

Chief Pono Kyman looked around himself, shaking with fear.

In front of him stood the *Dauntless* Bridge crew. Fleet Captain Peter J. Koester. First Officer Virgil Dylan Kane. Counselor Sutherland. Helmsman Lenny. Bloom. K'danz. Q.

Kyman started backing away from the crew, fearing for his life. But his way was blocked by another member of the crew. Ga'gh Schuukveldlaan.

"No!" Kyman muttered. "No, leave me alone!"

"Resistance is futile," Ga'gh responded flatly.

Kyman broke away from Ga'gh and the others, running down the passageway, the sound of his boots pounding on the metal deck, echoing off the bulkheads and exposed equipment of the Borg ship.

"Resistance is futile. You will be assimilated," said Koester, now nothing more than a Borg drone, as he and the rest of his assimilated crew followed ominously behind.

Kyman tried to escape, but soon found himself trapped in a dead end passage between two tall, almost organic pieces of machinery. He turned around, frozen with horror, as the former members of his crew trudged closer and closer, the dim light reflecting off of their implants, lights and circuits blinking in random patterns.

"No! Please, Skipper, don't!" Kyman pleaded to deaf ears as the Koester drone moved ahead of the others, grasping the El'Aurian man with the large pincer attached to his right arm. The nanoprobe injectors extended from near the knuckles on his left.

"No!" Kyman shouted, tears rolling down his face as the injector moved closer. "NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOO!" Kyman shouted as he bolted upright in his bed. Sweat poured down his face and neck, and his sheets were soaked.

"Bridge to Chief Kyman, please respond."

Kyman slowly gathered his wits as he looked toward the combadge sitting on the stand next to his bed. He gingerly picked up the small device and tapped it.

"K...Kyman here, Mister Ga'gh."

"Good morning, Chief," said the pleasant sounding voice of the Chief Tactical Officer, Ga'gh Schuukveldlaan of Wilryk. "Sorry if I woke you but Mister Kane wanted to make sure you'll be present for the ceremony. It starts in just over two hours."

"No, that's alright, Mister Ga'gh," Kyman said as he wiped the remaining sweat off with his sleeve. "I... I wasn't asleep. Tell the Exec I'll be in 10-Forward on time."

"Very well," Ga'gh responded. "Bridge out." Meanwhile, Kyman placed the combadge back on the nightstand and stood up, looking out the viewing window at the stars.

"That's the fifth time this month," he thought to himself. "What does this mean? Something is very wrong."

Space, The Final Frontier...

These are the voyages of the starship *Dauntless*...

Her ongoing mission:

To Seek; To Chart; To Explore...

Slipping the surly bonds of Earth,

Going where none have been before!

Star Trek: Dauntless

"Starship Lost - Part I" By PJK

The wood and glass doors of the 10-Forward lounge slid open and Chief Kyman rushed in, buttoning the last button on his new grey jacketed dress uniform as he did.

The lounge had been decorated for the launching ceremony that was already taking place and was crowded with dignitaries, shipyard workers, and members of the new starship's crew. In front of the large, forward facing

windows a podium was set up, where Admiral Setok, commanding officer of *Starfleet Yards - Vulcan* was giving a speech dedicating the new starship *Dauntless*. Close to the podium and to one side, both holding champagne glasses, stood Fleet Captain Peter J. Koester, the starship's commander, with the newly appointed chief medical officer, Commander Lotus Q holding onto Koester's right arm. Near them both stood Commander Virgil Kane, holding a glass of synthaholic champagne and looking markedly different since returning from the Academy without the beard and mustache he had sported the past two and a half years. Kyman quickly moved through the crowd to join the three.

"Sorry I'm late, Skipper," Kyman whispered to Koester. "I had something I... had to attend to."

Koester nodded at Kyman, still half-paying attention to the typically longwinded speech the Vulcan admiral was delivering. The admiral pressed a button on the podium, and through the window an object could be seen launched toward the ship from the dry-dock framework that surrounded her. Koester took his cue and handed Q the champagne glass he had been holding and replaced Admiral Setok at the podium. The admiral handed Koester a padd to read from.

"We hereby name this vessel Federation starship *Dauntless*," Koester recited. "The latest in the line of historic starship's named *Dauntless*. May she live up to the records and reputations of her predecessors. And may she always bring us home."

Koester turned to gaze out the window just as the object, a large black bottle of Dom Perignon, vintage 2161, the year the Federation and the first starship *Dauntless* both came into being, struck the hull, shattering into millions of tiny shards. Applause erupted within 10-Forward. Koester turned back to face the crowd, still clapping as he did, then picked up the padd once again.

"To: Fleet Captain Peter J. Koester; You are hereby authorized and required to assume command of the Federation starship *Dauntless*, Starfleet registry *NCC-75310*, and proceed on a three month shakedown cruise prior to commissioning. Your first assignment is to proceed to Rohrer IV and complete the treaty negotiations started by the *USS Hunley*. Signed, Ravitch, Admiral Alan L., Commander - Starfleet."

Again, 10-Forward erupted in applause.

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Captain's Log, Stardate 52184.9:

Sovereign-class starship PCU Dauntless en route to the Rohrer system to complete the negotiations started by the crew of USS Hunley, which mysteriously disappeared two weeks ago after departing the system in response to a distress call. In spite of the losses inflicted by the Dominion War, Starfleet has given us a milk-run for our first mission.

In the meantime, I'm using some spare time to get to know the new members of my crew. I had gotten used to the intimate family-like feeling of the small 150 member crew of my previous Dauntless. Now I have well over 850 people serving under me.

I've had Mister Kane arrange appointments for me to meet with my new bridge crew members.

Koester, commanding Dauntless, out.

Fleet Captain Koester reviewed the service record on his monitor one more time, then looked back up at the man that sat on the other side of his desk from him.

Kevin Fry was an expert helmsman and navigator with years of experience in Starfleet. Years and years and years and...

Koester groaned inwardly. What was behind the existence of so many refugees in time? And what drew them to his starship? First the *Dauntless*' Marine Contingent Commander 1st Lt McIntyre and his sergeant Olly O'Laughlin. Then his recent working relationship with Captain Kale. Now Lt Commander Kevin Fry. Was there some sort of time-space anomaly surrounding Koester that attracted these expatriates in time?

"Well, I must say your record is somewhat unusual....," Koester said. "Maybe not too unusual for this ship though," he added as a mumble. "But it's a pleasure having you aboard, Commander." Koester stood and offered Fry a handshake.

"Thank you, Cap... uh... Fleet... uh," Fry started saying, becoming somewhat flustered.

“Just call me Commodore,” Koester said with a grin. “Most everyone else does.”

“Certainly. Commodore,” Fry said. “Glad to be aboard.”

Koester nodded and watched as Fry turned and headed toward the ready room door before he clicked the monitor onto the next service record. Lieutenant Kes of Cait.

He heard the doors swish open again, and Koester looked up just in time for the pheromones to hit him and to see his next appointment saunter into his ready room and sit down before him with a purr.

* * * *

In sickbay, Q was busy taking stock of all the equipment and supplies when the doors parted to admit newly reassigned chief science officer Jeff Bloom.

“Hey, Doc... um, Lo... uh... Q,” Bloom said, slightly embarrassed and flushing green. “How are things going?”

“As well as can be expected, Jeff,” Q replied. “I’m not looking forward to having to break in that new Mark 4 EMH we’ve got installed. I was used to our old holodoc.”

Bloom nodded sympathetically, a strange looking gesture on a Vulcan, then glanced around the sickbay, amazed at just how much the design resembled their old ship’s sickbay. Standardized design, he supposed.

“So what is it that brings you down to MY sickbay, Jeff?” Q asked, emphasizing the one word. “Not feeling well as you fill in at my old position?”

Bloom chuckled, then showed her a package he was carrying. “Actually, a package arrived for you just before we departed Vulcan.”

“For me?” Q asked, surprised. She rarely received mail, since most all of her acquaintances were aboard the same vessel.

“Well, not so much you specifically,” Bloom explained as he handed the Trill doctor the small package. “It was addressed to ‘CMO, *USS Dauntless*.’ Came from *Starbase Diego Garcia*.”

Q’s eyebrow rose slightly as she made the connection. *Diego Garcia* was the starbase Doctor Sir Azriel Dourden, their chief medical officer aboard the previous *Dauntless*, had been reassigned to. She accepted the package and opened the wrapping carefully. Her eyebrows then knit in confusion.

“What is it?” Bloom asked, curiosity overcoming him.

Q lifted out a small isolinear optical chip and showed it to Bloom. His expression turned to one of confusion as well.

“Why would Doc Dourden send us this isolinear chip?” Q asked. “And what should we do with it?”

“Plug it in?” was all Bloom could offer. Q shrugged in agreement and moved toward one of the nearby computer interfaces and slid the chip inside. Nothing happened.

“Computer,” said Q. “Access isolinear chip in slot 11-alpha.”

The computer chimed in acknowledgement, then a moment later its feminine voice announced, “Warning, Emergency Medical Hologram Mark 4 program has been deleted from the databanks.”

Q and Bloom looked at one another in alarm, worried as to just what kind of virus they had infected the system with. The computer chimed once again.

“Program installed.... Initializing software...”

A humanoid figure appeared in the center of sickbay. The figure wore a Starfleet uniform minus the rank insignia on the blue collar. His bald head turned to look disinterestedly at Bloom and Q.

“Please state the nature of the medical emergency,” the newly installed EMH stated, then cocked an eyebrow when he noticed Q wearing the medical smock over her uniform. “Where is Doctor Dourden?”

“A Mark 1 program?” Bloom asked with confusion. “I thought they recalled all the Mark 1’s out of service?”

“Not just any Mark 1!” Q said, a smile coming to her lips. “OUR Mark 1!”

* * * *

It had been a long day, and the *Dauntless* was nearing the Rohrer system. Crewman John Lancaster, a new helmsman trainee, had just left the ready room, and Koester had one more meeting left for the day. He sat back for a moment, waiting for the doors to part once again.

Nothing happened.

He stood up and walked over to the replicator.

“Raktagino, extra sweet,” Koester ordered while glancing expectantly at the doors. The cup with steaming hot liquid materialized. Koester grabbed it and returned to his desk, again glancing at the doors.

Still nothing happened.

Finally, huffing a tired sigh, he tapped his combadge.

“Skipper to Kane. I thought you said I still had one more new member of the crew to meet today?”

There was a prolonged pause for a moment, then Kane responded, “That’s right, Skipper.”

Koester was starting to get annoyed. “He’s five minutes late. Where is he?”

“Uh....,” Kane started to stammer. “Mister ‘Spot’ entered your ready room five minutes ago, Skipper.”

“Excuse me!?” Koester exclaimed in surprise, looking around the seemingly empty room, then turning to the service record displayed on his monitor screen.

“Ensign Cdtkkhftn,” Koester tried to pronounce before giving up entirely. “Native of planet Daminia II. A sentient, non-corporeal life-form....” Koester paused. “Non-corporeal?”

“Correct, sir,” said a metallic sounding voice from within the room. Koester looked around, confused. The voice sounded so close.

“Uh... Ensign... Ensign Cdt.... uh...,” Koester stammered.

“My real name is unpronounceable by most humanoid life-forms. Just call me ‘Spot,’ sir,” the voice said. “It’s a nickname I picked up in the Academy.”

It took Koester a moment to realize that the voice he was hearing was coming from his own combadge. His eyebrows knit in annoyance.

“Ensign... uh... Spot..., it’s generally customary to actually appear in person for interviews with your commanding officer, not over the comm channels.”

“But, sir,” the voice continued. “I am here with you.”

Koester had just about lost all his patience when he noticed the circle of red light sitting on the edge of his desk. He stared at the spot for a moment, then looked around the ready room for a possible light source, even going so far as gazing out the ready room windows before looking back and seeing the circle of light move playfully back and forth on the desk.

“Uh.... Ensign? Is that YOU on my desk?”

“Yes, sir,” responded the metallic voice once again.

“How is it I’m... uh... hearing you?”

The voice made a metallic chuckle and then said, “My race is a non-corporeal species composed of electrically bonded ions which can interface directly with most electronic and computer systems directly. I’m accessing the *Dauntless*’ communications system to speak to you.”

Koester, still amazed, returned to his seat behind the desk.

“Your Academic record is quite impressive, Ensign,” he said, “but I can’t help wondering how you could possibly serve a bridge position without a body?”

“With all due respect, sir,” ‘Spot’ said, moving closer to Koester’s arm on the desk, “but as I said, I can interface directly with all ship’s systems. I can ‘be’ the sensors in some respects. I will make the ideal science officer for you, sir.”

“Very well. I look forward to working with you.” Koester almost started to reach out for a handshake out of habit when he caught himself. “Dismissed,” Koester said, and before he could blink, the circle of light was gone.

“Bridge to the Skipper,” sounded the voice of Virgil Kane over Koester’s combadge now.

“Go ahead, Exec.”

“Skipper, we’ve entered the Rohrer system. Dropping out of warp now.”

“Very good, Exec. Form a Diplomatic Away Team. I’ll be out in a moment.” And with a quick click, Koester deactivated his computer monitor and headed out onto the bridge.

* * * *

Commodore Koester emerged onto the bridge through his ready room doors. As he walked out he noticed Commander Virgil Kane, the ship’s first officer, standing at the port side engineering console, his back to Koester, talking with recently promoted chief engineer Nate Johnson.

“You shouldn’t worry that I can’t bring the efficiency up any further,” Johnson said to Kane with some pride in his voice. “The Sovereign-class? I know these systems like the back of my head. Er.. I mean, hand.”

Kane chuckled at the engineer’s faux-pas, not noticing Koester’s arrival behind him.

"I look at it this way," Kane said eagerly, an almost maniacal grin covering his face. "The Sovereign-class! Imagine the firepower! Imagine the crew size! Imagine the field days!!"

"Ahem..."

Johnson glanced over Kane's shoulder at the sound, then suddenly busied his attention performing a level three diagnostic on his engineering console. Kane stiffened, the maniacal grin evaporating, then slowly turned around to see Koester, one eyebrow cocked in the air, his arms folded across his chest.

"Imagine WHAT, Exec?" Koester asked.

"Uh... I was... uh... just telling Mister Johnson here..." Kane said, thumbing toward the engineer who seemed to be trying to meld into his console. "...Uh... that this new ship is so... uh... the systems are so automatic, I imagine we'll never need to ever schedule a field day."

"Mm hmm," said the Skipper, who then turned and took his seat in the center chair.

"What can you tell me about this planet?" Koester asked, turning toward his somewhat embarrassed first officer. Kane stepped up onto the upper bridge deck and brought up some information on one of the mission ops screens.

"Planet Rohrer IV. Class M. Gravity .95 standard. Unified culture ruled by the Grand Parliament. Was once under the control of the Klingon Empire, but was granted its independence under Chancellor K'mpec. Applied for Federation Protectorate status shortly after the Cardassian Union signed their alliance with the Dominion," Kane reported.

"We have Rohrer IV on visual," announced Lt Commander Kevin Fry, the vessel's new chief helmsman.

"Very well," said Koester. "Mister Winters, hail the Rohran High Council."

"Hailing frequencies open, sir," Commander Phillip Winters reported from ops. "We are receiving a reply."

Koester stood once again, straightened his uniform, and said, "This is Commodore Peter J. Koester of the Federation starship *Dauntless*. We would like to establish orbit and reconvene treaty negotiations with you."

Koester waited for a moment before a response blinked onto the main viewscreen. The Rohran who appeared on the screen looked human, with the exception of the faint purplish hue of his skin. The man exuded 'middle management.'

"Go away," the man simply said. Koester was speechless for a moment.

"It was... uh... my understanding that your planet had applied for Federation Protectorate status and that negotiations had been started in good faith by the crew of the *USS Hunley*," the Skipper finally managed to say.

The name of the missing starship seemed to agitate the man on the screen. He stammered somewhat himself as well. Koester, not knowing exactly what to do at that point, simply sat back down in his chair, at which point Counselor Kethry Sutherland leaned over to him.

"Mention of the *Hunley* seems to have upset him, Commodore," she whispered. "His emotions are a jumble."

Koester looked back toward the screen, where the man seemed to be regaining his composure.

"Mister... uh..."

"Collid," the middle manager on the screen stated. "Third Minister to the Parliament."

"Minister Collid," Koester continued. "We simply wish to enter orbit and continue the negotiations where they were left off." Koester tried to offer a warm, friendly smile. Collid seemed to deflate on the screen.

"Oh, very well," the Third Minister said. "You may enter orbit."

Koester smiled a little more genuinely, looking at Sutherland for support, then asked, "When may we beam down and meet with your government representatives?"

Collid suddenly seemed flustered again.

"You can't beam down," the man said. "You... uh... you just can't!"

"Wait a second, Minister. You're telling us we can now enter orbit of your world, but we can't beam down?"

"That is correct," Collid said after a moment's pause.

Koester looked first at Sutherland, then at Kane, who shrugged his shoulders in bewilderment.

"Look, Third Minister," Koester said, once again standing and taking a few steps closer to the screen. "I and my ship did not come all this way to simply sit in orbit and get the run around. We're here to negotiate a treaty with you. That's what we're going to do."

"But... ah... we... um..." Collid stammered, then lowered his eyes from the screen. "Very well. The Government negotiators will meet you in the Hall of Treaties. Coordinates will be sent." Then the screen blinked off, replaced by the image of the planet they now orbited below.

Koester looked back at Kane again in confusion, then turning toward the nearby science console said, “Jeff, the bridge is yours. Virg, Kethry, you’re with me. Have Mister K’Danz and Chief Kyman meet us in transporter room one.”

As everyone acknowledged the orders and Jeff Bloom, the emotional Vulcan chief science officer moved over to take his place in the command seat, Lt T’Cah looked up from the panel her superior had just vacated.

“Commodore, standard sensor scans of the planet have revealed large areas of the surface that appear to be shielded.”

“Environmental shields? Are they habitats of some sort?” Koester asked as he moved with the others toward the turbolift.

“I cannot tell, Commodore,” T’Cah said, changing the scan frequency but getting no different results. “The areas seem to be shielded specifically from sensors. The *Hunley*’s preliminary report did not mention the planet having areas shielded from sensors. I will look into it further while the away team is off the ship.”

“Perhaps something to ask the Rohran about when we beam down,” Koester said to Kane as the lift doors swished shut.

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The six member away team materialized in an ornately decorated hallway. The scene reminded Koester of pictures he had seen of the Imperial Palaces of Russia long ago in the days of the Czar. Rich red carpet covered the floor while pictures hung from red velvet and pure white marble walls. A group of five natives, including Third Minister Collid, stood a couple of meters away and moved forward to greet the Starfleet officers, hands extended in friendship.

“Welcome to Rohrer, Commodore,” the first man to approach said. His suit was festooned with ribbons and medals and a thick blue sash ran from his right shoulder to his left side. “I am First Minister Zentgraf. These are my associates, Second Minister Romney, Fourth Minister Pires, Fifth Minister Dorogoff, and I believe you already know Third Minister Collid.”

The away team nodded acknowledgement to each of the ministers, introducing themselves as they did. Koester then turned toward the junior security guard that had accompanied them down from the ship, an ensign named Tyler, assigning him to stand guard there in the hallway while the away team followed the entourage through tall, enameled doors into the Hall of Treaties itself. Koester had to stop and stare at the surroundings. The room was at least one-hundred and fifty meters to a side if it was a centimeter. Only a single table stood in the center of the room, around which stood ten skillfully handcrafted chairs. Gilded columns supported the corners of the room. Statues of Rohran heroes and paintings of mythical beasts – at least Koester hoped they were merely mythical – lined the walls. Huge windows on the far wall covered by light, filmy curtains brilliantly lit the whole structure. The highly polished marble floor reflected everything in the room.

First Minister Zentgraf gestured toward the table, and as everyone moved toward their seats and refreshments were brought in by government staff, Sutherland pulled Koester aside for a moment.

“Commodore,” the counselor said. “The Rohran seem friendly and respectful, but I am sensing there is something here they wish to keep hidden.”

“Thank you, Counselor,” Koester nodded, and preceded to his seat, accepting a native juice beverage from one of the passing staffers. He then looked at the First Minister.

“I suppose the best place to start is to find out what has already been negotiated by our predecessors.”

* * * *

“...And that, ladies and gentlemen, concludes a fairly successful day of negotiations,” Koester concluded as he gathered his isolinear chips. The entire group stood up from the ornate chairs while the commodore made his way toward First Minister Zentgraf to shake his hand. Zentgraf and his fellow ministers smiled warmly.

“Shall we continue negotiations same time tomorrow?” Koester asked.

“Of course, Commodore,” Zentgraf assured. “If you would kindly follow our staff members, they will show you all to your quarters.”

A frown creased Koester’s expression for a moment, then he explained, “I’m sorry, First Minister, but there must be a misunderstanding. We have no need to remain on the surface for the night. We don’t wish to trouble you, and Commander Kane and I both have work we must attend to aboard ship before we retire for the night. We’ll just beam back to our ship and return for the negotiations in the morning.”

“Oh, it is no trouble, Commodore,” Zentgraf said, his expression turning visibly nervous. “In fact, we have rooms already prepared for you.”

“Well, thank you, but we must really return to the *Dauntless*. There’s a mountain of paperwork there that requires my attention.”

“But, Commodore,” exclaimed the First Minister. “I really do insist.”

“First Minister...,” Koester started to say with a sigh before he was interrupted by the Rohran minister.

“Valet, escort our guests to their rooms,” ordered Zentgraf with urgency. The members of the *Dauntless* away team merely looked at each other in confusion. Finally, Koester started defiantly leading the way out of the Hall of Treaties and into the ornate corridor beyond.

“Mister Tyler, contact the ship. Six to beam up,” Koester ordered the security guard who had stood watch out in the hall. Tyler nodded and tapped his combadge.

“Away Team to *Dauntless*, six to...”

“Commodore Koester, I really must insist you stay,” Zentgraf said, sounding like an order. Koester simply looked at the First Minister, a concerned expression on his face.

“First Minister, we will return to continue negotiations at 1100 hours in the morning. In the meantime, I have a ship to attend to. Adieu.” A quick nod toward Tyler completed the gesture.

“*Dauntless*, six to beam up. Energize.” And in a sparkle of light, the away team dematerialized.

* * * *

“What was it with them?” Koester asked his first officer as the two dined on a light meal in the 10-Forward lounge. Through the large, forward-facing windows the blue-green planet of Rohrer IV could be seen slowly spinning below. “First they don’t want us to even beam down, then they don’t want us to leave!”

“Maybe they’re just shy, but once they get to know you, the ultimate host comes out?” Kane offered, munching on a leaf from the Bajoran salad he was eating.

“Bridge to the Skipper,” said the voice of Commander Bloom through Koester’s combadge. “We received the report from Starfleet you requested.”

“Thanks, Jeff. I’ll be up to my ready room in a short while to review it,” Koester said.

“Aye, Skipper.”

Kane looked at his CO with a quizzical expression. “What report, Skipper?”

“I sent Starfleet an inquiry for more information pertaining to Rohrer IV and the missing *Hunley*. I thought maybe we could find out why the Rohran were acting the way they were toward us.”

Koester gulped down the last of his coffee from his mug, then took one last bite of his sandwich as he stood up and straightened his uniform.

“Chief Kyman is meeting me in the ready room. Would you care to join us and review the information?” he asked Kane.

The human-turned-Bajoran nodded, causing his silver earring to jingle against his lobe, as he too took one last bite of his dinner and followed Koester to the turbolift.

* * * *

“Nothing unusual here, Skipper,” Chief Pono Kyman said as he read through the information file of Rohrer IV. “Survey report describes the Rohran as friendly, open people. They were a very mild race, which contributed to their conquest by the Klingon Empire in 2198. Initially they offered resistance, for which the Klingons destroyed a number of cities by orbital bombardment. However, once they surrendered, the Klingons found them to be agreeable and afforded them greater freedoms than most cultures under their control until K’mpec allowed them their independence in 2360. They maintained close ties to the Empire while opening relations with the Federation as well. If anything, I would say their behavior today was what was unusual.”

“Everything I have says basically the same thing,” Koester agreed. “Exec?”

Kane looked over toward Koester and said, “This report states the Rohran petitioned for protectorate status with the Federation shortly after the Cardassians allied themselves with the Dominion. *USS Hunley* was assigned to negotiate the treaty. However, after three days of negotiations, the *Hunley* reported to *Starbase 175* that they had received a distress call and were departing Rohrer IV to investigate. The ship was never heard from again, and no debris has ever been found.”

Koester rubbed at his eyes as he took another long sip of coffee, then glanced at the chronometer displayed on his computer monitor, which read 0116 hours.

"It's getting late, gentlemen. What do you say we call it a night?"

"Good idea, Skipper," Kane said, rising from his seat and nodding toward the door. "We have another long day of negotiations tomorrow."

"Thank you, gentlemen. Dismissed."

Kane and Kyman nodded their good nights and departed the ready room. Koester shut off his padd and monitor, then stood by the viewport, rubbing the back of his neck, stiff with fatigue, and gazing at the quiet looking planet they orbited, slowly shaking his head in puzzlement.

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The buzz was the first thing Peter Koester was aware of. He slowly opened his groggy eyes, wiping the sleep from them, and glanced at the chronometer on his nightstand. It was 0700 hours. He groaned as the buzz sounded again.

"This is Koester," he said with a croak.

"Sorry to wake you, Commodore," said Lt Commander Kevin Fry's voice. "First Minister Zentgraf is waiting for you on subspace channel 3. Says it's important."

Koester sighed silently, then answered, "Thank you, Commander." He then pulled himself out of bed, wrapping a robe around his night clothes, and sat at the nearby desk, pressing the monitor control.

"*Dauntless*, Commodore Koester. What can I do for you, First Minister?"

"Good morning, Commodore," Zentgraf said, his face brightening as he spoke. Koester found himself thinking how people that bright and chipper this early in the morning should be drug out into the street and shot with a phaser on setting 10. "Our commission was eager to reconvene the negotiations, and wondered when you and your team would beam down?"

Koester groaned again, then said, "With all due respect, First Minister, but I thought we had agreed upon meeting at 1100 hours. You're four hours early."

"Well, as you Earthers are fond of saying, Commodore, the timely avis captures the invertebrate crawler. Or something to that effect." Zentgraf smiled a strange smile. "Whenever you can get here, we'll be waiting."

"Understood, First Minister," Koester said, trying not to rudely yawn in the Minister's face. "I'll try and get my team together early and be down as soon as we can. *Dauntless*, out."

Before Zentgraf could say another word, Koester shut the channel and dropped his head, eyes closed, onto his arms on the desktop and slowly tapped the comm channel on his desk.

"Bridge, this is the Skipper. I need the diplomatic away team members assembled and ready to beam down in one hour."

"Yes, Commodore," responded Fry. "I'll see to it."

* * * *

As K'danz, Tyler, Counselor Sutherland, and a very sleepy Kane, Kyman, and Koester stepped up onto the platform of transporter room one, Lt T'Cah, the Vulcan science officer quickly slipped through the doors holding a padd.

"Commodore," the Vulcan woman said. "I have located records that indicate the shielded regions of Rohrer IV's surface are so-called 'dead zones' created by the Klingon orbital bombardment almost two centuries ago. They were set up by the Rohrans to contain the radioactive fallout produced by the weapons."

Koester nodded very informally.

"Thank you, Lieutenant. You can energize whenever you're ready, Chief."

The transporter chief nodded as he rechecked the system readouts one last time, then activated the transporter.

The away team materialized in the same immense hallway they had departed the night before. Commodore Koester attempted to put on a more pleasant smile than the one he felt as Ministers Zentgraf, Romney, Collid, Pires, Dorogoff, and all their aides walked toward them to greet the team.

"Welcome back to Rohrer IV, Commodore. It is so good to see you again," Zentgraf said enthusiastically as he pumped Koester's hand vigorously.

“Shall we continue the negotiations?” Koester asked, gesturing toward the huge doors of the Hall of Treaties. Zentgraf nodded, and began leading the way, the other Ministers and the away team following close behind, until Ensign Tyler fell to the floor.

Many of the Rohrans looked at the collapsed security guard in abject horror, one even whispering, “Oh no. It’s starting again.” Immediately Koester was tapping his combadge.

“Away team to *Dauntless*. Medical emergency! Beam Ensign Tyler directly to sickbay!”

“We can take care of him!” Zentgraf suddenly exclaimed as two Rohran medics appeared from another side hallway wheeling a gurney between them. The away team watched with surprise as the two medics quickly scooped the unconscious ensign onto the stretcher and began wheeling him quickly down the hall. Koester turned to the First Minister, a look of shock evident on his face.

“I would still feel better if one of our doctors was here to assist. I doubt you’ve medically cared for many humans.” Without waiting for any reply from Zentgraf, Koester continued, “Koester to *Dauntless*, relay my last. But have **Q** beam down with a medikit, ASAP.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” responded Commander Bloom, who added a moment later, “**Q**’s on her way, Commodore.”

Koester and the others nervously paced within the Hall of Treaties until a few moments later, a familiar hum filled the air and Dr Lotus **Q**, Koester’s former head of stellar cartography and now chief medical officer, materialized near the group.

“Where is he?” **Q** asked, removing a medical tricorder from her medikit and walking toward the doors to the hallway until one of the medics who had wheeled Tyler away appeared in the doorway, his face ashen.

“I’m sorry, Minister,” the medic said to Zentgraf but addressed the entire room. “The Starfleet human didn’t make it.”

“What?!?” Koester said in disbelief. “He only collapsed five minutes ago. What could possibly have killed him so fast?”

“I want to examine the body,” **Q** stated, frowning as she returned the tricorder to its slot.

“It is a Rohran tradition not to disturb the vessel once the soul has departed,” Zentgraf said, concerned. Koester turned on the First Minister before **Q** had a chance to protest.

“Ensign Tyler was a Terran and a member of my crew. I’m sorry, First Minister, but Rohran tradition just doesn’t apply here.”

“Really, Commodore, what could you possibly learn from his cor...,” Zentgraf started to say before **Q** interrupted him angrily.

“Perhaps what killed him, maybe?”

Zentgraf sighed, then shrugged his shoulders resignedly.

“Very well. Valet, escort the *Dauntless*’ doctor to the Med Facility.”

One of the Minister’s aides nodded then led **Q** out of the Hall of Treaties. Meanwhile, the crowd inside the Hall, their dispositions dampened by the sudden death, milled about aimlessly. Koester observed the mood.

“First Minister,” he said to Zentgraf. “Perhaps it would be better to temporarily postpone the negotiations for at least a few hours? I don’t think anyone is in the mood to bargain right now.”

Zentgraf nodded, saying, “Perhaps we can reconvene later this afternoon. In the meantime, Commodore, feel free to enjoy the hospitality of Rohrer IV.”

* * * *

A short time later Virgil Kane and Kethry Sutherland were enjoying the mild spring-like air as they walked around through the narrow streets of Rohrer’s capital city, observing the sights and the people. The large buildings of the governmental center and its bureaucrats had given way to the low, long buildings and busy customers of commercial shops and businesses, and eventually to small homes with grass and trees in the yards and families playing outdoors. As they walked they noticed a group of teenagers huddled around a strange looking mass sitting in one of the yards.

Kane had assumed it was a rock of some sort until he noticed the young Rohrans were attempting to clean the object, which had a series of strange looking markings visible on one part of it.

“What do you make of that, Counselor?” he asked Sutherland as they watched the teenagers scrub the object, occasionally sending splashes of water and soap toward one another, causing giggles and screams to erupt from time to time.

“I don’t know, Virgil,” Sutherland said.

Curiosity getting the better of him, Kane pulled out the tricorder from his holster and scanned the object.

"It's metal," he said, observing the readings. "Tritanium, to be exact. That's odd."

"What is?" Sutherland asked, now looking over Kane's shoulder at the small readout.

"Tritanium is neither native to, nor manufactured on Rohrer IV. That chunk of metal shouldn't be here."

Before Sutherland could ask another question, both officer's combadges chirped.

"Koester to Kane and Sutherland. We have a problem. Meet back at the Hall of Treaties right away. And hurry."

Concern grew in both Kane and Sutherland's expressions as the First Officer tapped his combadge.

"Aye, Skipper. Kethry and I are on our way."

* * * *

"Get back up to the ship," Koester told Q with some urgency. "See what you can do up there. In the meantime, I'm going to get some answers from First Minister Zentgraf, whether he's willing to provide them or not!"

Q nodded, then tapped her combadge.

"Q to *Dauntless*. One to beam up."

A moment later, the chief medical officer dematerialized. Koester nodded to himself, then moved to confront the Rohran First Minister.

"You know what's going on!" the Commodore accused. "What is happening to my crew?"

"What is it, Skipper?" Virgil Kane asked as he and Counselor Sutherland walked in, the counselor carrying a small object wrapped in a piece of cloth.

"I was just informed by Mister Bloom that two members of our crew suddenly became ill and died within the last hour," Koester informed his first officer. "I just sent Q back up to try and determine what's happening, but I have a strong suspicion that First Minister Zentgraf and his Parliament know what it is and haven't been sharing."

"Actually, Skipper, we may have part of the answer here," Kane said, turning toward the ship's counselor, who offered the Koester the cloth wrapped item she carried.

"We came across a pretty large chunk of this, at least fifty kilograms, out in the town," Kane explained. "The kids who were trying to clean it off told us they found it while out camping in the woods. It took us a while to get them to admit they had been camping in one of the 'Dead Zones.' We managed to phaser cut off this small sample before returning here. Take a look at it."

Koester unwrapped the small, heavy object, revealing a chunk of metal with a small marking on one side.

"Is this something written in standard?" Koester asked with alarm. Kane nodded.

"And it's tritanium, Skipper. A metal not found on Rohrer IV."

Koester glared toward First Minister Zentgraf and his staff, who appeared as if they wanted to flee the room. "Is this what I think it is?" Koester asked looking back at his first officer.

"We would need to perform a more thorough analysis back on the ship, but preliminary scans indicate it's most probably a piece of a Federation starship's hull. And the kids who brought it back say there's a lot more of it where they found that."

* * * *

The five top ministers of the Rohran Parliament sat in chairs along one side of the negotiation table, looking much like children being scolded by their parents. Most of the *Dauntless* away team stood either near the large doors that lead out to the ornate reception hallway or near the huge windows overlooking the Rohran capital. Commodore Peter J. Koester, commanding officer of the starship *Dauntless*, however, paced back and forth along the other side of the table, glaring at the ministers and ticking facts off on his fingers.

"Fact: You first tried to keep the *Dauntless* from entering orbit when we arrived yesterday! Fact: Once you allowed us to enter orbit, you didn't want to allow our away team to beam down! Fact: The *Hunley* disappeared without a trace, until now, over two weeks ago! And fact: Now members of my crew are dying. I believe you destroyed the *Hunley* and were trying to keep that fact hidden from us. Now I think you're doing the same to the *Dauntless* and I want to know why?"

For the first time since Commanders Kane and Sutherland had returned with a piece of metal from the lost starship, First Minister Zentgraf's expression changed from one of fear to indignation. He stood, causing Koester to cease pacing and stand opposite the minister.

"Commodore Koester, I realize that we have not exactly built up your trust in us, but what I am about to tell you is the truth," Zentgraf said. "It is true that the *Hunley* arrived nineteen days ago and her captain commenced

negotiations with us concerning our application for Protectorate status. What we have not told you, what we have feared to tell you, is that shortly after their arrival, the crew of the *Hunley* started to die unexplainably, like your crew is now. It occurred so quickly their doctors could find no cause, no cure. Within a day, their entire crew had succumbed to this... this plague. Shortly after, the starship began to drop out of orbit. It crashed in a sparsely populated section of this continent only a few tectons from here.”

Koester’s demeanor softened slightly, his gut feeling telling him the Rohran was finally telling the truth at last.

“Why did you hide all this from us? Why was a message about the *Hunley* leaving the system to investigate a distress call received by *Starbase 175*?” the Commodore asked.

“We were afraid,” the First Minister responded. “When the Klingon Empire first annexed our world so many years ago, a small resistance movement tried to fight back, resulting in the destruction of one of the Klingon battlecruisers. Their response was to destroy over a dozen of our cities by orbital bombardment. Even today, the remains of those cities are contaminated with intense radioactivity. They are the reason we built our shielded ‘Dead Zones.’ We feared the Federation might retaliate in kind for the loss of your starship, so we built another shielded zone over the wreckage of the *Hunley*, then broadcast the message which led you to believe the starship had left our system and was lost.”

Koester sat in the chair opposite, his head pounding with the beginnings of a massive headache. He sighed as he looked at Zentgraf, who likewise sat down.

“The Federation doesn’t retaliate in the way you feared, First Minister. Now we need to know what killed the crew of the *Hunley*. ...What is killing my crew.”

“I’m afraid we don’t know, Commodore,” Zentgraf said sadly. “And that too is the truth.”

Koester gripped his head in his hands, the headache seeming worse. He tapped his combadge.

“Koester to sickbay. Q, what’s your status?”

A moment later, the tired sounding voice of the *Dauntless*’ chief medical officer responded, “The autopsies we performed on the first few deaths have revealed indications of a viral infection, Captain. We’ve had another three deaths, and about two dozen are exhibiting symptoms now. The main symptoms seem to include nausea, headache, and fatigue before coma and rapid death sets in. The gestation period appears to be anywhere from ninety minutes to around forty-eight hours, depending on the patient’s general health and stamina.”

Koester felt his blood pressure rise as he listened to Q’s report.

“Poe, I need you and the EMH to find the cause of this virus, and soon, or the *Dauntless* is going to end up a ghost ship like the *Hunley*. The away team’s going to return to the ship soon. I’ll have Kethry help you out too. Koester, out.”

Koester stiffly rose out of the chair and turned to his first officer.

“Virg, let’s get back to the ship.” He then turned back to the First Minister and added, “If there’s anything else you can tell us, please contact us.”

Zentgraf, a sad expression on his face, nodded just as the away team vanished into thin air.

* * * *

Aboard the *Dauntless*, more and more of the crew were becoming sick with the virus, the cause of which had thus far eluded the ship’s medical staff. Sickbay had long since been overrun, so now Q remained in charge of sickbay while the EMH ran a ward in the starship’s main shuttlebay. Meanwhile, a small crew of researchers, led by Kethry Sutherland, sought a breakthrough in singling out the cause and defeating it.

“You look terrible, Skipper,” Virgil Kane said as he moved up beside the command seat the commodore occupied. “Why don’t you get some rest down in your quarters?”

Koester, his eyes puffy and his head pounding, looked at his first officer.

“You don’t look much better than I do, Exec.”

Kane nodded, knowing the futility of trying to argue with Koester, when the intercom beeped.

“Bridge. Kane,” he said into the pickup.

“Mister Kane, this is Counselor Sutherland in Medlab 1. We’ve isolated the cause of this plague.”

Koester, his eyes suddenly wide, looked at Kane.

“Do you have a cure, Counselor?” the commodore asked with hope.

“We don’t know. The cause is a bacteria that as far as we can determine was mutated by the effects of radiation from the Rohran ‘Dead Zones.’ We can only assume the Rohrans are naturally immune to the virus having

lived on the planet throughout the mutation period. We're busy synthesizing a vaccine, but if we try testing it on a member of the crew, healthy or otherwise, and we're wrong, we could kill them."

Koester struggled to his feet, saying as he did, "I'll be your guinea pig, Counselor. I'm on my way down to Medlab 1 right now."

Kane caught Koester's arm as the commodore passed, concern covering his already pained face.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Skipper? If they're wrong, you could die."

"And what would happen to me if they can't test this vaccine, Exec? I'll die anyway."

Kane could not help but admit to the logic of the situation and released his CO's arm, instead helping the man into the turbolift.

"Mister Fry," Koester said, turning to look out on his bridge one last time. "You have the deck and the conn."

Kevin Fry nodded from where he sat at the helm, then stood as a more junior crewmember replaced him at his post and assumed the command chair. "Aye, sir," he said. "I'll keep the seat warm for you, Commodore."

* * * *

By the time Koester and Kane walked slowly through the doors of Medlab 1, Q had joined Kethry and her staff in the lab and was reviewing test results on a computer monitor. She looked up as Koester approached.

"What's the word, Doctor?" he asked, attempting a slight smile.

"Not good," Q answered. "Half the crew is sick. We've lost over thirty people to this virus. And if this vaccine doesn't work, we're going to lose hundreds more."

Koester nodded as he sat near one of the lab tables. "Then let's not hold this off any longer."

"Are you sure you want to do this, Pooh?" Q asked as Sutherland inserted a vaccine vial into a hypospray and moved next to Koester's right arm. The commodore simply nodded again and shut his eyes. Q looked up at Sutherland - worry in her own eyes - and nodded, biting her lower lip as she did. Sutherland pressed the hypospray against Koester's upper arm and hit the release button. A soft hiss ensued.

Everyone's eyes were on Koester, who slowly opened one eye and looked at those around him. A smile started to form on his lips before he suddenly jerked.

"He's having a seizure!" Q yelled. "Virg, hold him down!"

Kane and Q moved quickly to hold the commodore down on the table to keep him from falling to the deck while Sutherland rushed to grab a counteragent hypospray and inject him. Before she could place the hypo to Koester's skin, the seizure ended as quickly as it had begun. Koester slumped flat on the table.

"Tricorder!" Q demanded, holding out a hand. As soon as one was handed to her, she began scanning Koester.

"Is he dead?" Kane asked.

"No. Unconscious," Q said with some relief. "His immune system has kicked into high gear. Metabolism is one hundred thirty percent of normal. Body temperature five degrees above normal and still rising slightly. But it's beating out the virus. Kethry, I think you found it!"

Kane and a couple of the lab staff moved Koester over to a nearby biobed and laid him down upon it just as his eyes opened again. For the first time in hours they looked clear and vibrant.

"How do you feel, Skipper?" Kane asked.

"My headache's finally gone," Koester commented, still sounding groggy. "Is it working?"

Q, a bright smile covering her face, scanned Koester once again with the hand-held scanner and looked at the readings displayed on the tricorder's small screen.

"It's working, Pooh. It's working fine. From these readings it will take at least a few hours for it to run through your system, but the virus is cured!"

Koester smiled, then said, "Well then what are you all standing around for? Immunize the entire crew! And as soon as we have enough of the vaccine synthesized for an orbital spraying, that's what we're doing."

"Yes, sir!" Sutherland responded with a smile, then turned to the lab staff. "You heard the Captain. Let's get to it!"

* * * *

Captain's Log, Stardate 52187.2:

The Dauntless has just completed the last of ten orbits over Rohrer IV, performing an orbital spraying of our vaccine to immunize the entire planet of these mutant bacteria. Within seventy-two hours the surface of the planet Rohrer IV will be safe for non-Rohran beings to visit once again.

In the meantime, we are awaiting the arrival of the USS Grissom, which will help us examine the wreckage of the starship Hunley on the planet below.

Koester, commanding Dauntless, out.

Commodore Peter J. Koester stood at the edge of the debris field, no longer covered by a shield, and watched as members of the *Dauntless* and *Grissom* crew moved about, scanning the larger pieces of wreckage, cataloguing everything they could. As he stood in silence, Commander Virgil Kane and Commander Q slowly and quietly moved up beside him. The three looked over the scene in silence together for a moment.

"What have you got for me, Exec?" Koester said, finally breaking the respectful silence.

"A team from the *Grissom* found a section of the main computer core with some subsystems still intact. We managed to download and clean up sections of the last few entries to the captain's log."

"Is it like we figured?" Koester asked, finally turning to look at his subordinates.

"Yes," Q answered. "The *Hunley* was a much smaller ship than our new *Dauntless*. Her crew was unaware they were fighting a fast acting virus in very enclosed conditions. They never had a chance. Like the Rohran Parliament Ministers explained to us, the entire *Hunley* crew succumbed to the disease and died within twenty-four hours. It was then just a matter of time before the ship simply fell out of orbit and crashed."

Koester bowed his head in sadness. "What a waste," he commented.

"It could have been much worse," Kane added, looking around. "The *Hunley* came down in the middle of nowhere. Can you imagine if the ship had crashed atop a village or town? Or even the capital city only seven kilometers away?!" Both Koester and Q nodded in agreement before Kane added, "There is some good news, Skipper. The diplomatic team has finally finished negotiations with the Rohran Parliament Ministers. Rohrer IV is now officially a Federation Protectorate. They open the Embassy tomorrow in the temporary location in the Hall of Treaties until a new Embassy building can be constructed. And both the Rohran's and Federation negotiators have already agreed on a name for the new building."

Koester looked at his first officer, his curiosity expressed by a subtle raising of his right eyebrow.

"They are going to name it the *USS Hunley Memorial Federation Embassy*," Kane explained.

Koester nodded, a small smile appearing on his lips as he turned back to look at the debris field.

"That's appropriate," he murmured. "I really think they would have liked that."

The End