from his seat next to Picard. “Once we’re all in place, the *Sarek* will be given permission to depart the station and we can begin escorting them to the wormhole.” He grinned as he added, “Then the real fun will begin for Captain Kale and his crew.”

* * * *

On the bridge of the *Sarek*, final checks were being performed as the crew prepared for departure.

‘Nervous, excited, and busy best describe this crew right now,’ thought Kale. *‘But at least they’re busy. I’m just sitting here watching everything happen!’*

Counselor Kethry Sutherland, the ship’s newly assigned half-Betazoid ship’s counselor, entered the bridge and took her place at the captain’s left side. She seemed to take note of him before leaning over to Kale and gently touching the captain’s hand without him realizing.

“You should relax, Captain. Everything will be fine,” she confided.

He glanced at his hand, then looked at the counselor through the corner of his eye, his expression saying all that needed to be said. But still, he said it anyway with a grin.

“I hate it when Betazoids do that.”

“Captain, the *Arcturus* has released its docking clamps and is maneuvering to the rendezvous point. The *IKS Pagh* is already approaching the designated point,” informed Arbelo.

“All this ceremony for the simple act of a starship departing a space station,” Kale grumbled. “I would feel a whole lot less under scrutiny if Starfleet would have just let us depart at our own leisure.”

“It’s not every day Starfleet assigns a starship to the Gamma Quadrant,” Arbelo remarked. “You had to know they would celebrate this!”

“It’s not like we’re the first,” Kale refuted. “Commander Sisko and his crew have made several voyages into the Gamma Quadrant already. Then there was that Klingon ship, the *IKS Toh’Kaht*, late last year!”

“Let’s hope our mission goes better than the *Toh’Kaht*, Captain,” Sutherland remarked. “And besides, we’re the first of what Starfleet expects will be an entirely new Federation fleet within five years! One dedicated to the exploration of the entire Gamma Quadrant. Starships... Starbases... Colonies!”

“I’m still not comfortable with all the attention we’re getting over this,” Kale remarked. “Helm, status?”

“Thrrrrrusterrrrr at station keeping, sirrrr,” said Ensign Pr’n Kes, the ship’s new Caitain helm officer.

“Release docking clamps,” ordered Kale.

“Docking clamps released!” reported Arbelo.

“Well, people, this is it!” said the captain, standing and taking a position between Arbelo and Kes. “Ensign, take us out.”

Sarek’s thrusters fired, slowly propelling the starship upwards, away from the docking pylons. Once clear, the aft thrusters activated, moving the ship forward and on its way toward the wormhole.

“Shut down thrusters,” ordered Kale, who then turned toward the upper bridge engineering station. “Commander, are my impulse engines ready?” he asked his new chief engineer, T’Veer.

“**M**y engines are in working order, Captain,” she replied. Kale was not sure, but he thought he saw a hint of a grin in her reply.

‘On a Vulcan?’ he thought. *‘Nahhh. Must be my imagination.’*

Kale turned back to the screen, where four ships were forming a diamond formation, the *Pagh* in front and above where *Sarek*’s position would be, the Bajoran heavy-fighter *Trasa* below and behind, and the Federation starships *Arcturus* and *Enterprise* on the port and starboard sides respectively.

“Ensign... Engage.”

The ship surged forward, taking its honored place among the other ships, all of which simultaneously engaged their impulse drives, escorting the *Sarek* toward her destiny.

“Easy, Ensign. I don’t want to start our first mission with a bang,” said Kale, turning now to face his new first officer where she was sitting in the chair to the right of the center seat. “Into another ship that is.”

Cosna ignored the joke.

“Aye, sirrrr,” said Kes.

After a few minutes, Arbelo looked up at Kale. “We are within fifteen-hundred meters of the wormhole entrance. Escorts are slowing and falling back.”

On the screen the four ships started falling behind the *Sarek*’s position. Soon they came to a complete stop.

Then, ahead of the ship, perfectly framed by the main viewscreen, the wormhole opened, its otherworldly light brightening the entire bridge.

“Good luck, Kalin. To all of you,” Vice Admiral Johnson said from his seat on the bridge of the *Arcturus-A* as he watched the Bajoran wormhole open wide to seemingly swallow the departing Galaxy-class starship.

“Q’apla!” proclaimed Captain Klag aboard the *Pagh*.

“Best wishes, my friend,” Captain Picard remarked from his own bridge.

The *Sarek* eased closer to the phenomenon, her impulse engine propelling the great ship over the brink. *Sarek* entered the wormhole, and in a blink.....

...She Was Gone.

To Be Concluded...