

Ship's Counselor Kethry Sutherland casually walked into the 10-Forward lounge, the padd displaying her latest vampire novel of interest tucked under her arm, and made her way to one of the small tables in the quiet corner of the room close to the large windows overlooking the planet they orbited far below.

Ordering a drink from one of the stewards, she settled into the seat and activated the padd, settling down for the next enthralling chapter until she noticed Chief Pono Kyman, the El'Aurian ship's command master chief, or 'Chief of the Boat' as Commodore Koester preferred to call him, sitting at one of the nearby wall-side tables, sweat pouring down his brow.

Concerned, the counselor deactivated her padd and placed it on the table next to her newly arrived drink and approached Kyman.

"Good evening, Chief. You're up pretty late tonight," Sutherland observed. "Is everything going well with the away team mission?"

Kyman seemed nervous as he looked up at Sutherland, then motioned for the counselor to join him at his table just as the lounge steward brought a large mug of black Terran coffee over to him.

"I'm having some trouble sleeping," Kyman explained as he took a large gulp of the coffee. His hair was out of place and the El'Aurian looked as if he had tumbled out of his bed.

"I'm not surprised, you drinking almost pure caffeine like that. Maybe you should go down to sickbay and have them prescribe something for you?"

Kyman glanced down at the mug as if he did not realize he was even holding it, then started shaking his head.

"No, Counselor, you don't understand. I want to stay awake right now."

Sutherland was now confused.

"Why, Chief?" she asked.

"The dreams," Kyman said in way of explanation. "I'm still having the dreams."

Sutherland abruptly realized this was more than a simple case of insomnia. She settled into the chair across from Kyman and asked, "Can you tell me about these dreams, Chief?"

Kyman's expression became distant as he spoke.

"I've been having them off and on for almost the last eight months now. I'll usually have them four or five nights in a row, then it will go away for a couple of weeks. Sometimes for almost a full month. And then they'll be back, as vivid as real life." Kyman took another large gulp of coffee, then continued. "I know dreams have some meaning behind them, but all these are doing is scaring me half to death."

"Can you remember them?" the counselor asked.

"Are you kidding? I wish I could forget them!"

Sutherland noticed Kyman's hand shaking slightly as he lifted the mug once more, but she could not tell if it was from the recent infusion of caffeine, the chief's sudden excitement, or fear.

"It's always the same, Counselor," Kyman started to explain. "I'm trapped aboard the *Dauntless*, and everyone is after me."

"After you? Why would the entire crew be after you?"

"Because I'm always the last one. The only one. Everyone else I know, everyone else I care about, has been assimilated."

The word took Sutherland by surprise.

"You don't mean as in..."

"Yes," Kyman nodded, and drank from his mug again. "The entire crew become Borg."

* * * *

Ensign Alasdair Myrddin Wallace scanned the foliage once more with his tricorder, cataloguing the flora for later study aboard the ship. He breathed deeply in the fresh, oxygen laden atmosphere.

"Ahh, it sure beats shipboard air, doesn't it, Laddie," the ensign asked of his companion in a strong Scotsman's brogue.

"Any chance to get off the ship, I'll jump at," answered Ensign O'Shea, one of the *Dauntless'* newly assigned security guards.

"Oh, please," frowned Wallace as he folded his tricorder. "Ye' barely been aboard ship six months, and you're already complaining about deep space duty?" The science officer tapped his combadge. "Away team t' *Dauntless*."

"*Dauntless*. Go ahead," replied the voice of Lt(JG) Noorde from the bridge.

“Commander Kane says we’re just about wrapped up with the survey here, Lieutenant. We should be needin’ a beam up shortly.”

“Very well. The transporter room is standing by. *Dauntless* out.”

“Wait!” Wallace almost yelled. “Bloody daft...” The science officer tapped his combadge again, saying, “Away team t’ *Dauntless*. We still need t’ compile the mineral deposits survey we recorded for evidence o’ dilithium. It will take a little time before we can complete the necessary tests.”

Wallace waited for a response from Noorde, as Commander Virgil Kane, the *Dauntless*’ first officer, and Lt Commander K’danz, their chief of security, pushed their way out of the thick jungle growth to join Wallace and O’Shea. Noorde did not respond.

“Away team t’ *Dauntless*, did y’ copy my last?”

Still nothing.

Kane now tapped his combadge, saying, “Kane to *Dauntless*, please respond.” When no one did, he exchanged worried glances with K’danz. “This is Commander Kane. Anyone on this circuit, please respond.”

“This is Lieutenant T’Cah, Commander,” replied a cool, Vulcan voice. “I am with Lieutenant Lin. Neither of us have been able to contact the *Dauntless* either. We will join with you at your coordinates presently.”

Kane acknowledged, then looked at the other three crew members around him.

“I don’t know why or how, but we’re cut off from the ship,” he stated.

Space, the Final Frontier...

These are the voyages of the starship *Dauntless*!

Star Trek: Dauntless

“Open Season” By PJK

Captains log, stardate 52658.0:

After our recent skirmish in which the Dauntless managed to defeat two Cardassian Galor-class warships and a Jem’Hadar attack ship single-handedly, I have decided to give the crew some rest on the recently charted world of Nella III, which early surveys indicated may have sizable dilithium deposits.

Our initial away team is down on the surface now, surveying the area for dilithium and a spot for some well deserved R&R.

Koester, out.

The six members of the away team huddled together, proposing ideas for regaining contact with the starship orbiting high above. A soft bleep from her tricorder drew Lt T’Cah’s attention.

“Commander,” she said as she picked up the instrument and commenced scanning the jungle around the away team. “I am registering non-native life forms slowly approaching our coordinates.”

“Could it be another away team from the ship searching for us?” Kane asked, hopeful.

“Negative,” T’Cah answered, dashing his hopes. “There are six of them. Definitely not human. Life-form indications are like nothing I have ever encountered before.”

Just as T’Cah finished her report, the thick brush to Kane’s left moved aside and six alien creatures entered the clearing. They all stood about two meters tall, with strongly muscled bodies. Their pale yellow, almost leathery reptilian skin glistened with drops of water from the jungle trees. They wore only short thin pants, and carried a long tube-like piece of equipment on their backs. Each stared at the away team with small, predatory eyes.

Kane took a step closer to the apparent leader of the group, who had entered the clearing first.

“Greetings,” he said. “I’m Commander Virgil Dylan Kane of the Federation starship *Dauntless*. We mean you no harm.”

One of the aliens apparently spoke to the leader. A low, grunting noise. Not even the universal translators built into the Starfleet communicators could decipher the guttural language. The initial remark started what appeared

to be a discussion among the aliens, with dramatic arm movements and occasional hand gestures toward the *Dauntless* away team. But no matter who tried, or how often, the aliens ignored the away team's attempts to communicate.

"Commander," called T'Cah when Kane finally gave up on speaking to the new arrivals. "Notice the machine carried on the back of the last alien to enter the clearing?" Kane looked at the shortest of the alien beings and noticed how the box-shaped device on its back was different from the long, thin devices the other five carried.

"Yes, I notice it's very different from the others. What do you suppose it is?" Kane asked.

"This is merely supposition, Commander," T'Cah answered, "but I believe that is the device that is jamming our communications with the *Dauntless*."

Kane's eyebrows shot up briefly, and he took another step toward the lead alien, who was still immersed in his discussion with his own group.

"Excuse me," Kane said. Then louder, "Excuse me! I believe your machine there may be blocking our communications signals with our ship."

The six aliens all stared at Kane, no one moving or speaking for the next ten seconds, until the alien leader slowly removed the long device from his shoulder and lowered it toward the away team.

"I don't have a good feelin' about this, Commander," Ensign Wallace commented.

Kane slowly started backing away from the alien.

"Neither do I, Mister Wallace," he said, just as a bright flash erupted from the end of the alien device, sending a lightning-like blast of energy toward the away team, where it struck the ground sending dirt and rocks hurling through the air.

"Run!" Kane commanded, and the away team dove into the jungle, followed after a short pause by the six aliens. The aliens yelled out a horrifying scream that sounded like a cross between a laugh and a war cry.

"This does it," K'danz huffed out to Kane, pulling the phaser from her holster and shooting back at the aliens as she ran. "I don't go on any more away team missions with you, Commander."

"Why not?" Kane asked, trying not to trip over the multitude of branches and roots in his path.

"Because lately, I always seem to get chased by some creature intent on killing me when I'm with you!"

Kane laughed despite the horror of the situation, until another lightning blast sounded off to his right, followed closely by a scream of pain.

"Arghhhh! I've been hit!" Lt Lin shouted out as he fell, his hands gripping the calf of his right leg. T'Cah and Wallace turned around to help the badly burned security guard, but were driven back by more shots from the alien's strange weapon.

"Go!" Lin yelled out, gesturing madly at T'Cah and Wallace. "Leave me!"

"We can't do...," Wallace started to shout back when suddenly one of the aliens dropped down from the branches of the tree in front of them. Instinctively, Wallace lashed out with his fist and punching it directly between its beady eyes, taking the creature by surprise before it could level its weapon and knocking it flat on its back.

"Ensign, come!" T'Cah ordered, and the two resumed running while behind them, Lin's pained screams continued for a moment more, then stopped suddenly.

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Fleet Captain Peter J. Koester stepped out of the turbolift onto the bridge, glancing around at the various stations. He took a step up to the center seat, which was currently occupied by his chief helmsman, Lt Commander Kevin Fry.

"Status, Mister Fry."

"We're maintaining standard orbit, Commodore," Fry answered. "I hope you don't mind, but I authorized Crewman Lancaster to take the helm for this shift."

Koester shook his head as he glanced toward the conn position, currently manned by Crewman John Lancaster, a trainee who had spent the past few months qualifying for the position of helmsman.

"Would you like to resume the deck and the conn, sir?" Fry asked.

"No, that's quite all right, Commander," Koester said with a gesture of his hands. "I just came up to find out how the away team is doing?" The Commodore glanced over to the mission ops station near the back of the bridge, and frowned slightly when he noticed it was not man by someone other than who he expected.

"Petty Officer Mudd," Fry said authoritatively, looking toward mission ops. "What is the status of the away team?"

"And where is Chief Kyman?" added Koester. "Isn't he normally on duty this shift?"

Petty Officer Harry Mudd IV, great-grandson of one of the Federation's most well known con men and cheats, turned his chair to face the two officers, answering both, "Counselor Sutherland authorized Chief Kyman SIQ for this shift. I'm covering for him here. And the away team has not communicated with the ship in just over two hours."

"That's unusual," Koester commented. Fry nodded. "It's against regulations for an away team to be out of contact with the ship for more than an hour, and it's not like Virg at all. Mister Winters, contact the away team and determine why they haven't reported in recently."

"Aye, Commodore," Lt Commander Phillip Winters responded, then attempted to hail the away team. After a moment with no success, the operations officer turned to face Koester. "I'm not getting any response from them, sir."

"I don't like this," Koester said. "Mister Bloom, scan the planet's surface for humanoid life signs."

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"There's still no communications with the ship," Kane explained to the five remaining members of the away team as they huddled together beneath a large overhanging boulder. The away team had successfully managed to elude the aliens in the time since they had lost Lt Lin. Tricorder readings of the area not only helped the team avoid the aliens, but also revealed their apparent motives.

"It looks like they're hunting!" Ensign O'Shea pointed out. "Look here. It's just like my family and I used to do on Cerberus Colony. These are the sitters." He pointed to two stationary indications on the tricorder screen, then toward the four moving indicators which traveled toward the two stationary ones. "And these are the drivers. Their job is to force the prey - in this case us - toward these two, where we're captured."

"Or worse," commented Wallace.

Kane gave the junior science officer an unpleasant look, then said, "Look, all we have to do is use the tricorder to avoid these... these hunters."

"The only trouble, Commander," T'Cah pointed out, "is I've been keeping track of their so-called drives over the last couple of hours, and indications are they're getting closer."

Kane was about to comment on T'Cah's observation when all of a sudden the tricorder made a strange bleeping noise, followed by the small screen turning to static for a moment before the unit emitted a puff of smoke and lost power.

"What's happened?" Wallace asked, concerned.

"I'm not sure," T'Cah said. "It appears the unit has been neutralized."

"Neutralized?!" K'danz said with alarm, then ripped her phaser out of its holster once more. She pressed the control buttons on the top of the weapon, but no indicators lit to signify a power change. Finally she just aimed the phaser at a tree some meters away and depressed the trigger. Not unexpectedly, nothing happened.

"Dammit!" K'danz cursed. "They've neutralized the phasers too."

Before anyone else could comment on their new situation, T'Cah raised a hand to silence everyone. She seemed to be concentrating on her hearing, and a moment later, Kane could also hear what the Vulcan woman had detected. Slow footsteps.

It took a moment before anyone could determine from which direction the sounds were coming from. By the time T'Cah was relatively sure of her bearings, a pair of barefooted, pale yellow clawed feet could be seen walking around the edge of the boulder the team hid under.

Kane immediately recognized the Hunter as the smallest of his team, the one carrying the jamming device that he now assumed was also responsible for disabling their phasers and tricorder. The human-turned-Bajoran was struck by an idea. Since the Hunter was still facing away from the boulder, apparently searching for the away team by sight across the more open area, it had not yet seen them. Kane gestured for the others to remain still while he crawled closer to the creature, intent on somehow destroying the jamming device.

Kane got to within half a meter of the creature's feet when he unexpectedly snapped a fallen twig beneath his knee. The Hunter, startled, turned to find Kane charging him. Kane knocked into the creature with all the force he could muster, knocking it down on its back and the device it carried, but not before the Hunter shouted out in its strange guttural language. Not far away from the sounds of it, another of the Hunters called back, its grunts sounding more concerned when it did not receive a reply from the creature that now lay, its back broken, at Kane's feet.

"Come on, everyone, let's get out of here!" K'danz said as the team abandoned its hiding place, Kane rejoining them on the run. Through the forest behind them, the pounding of feet could be heard entering the

clearing. One of the Hunters let out a scream of outrage and horror when it saw their comrade's lifeless body while the other quickly took aim and shot with its lightning weapon. Before the away team could clear the edge of the woods, Ensign O'Shea fell in a bloody gurgle, the lightning flash of the weapon passing right through his back and chest.

* * * *

Hiding in the thick forest, the away team had managed to avoid capture - or worse - for another fifteen minutes when they stumbled upon a cave entrance hidden by vines.

"Do we go in or not?" Kane asked. "It could be a secure hiding place until the *Dauntless* sends rescue, but if this is the only entrance, it could be a perfect death trap as well. And without a tricorder, we can't tell."

"There's only one way to tell for sure," K'danz said, and she started into the cave, followed by T'Cah. Kane started to enter, but stopped when Ensign Wallace put his hand on the first officer's shoulder.

"Commander," said Wallace in a whisper. "How do we know these creatures haven't already destroyed the *Dauntless*? We've been out of contact for hours! You would think if they were still in orbit the Commodore would have sent out rescue teams by now? Ma'be these aliens arrived in some sort of warship and took 'em by surprise like they did us down here."

Kane's face turned grim as he replied, "We can only hope not, Ensign. We can only hope not."

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The four surviving members of the away team moved slowly into the cave, feeling their way along rocky walls. The temperature dropped rapidly, almost as if the cavern were being cooled by artificial sources. As his eyes adjusted to the dark, Kane could make out the shapes of the rocks along their path.

"Hold it!" K'danz said, holding up a hand. "Is it just me, or does there seem to be some light in here?"

"I believe there is an artificial light source coming from up ahead, Commander," T'Cah observed.

"I don't like this," Wallace commented. "Be careful."

The away team - what remained of it - moved slowly and carefully through the cave, the light they had detected becoming increasingly brighter. Eventually they entered a large chamber. The sight there stole all their breath away.

Mounted on brackets in the wall were the heads or skulls of various creatures, some recognizable, most not. A Klingon skull - identifiable by its cranial ridges - mounted by spikes through the eyesockets, figured prominently in the center of the display.

"Oh my God!" muttered K'danz as she looked toward the side of the chamber entrance, drawing the other's attention toward where she gazed in horror. There, in a pose worthy of Genghis Khan, stood Lt Lin, phaser drawn, teeth bared in aggression. T'Cah was the first to approach the security officer.

"He appeared to be mounted for display," T'Cah said, examining the body. "I can see where they crudely sewed up the skin back behind the neck."

"Poor lad," commented Ensign Wallace, who shook his head sadly.

"Hey, look at this!" K'danz said urgently.

The others moved over to where the security chief held up a sheet that covered a large, alter-like protrusion of rock. On the alter lay the body of the alien Hunter that Commander Kane had killed. Its body was nude, covered with oil and herbs, and it was surrounded by torch-like objects, prepared as if to be ceremonially buried.

"This must be where those Hunters are camped," Kane commented. "We have to get out of here. Now!"

The away team turned to exit the chamber, hoping to escape before the Hunters returned. However, as they exited the lit chamber, an unmistakable sound could be heard moving in from the cave entrance. The voices of the Hunters and their bare clawed feet moving through the passage toward them.

"Damn," K'danz muttered.

Kane ordered the away team back into the lit chamber in the hopes of perhaps finding a hidden exit to the outside. There was no such luck. Moments later, the five remaining Hunters entered the chamber, one of them carrying a freshly skinned human skull, undoubtedly that of Ensign O'Shea, and stopped dead in their tracks, surprised to find their remaining prey cowering within their own encampment.

The shock quickly wore off, and what Kane imagined could only be a smile formed on the Hunter Leader's hideous lips, exposing the many rows of teeth within. It grunted to the others, who spread out, completely blocking

all hope of escape for the away team. Then as Kane and the others raised their hands in surrender, hoping for mercy, the Leader slowly lowered its weapon from its shoulder and aimed it squarely at the *Dauntless*' first officer.

Kane closed his eyes as weapons fire filled the chamber, and to his surprise, he did not feel anything. In fact, he quickly realized, he was still standing and opened his eyes to find the Leader collapsed on the floor, the other alien Hunters promptly following as more weapons fire filled the chamber. The away team looked at each other in confusion until a soldier wearing battle armor entered the chamber, quickly covering all points and signaling to others behind him.

"I found 'em! They're here!"

Relief washed over Kane as he recognized the soldier carrying the compression phaser rifle and chewing on the butt of an old cigar. Sergeant 'Olly' O'Laughlin. A moment later a platoon of half a dozen Starfleet Marines stormed into the cavern, covering the bodies of the fallen aliens with their rifles as 1st Lt McIntyre, the *Dauntless* Special Contingent Commander walked in and assessed the situation.

"Good work, men," McIntyre said. "Well done!"

As one of the Marines began scanning the alien bodies with a tricorder, McIntyre walked over to Kane, who gripped the Marine lieutenant's hand in a firm shake.

"Not to sound ungrateful," Kane said, "but what took you so long?"

"Commodore Koester sends his apologies, Commander, but it took us some time to cut through the interference of some sort of dampening field and find where you were, and more time to rig our compression phasers to operate within that field these aliens had created."

"They're dead, Lieutenant," one of the Marine corporal announced to McIntyre. "They're all dead."

McIntyre looked at Kane as the platoon medic started examining the other away team survivors, and said, "What do you want done with them, sir?"

"My first reaction is to just leave them here to rot," Kane answered, glancing at the gruesome display along the cave wall, then sighed. "Make sure Lt Lin and Ensign O'Shea's remains are returned to the ship and placed in stasis. And have the alien bodies sent up to Medlab 2. Maybe Q can determine where they came from."

Kane, the effects of his ordeal starting to manifest themselves, turned to his away team and quietly said, "Let's all get back to the ship."

* * * *

"That sounds like quite an ordeal, Exec," Koester said as he handed Kane another mug of raktagino and joined Q on the ready room couch, his arm around the petite chief medical officer's shoulders.

"I have to admit, Skipper, it was more terrifying than that incident on Hammond's World a couple months ago. At least there we were being stalked by wild animals acting on instinct. These were sentient, humanoid beings who apparently take pleasure in hunting other sentient beings purely for sport."

"Any idea where they came from?" Koester asked the diminutive medical officer sitting next to him. Q was about to present her autopsy findings when she was interrupted by the klaxon of the red alert. Immediately all three officers jumped up from their seats, Kane perhaps a bit more slowly than he normally would, and rushed out onto the bridge.

"Report," Koester requested as he took his command chair from Lt Commander Fry.

"An alien vessel just maneuvered out from behind Nella III's lone moon," Fry explained as he took Lancaster's place at the helm. "Sensors indicate they have weapons lock on us. Our shields are raised, phasers are energized but not armed."

"Very well," said Koester. "Mister Winters, hail the alien vessel."

Winters opened the hailing frequency, then frowned. He turned his seat toward Koester.

"Communications are being jammed," he reported.

Koester nodded, having expected as much, then turned to Ga'gh who had just replaced O'B at tactical.

"Arm phasers. Lock and load torpedo bays."

"Phasers locked on target. All torpedo bays report armed and ready," the Wilryk man confirmed.

All eyes were glued to the viewscreen as the alien vessel, clearly a warship with all sorts of weapons ports and sensor grids covering its surface, moved closer. It was not long before the ship opened fire.

"Sonic disruptors, Skipper," Ga'gh reported. "Our shields are holding."

"Return fire."

Ga'gh pressed his console, and an orange beam of phased energy lanced out from the underside of the *Dauntless*' saucer, striking the alien vessel and leaving a scorched mark in its wake.

“They appear to have ablative armor, but no shields, Skipper,” Kane commented as he watched sections of the alien vessel’s skin peel away, leaving undamaged layers beneath.

“Lock torpedoes on target. Fire at will,” Koester ordered.

Ga’gh acknowledged the order, but before he could carry it out, another weapon on the alien ship shot out at the *Dauntless*. The crew was knocked about as the starship rolled violently to starboard.

“The shields took the brunt of that, Skipper, but they’re down to eighty five percent,” Ga’gh reported. “Minor structural damage to the forward secondary hull and the yacht locking clamps.”

“I’m NOT about to lose my YACHT,” Koester said with a growl. “Lock quantum torpedoes on target. Fire a standard volley.”

With a nod, Ga’gh launched the quantum torpedoes. Six fireballs of zero point energy, in two groups of three, spat from the launch tubes just forward of the captain’s yacht docking port. They streaked across the vacuum, striking the alien warship, gouging great sections of armor and hull plating out of it.

“Sensors indicating damage to their fusion drive and a bleed-off of power to their weapons systems, Commodore,” chief science officer Bloom reported from his console next to Ga’gh.

“The alien vessel is turning away,” Winters reported as another blast of energy struck the *Dauntless*’ shields, but not as violently as earlier.

“Shields down to eighty two percent. No damage,” reported Ga’gh.

“Commodore, I’m reading an energy buildup in equipment I cannot identify aboard the alien ship,” Bloom stated with concern. “Based on the power curve, it could be a doomsday bomb of some sort.”

“Aw, hell,” Koester grumbled. “Mister Fry, I need warp speed.”

Before Fry could respond, a tear in the fabric of space opened up in front of both the *Dauntless* and the alien ship. The bridge crew looked on, awestruck, as the warship fired its remaining fusion engines, pushing it through the rip, where it blurred and disappeared, the rip sealing itself behind.

“What did we just witness, Jeff?” the commodore asked as he took a few steps closer to the viewscreen, still amazed by what he had seen.

“The nearest I can associate it with would be a transwarp corridor, similar to what the Borg use,” the Vulcan man explained. “But without a pre-existing corridor. What we saw was created just now by that alien vessel. And from the power curve I just witnessed when it opened, that corridor could have gone anywhere. Not even limited to our own galaxy.”

Koester just stared at the viewscreen, his expression blank.

“What are you thinking, Skipper?” Virgil Kane asked as he moved up next to his commanding officer.

Koester looked at his first officer and said, “That they’ll be back. Probably not tomorrow, but someday.”

The commodore walked around the conn and stood closer to the big main viewer, as if being closer would allow him to see where the alien ship had gone, and continued, “I suppose that planet down there is like a posted hunting ground for them.”

“I guess this explains most, if not all, of the ships missing from this sector in recent months,” Phillip Winters proposed as he read a display on his ops console. “Supply vessel *Altair*. Tanker *Rising Sun*. A small pleasure yacht called the *Achilles*. Klingon bird of prey called the *Buruk*. And the scout *USS John Young*.”

Koester nodded sadly, agreeing with his operations chief, then looked at his first officer.

“Mister Kane, draft a report to Starfleet. Include all log entries concerning this incident. And make a recommendation to quarantine the entire system.”

“Aye, Skipper,” Kane replied.

The End