

*Author's Note: This story takes place shortly before and during the events of the story "A Change in Perception."*

"Commander Gomez, I would like you to perform a level two diagnostic on the impulse systems and have the report on my desk in three days."

"Yes, ma'am," Commander Sonia Gomez, chief engineer of the starship *USS Sarek*, responded to Captain Jo Ann Parker, the starship's newly assigned commanding officer. The captain, sitting in the traditional seat at the head of the conference lounge table, then looked to her right, where a large Capellan warrior wearing a sash of blue feathers across his uniform chest sat.

"Is there anything else on this morning's briefing agenda, Commander?" she asked.

"Just one more thing, Captain," A-ZuRQuIL, the starship's first officer and chief of security replied. "Though I don't know if you're going to like this or not."

"I'll take my chances," Parker remarked with a wry grin. "Hit me, Commander."

"The *Sarek* has been assigned to be the Academy training vessel for this year's class of cadets," A-ZuRQuIL stated, prompting a subtle groan from both Gomez and chief science officer JoAnn Tredworth. "The cadets will arrive by transport and rendezvous with us no later than stardate 66045.5."

"How interesting," Parker remarked. "I had heard the Academy was using active-duty front line starships as their training vessels for the last decade or so, but I wouldn't have expected them to send the cadets all the way out here to the Fifth Fleet AOR."

"It might have something to do with Fleet Captain Koester's daughter being a cadet in this year's class," A-ZuRQuIL remarked knowingly. "Though it makes you wonder why they're sending these kids to us and not the *Dauntless*."

"Probably to avoid even the appearance of a conflict of interest," ship's counselor John Llewellyn suggested.

"I think it's exciting," assistant chief of security Kyler Saya commented. The young-looking Bajoran/El-Aurian woman glanced toward Tredworth and continued, "Being able to shape young minds. Influence the future of Starfleet in such a hands-on manner!"

"Yeah. Thrilling," Tredworth agreed sarcastically.

"Considering my last tour before receiving command of the *Sarek* was as an instructor at Starfleet Academy, I have to say I find this assignment appealing," Captain Parker said. "How long will the cadets be aboard?" she asked her first officer.

"They're scheduled for six months," the Capellan replied. "But when you factor in the travel time to reach the Fleet AOR and the return trip back to Earth, they'll be aboard the *Sarek* for just under five months."

"Like Commander Kyler, I look forward to being able to influence the careers of our future officers in a positive way," Parker remarked. "Commander A-ZuRQuIL, inform the crew that the visiting cadets are to be given every courtesy in helping them learn everything they need to know about how a starship operates and what life in the frontier is like. And I want you to put together a training program of classroom instruction and under-instruction watches. Coordinate with the Academy instructors that will likely accompany the cadet class."

"Aye, Captain," A-ZuRQuIL replied, noting the order on his padd. "That's the final item on the agenda for this morning."

"Very well. Remember, I want department crew efficiency reports by 1600 hours today," Parker reminded her command staff. "And everyone coordinate with the Executive Officer on planning a day of combat and casualty drills for sometime in the near future, preferably before the cadets arrive. Any questions?" There were none. "Very well. Dismissed."

As the senior staff gathered their belongings and headed out the doors at either end of the briefing lounge, Parker approached Tredworth, who was standing near one of the rear-facing windows and gazing at the stars beyond.

"I noticed you seemed to have a problem with the idea of hosting the cadet cruise, Commander."

“Oh, I’m sure it will be fine, Captain,” the Betazoid science officer responded, turning to look at her new commanding officer. “It’s just... well... I’m not really comfortable around kids. Never have been, not even when I was a cadet back at the Academy. And this brings back bad memories of my own Academy training cruise. What a nightmare that was!”

“I’m sure you will have nothing but good things to say once this assignment is complete,” Parker commented with a smile.

“I hope you’re right, Captain,” Tredworth replied. “I hope you’re right.”

Space, the Final Frontier...

These are the voyages of the starship *Sarek*!

## Star Trek: Sarek

### “Ambush” By PJK

Several days later, the three transports carrying the class of cadets from *Starbase 719* arrived and the cadets transferred aboard the *Sarek*. Most were excited to be aboard the famous starship. Some were disappointed to find themselves aboard the Galaxy-class starship instead of the Fleet Flagship *USS Dauntless*. It took the better part of the next twenty-four hours for all the cadets to receive their berthing assignments, their division assignment, and meet with the officers they would be working with for almost the next six months before finally getting a brief respite for the first time since departing Earth a few weeks earlier as the ship headed toward its first assignment in the 1757 Aurigae system.

“On course 030 mark 2,” announced Lt Commander Christopher Huff, sitting at the conn station on the bridge. “Our course will take us through the system designated 50108-C-1. Estimated ETA to system boundary: three days, five hours, thirty minutes, present course and speed.”

“Very well, Helm,” Parker acknowledged before turning her attention to her first officer in the seat to her right. “Have the cadets been integrated into each division successfully, Commander?”

A-ZuRQuIL turned slightly to look beneath the tactical horseshoe, where he was able to see four cadets manning the aft consoles and a fifth observing Lt Commander Kyler standing watch at tactical.

“Yes, Captain,” the Capellan replied. “It took some doing, but we managed to find homes for all the abandoned puppies.”

“Commander!” Parker admonished. “Remember, you were an air-breathing, food-eating, non-useful, Academy cadet yourself at one time. Try and give the present class a chance.”

“Yes, Captain,” A-ZuRQuIL replied, hanging his head in exaggerated shame like a scolded grade-schooler.

As the two senior officers conversed, an indicator lit up on the tactical console.

“Captain!” Lt Commander Kyler Saya announced. “Receiving an incoming transmission on a non-Starfleet frequency! Audio only.”

“On speakers.”

It took several seconds for the universal translator to decipher the alien syntax, but eventually a voice could be heard coming through the bridge speakers. “... need help! Under attack! We’re defenseless against the R...!”

“What happened?” Parker asked as the voice cut off.

“I’m not sure, ma’am,” Kyler replied. “They stopped transmitting. The carrier wave continued for several seconds after the voice disappeared, but now that’s gone as well.”

“Origin of the transmission?”

Kyler employed her scanners for several seconds before reporting, "Long-range sensors are detecting a vessel at bearing 047 mark 355, approximate range: one-eighth of a light year. Vessel appears to be adrift."

"Commander Kyler, respond on the same frequency: This is the Federation starship *Sarek*. We have received your distress call and are en route to render aid. They may still be able to receive even if they cannot transmit. Helm, alter course. Come right to 047 mark 355. Increase speed to warp nine," Parker ordered.

"Coming right to new course 047 mark 355. Increasing speed to warp factor nine," Huff replied. "ETA to target vessel: thirty-six minutes."

"Let's hope we get there in time," Parker remarked to A-ZuRQuIL.

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A little more than half an hour later, the *Sarek* dropped out of warp. The distress call had originated in deep space just past the fringe of a small uninhabited planetary system, where several large asteroids drifted aimlessly in their centuries-long orbit of the small distant sun.

"Alien vessel coming into visual range," T'Reth, the Andorian operations officer reported.

"Sound yellow alert," Captain Parker ordered. "We don't know what we're up against here."

On the viewscreen, a small ship about the size of a class 2 cargo ship could be seen, slowly growing larger as the Federation starship approached. The ship was completely dark, barely visible in the dim light of the closest star.

"Sensor readings?" A-ZuRQuIL asked.

"No power readings," T'Reth replied. "Vessel appears to be in complete shutdown. No power core readings. Not even residual batteries. No life form readings."

"That doesn't sound right," Parker remarked. "It's only been forty minutes since we received their distress call. Unless something catastrophic happened, like they got hit by a mine or an asteroid, there should have been enough residual life support for a few survivors!"

"Hull appears to be intact," T'Reth stated. "No outward signs of any damage."

"Perhaps they suffered a radiation leak?" A-ZuRQuIL suggested. "That could explain why the core is shut down."

"I suppose that's one possibility," Parker agreed. "Mister T'Reth, conduct a full scan of the vessel. I want full lay-out and interior conditions. If the ship is as intact and abandoned as it appears, we'll send an away team over to investigate."

"Aye, ma'am," the Andorian acknowledged.

"You want me to lead the away team?" A-ZuRQuIL asked.

"Yes," Parker replied, her face taking on an expression of deep contemplation. "And now that I think about it, have half of the away team consist of several cadets. They can start learning what being a Starfleet officer entails."

A momentary look of frustration crossed the Capellan man's face before he could catch himself. He then smiled a broad, mock smile as he said, "Of course, Captain." A-ZuRQuIL then looked in the direction of the upper aft deck and said, "Commander Kyler, Commander Tredworth, you're both with me. And pick a cadet assigned to your respective divisions to accompany us on this mission."

Both women acknowledged their orders. Several minutes later, A-ZuRQuIL, Lt Commander Tredworth and her science division cadet Gem Koester, Lt Commander Kyler and her security division cadet Rahsaan Romain, Commander Gomez and her engineering division cadet Sostack, and chief medical officer Dr. Timothy Malin were gathered in the transporter room, everyone donning a full environmental suit since sensor readings had indicated there was no life support aboard the alien ship and no one was sure what - if any - atmosphere remained.

"Why do we have to have cadets tagging along with us and A-ZuRQuIL does not?" Gomez groused to Tredworth.

"Because he's the XO and none of the cadets are learning how to become executive officers... yet," Tredworth said back under her breath so that Cadet Koester would not overhear.

Once everyone was fitted out, A-ZuRQuIL stepped up on the transport platform and said, "We're going to have to beam over in two groups. Commander Kyler, Cadet Romain, Commander Gomez, Cadet Sostack, and I will beam over first. We'll signal as soon as we are sure it's clear. Then Commander Tredworth, Cadet Koester, and Doctor Malin can beam over in the second group."

The officers and cadets assigned to the first group all mounted the transport platform, A-ZuRQuIL and Kyler holding hand phasers at the ready while Romain held a small type-I phaser locked on stun setting. Once everyone was situated, the transporter chief signaled he was ready.

"Energize," the first officer ordered. Seconds later the five people dematerialized. As the transporter cycle completed, the remaining three stepped up on the platform and awaited their turn. As they waited for their signal, the doors to the corridor parted and another cadet, a Betazoid girl with pure black eyes wearing the blue uniform of a sciences cadet, stepped in and looked at the people waiting on the transporter.

"Is something wrong, Cadet Brooks?" Tredworth asked. The Betazoid girl simply shook her head and kept watching the three people on the platform. Tredworth looked over at Koester, who looked back at the commander and shrugged.

"A-ZuRQuIL to *Sarek*. The alien ship is secure in the vicinity of the beam-in coordinates. Send over the second group."

"On their way, Commander," the transporter chief acknowledged. He then looked at Tredworth.

"Energize, Chief," she ordered. A moment later, the two officers and lone cadet dematerialized, the sparkle of the beam reflecting in Brooks' eyes.

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The away team stuck together as a group as they explored the seemingly abandoned vessel. The corridors were dark, not even emergency lighting providing any illumination beyond the beacons each away team member carried.

"Nothing," A-ZuRQuIL remarked, glancing at the tricorder he carried in his other hand. "No power emanations. No life signs. We know there was at least one person aboard this vessel less than an hour ago! What could have happened?"

"Perhaps we should have the *Sarek* maintain a detailed sensor scan of this vicinity of space?" suggested Cadet Koester.

"Why is that, Cadet?" Kyler asked as she shone her light into an open doorway, pointing her phaser into the space beyond before ascertaining it was empty.

"This vaguely reminds me of something the *Dauntless* encountered several years ago," Koester explained. "Ships that had been literally stripped of all organic matter by a space-borne life form the crew called 'space sharks.'"

A-ZuRQuIL looked back at Tredworth, her face barely visible through the environmental suit hood, a questioning look on his own face. Tredworth made several adjustments to her tricorder sensors before saying, "I'm familiar with the report on those life-forms you describe, Cadet. I don't think they're responsible for whatever happened here. Thee life-forms the *Dauntless* encountered consumed literally every organic molecule from the vessels they attacked. I'm detecting bacteria and other organic molecules here that did not originate from the *Sarek*."

"What are the atmospheric readings in here?" A-ZuRQuIL asked.

Reading an oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere, oxygen level slightly lower than our norm, with inert trace gasses. Breathable with one exception," Tredworth reported.

"And that is...?"

"The ship has been rapidly losing interior heat since the power core was shut down. Current temperature is fifty seven degrees below zero Celsius. If we were to remove our environmental suits now, our lungs would freeze on our first breath."

“Okay. Important safety tip. Don’t remove your environmental suit. Thanks, JoAnn,” A-ZuRQuIL remarked. “Now, any idea where the bridge of this vessel is located?”

“Based on tracing the circuitry and control systems,” said Gomez as she scanned her own tricorder over the bulkheads and equipment in the passageway, “it appears the bridge - or whatever equivalent they have on this ship, is located at the forward end of the ship at the far end of this corridor. If we can access the bridge, we might be able to get the power core back up and running, which will make surveying the rest of the ship that much simpler.”

“Sounds like a plan,” A-ZuRQuIL said. “Commander Kyler, would you take the lead?”

The away team quickly reached the closed door at the end of the corridor. A quick scan determined the door was not locked, simply shut, and A-ZuRQuIL and Sostack, one of the two male cadets, managed to pull it open with some effort. It took a few minutes of studying the systems and comparing it with the readings provided by the tricorders before Gomez felt confident enough to manipulate the controls. Thirty seconds later the ship was filled with a subtle rhythmic rumble. Another half minute or so and the consoles on the bridge started to automatically reboot themselves. Within moments, the away team had lights and heat restored.

“That’s better,” Gomez said with a self-satisfied smile. “It should take a few minutes for the temperature to come up, but it should be livable in here soon enough.”

“Good work, Commander,” A-ZuRQuIL said before activating the communicator attached to the front of his environmental suit. “Away team to *Sarek*.”

“Go ahead, Commander,” replied the voice of Captain Parker.

“We’ve located the bridge of the vessel and managed to restart the power core,” the Capellan reported.

“So we noticed. Good work. What’s the status over there?”

“We have not encountered any signs of whoever was aboard this vessel. No life signs. No bodies. We’re about to commence a more detailed search of the ship. We’ll keep you informed of anything we find.”

“Very well,” Parker responded.

“Away team, out.”

A-ZuRQuIL deactivated his communicator, then gave out his instructions.

“According to the sensor readings, this ship has three main levels with four open bays that extend through all three levels. Commander Tredworth, take Cadet Koester and Commander Kyler and head down to the lower level and start looking around down there. Report on anything you find. Doctor Malin and Cadet Romain are with me, we’ll make a quick sweep of the upper level before joining the first team down below. Commander Gomez, you and Cadet Sostack stay here on the bridge. See if you can access any kind of ship’s log or records. Maybe they’ll tell us why this ship was out here or give us a clue as to what happened?”

Each team acknowledged their orders and went about their assigned duties. A-ZuRQuIL and his small group found the upper level to consist mainly of a single long corridor running the length of the vessel and connecting the ladder from just outside the bridge at the forward end to a small engine room similar in size and configuration to the one the Capellan had seen aboard the cargo carrier *Erstwhile*, with only two small cabins - likely designated for the ship’s captain and first mate - on opposite sides of the corridor amidships, both unoccupied and empty of any personal belongings. A-ZuRQuIL had an uncomfortable feeling as he thought back to what Cadet Koester had been saying about the ‘space sharks.’

By the time A-ZuRQuIL, Malin, and Romain reached the lower level, it was obvious the vessel’s heat had returned, and the away team members removed their environmental suit hoods. They encountered Tredworth and her team in the first large bay on the port side of the ship.

“Find anything, Commander?” the first officer asked.

“Only that it’s pretty evident this ship used to be a short-haul cargo ship that has been modified for an extended interstellar voyage,” Tredworth replied.

“What do you mean, ‘used to be’?”

Tredworth gestured around. The cargo hold they were standing in had been converted over to a mess hall and recreation facility. Two long tables lined one side close to a hastily constructed galley, while there were several old but comfortable looking chairs with printed reading material, two video monitors, and what might have been several games or toys stored on shelves against the bulkhead.

“Whoever they were, it looks like they left in a hurry,” remarked the chief medical officer as he noticed plates of food, some of it half-eaten, sitting on the table and one of the chairs tipped over on its back as if knocked over in haste.

“What do you think happened?” A-ZuRQuIL asked.

“I’m not sure, but we made a quick sweep of the other three cargo bays. The two on the starboard side have been converted into living quarters. Looked like enough room for twenty - maybe twenty five people. The last cargo bay is carrying actual cargo. Grains, freeze-dried food packages, building materials...”

“This is a settler’s transport!” A-ZuRQuIL said, realization dawning on him.

“That’s my guess,” Tredworth agreed. “And from the look of things, she was meant for a one-way haul. Probably planned to live out of the ship at whatever destination they were headed for until they could get the shelters built and crops planted.”

The Capellan looked around at the abandoned food and gear and said, “But what happened to them?”

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Back aboard the *Sarek*, Cadet Brooks was walking down one of the corridors, her head cocked slightly to one side as if she were listening to someone who was only talking in a whisper.

“I know,” she remarked. “It must have been terrible.”

She passed some of her Academy classmates in the corridor who looked at her with mild curiosity as she passed, particularly the fact that while she was wearing her proscribed Academy cadet uniform, she was not wearing anything on her feet, her bare soles treading silently across the carpeted deck. The other cadets shrugged and continued on their way. Brooks had always been considered quirky and a little peculiar by her classmates, though she maintained high grades in spite of usually appearing like she was barely paying any attention in most of her classes.

She paused at one of the corridor intersections, where a straight passage ran perpendicular to the curved corridors of the starship’s saucer-shaped main hull.

“You know I really shouldn’t,” she remarked to herself. “Yes, I know they’re hopelessly confused. I doubt I would be of any help. Oh, fine.”

With an almost distracted air, Brooks turned left down the spoke corridor, soon arriving in front of a large pair of doors. Without a second thought, she entered the doors into one of the less-frequently used transporter rooms, otherwise currently unoccupied, the equipment placed in stand-by.

With speed unusual for someone who had not been trained on the equipment, with years of experience operating it, Brooks activated the console and entered a series of coordinates into the targeting scanner. She then activated the timer and casually moved around the console and up onto the transport pad. Almost as an afterthought, she said with a giggle, “Energize.” Seconds later the transporter activated and Brooks dematerialized.

On the bridge, the operations officer took note of the transporter activity.

“Captain, Transporter Room 6 just beamed someone over to the derelict vessel,” T’Reth reported.

“Who authorized that?” Parker asked, sounding annoyed.

“No one I’m aware of,” the Andorian replied.

Parker touched the communications control on the arm of her chair before saying, “*Sarek* to away team.”

“A-ZuRQuIL here,” came the reply a moment later.

“Commander, we just had an unauthorized use of the transporter to beam someone over to that ship. Not sure who it is or why they beamed over, so be prepared for anything,” Parker informed.

“Understood, Captain. We’ll keep an eye out. Away team, out.”

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Brooks, still bare-footed, materialized in the same mid-level corridor where the away team had first arrived. She started moving forward, running her hand along the corridor bulkhead distractedly as she spoke to herself again.

“Now that simply cannot be true!” she admonished, as if carrying on a normal conversation with someone who was not there. “Oh, my!”

Brooks reached the ladder near the door to the bridge and gingerly, in her bare feet, made her way down to the lower level just as the bridge door opened and Gomez and Cadet Sostack emerged, looking puzzled as they watched the unauthorized visitor disappear down the lower level corridor before quickly following. Brooks reached the door of the first converted cargo bay on the right and stepped through the open door. Having not expected the unauthorized visitor to come right to them, the away team members were unaware of her presence at first.

“Um... Commander A-ZuRQuIL?” Gomez said as she and Sostack paused at the open door.

The rest of the away team all turned and finally noticed Brooks standing there in her bare feet. Then they noticed she seemed to be staring at something in the air above them. Looking up, A-ZuRQuIL and the others were shocked to realize there were numerous bodies - apparently humanoid - hanging upside down by their ankles directly over their heads nearly ten meters up, every one of them completely skinned.

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“There were twenty four of them, Captain,” A-ZuRQuIL reported through his communicator as other members of the away team, including the newcomer Cadet Brooks, helped lower the corpses gently down to the deck and wrapped them in blankets collected from the living quarters. “Pretty much corresponds to the number of bunks we found in the converted cargo holds. Looks like sixteen adults and eight children. From what Doctor Malin can tell, most of them were stabbed to death with sharp implements before they were skinned, though evidence indicates several of them were still alive when it happened. Whoever... or whatever... did this was very efficient. There wasn’t even any blood spilled.”

“Any idea what did this, Commander?” Parker asked.

“None whatsoever,” the Capellan replied. “It must have happened so quickly, there’s not even any mention of anything unusual that Commander Gomez has been able to find thus far in the ship’s log.”

Parker paused in thought for a moment, wondering who she should inform about the incident, particularly in light of the fact her crew could not even figure out where the transport had come from.

“What is your recommendation, Commander?” she finally asked.

“All of us over here agree, we want to give these people a decent burial at least,” A-ZuRQuIL replied. “Then maybe place the transport under tow and take her to the closest outpost and let them figure out where it came from or who it belongs to.”

“I agree,” Parker said almost immediately. “Do you need any further help over there making preparations?”

“No, I think we have it all handled...”

“Captain,” interrupted Ensign Novak, the officer who had replaced Kyler at tactical. “Sensors are detecting a vessel on a direct intercept course with us. Current speed, warp three.”

“Identification?” Parker asked.

“Unknown configuration, never before encountered.”

Aboard the transport ship, the away team was still wrapping the bodies in blankets in preparation for a brief burial in space ceremony when Brooks suddenly looked up, like she was reacting to someone calling her name. She stared at the outer bulkhead for several seconds, her head cocked to the side a little, before saying, in a sing-song manner, “They’re coming baaaaaack.”

A-ZuRQuIL, having heard the report on the *Sarek*’s bridge through his communicator, looked at Gomez.

“Sonia, see if you can determine who they are! Whoever carried out this massacre might be back to finish the job!” he ordered.

Gomez nodded at the first officer, then looked at her engineering cadet. “Sostack, with me!” The pair quickly left the cargo bay/mess hall and rushed to the ladder out in the corridor and up to the bridge. Once back in

the transport's cramped control center, she tied her tricorder into what she and Cadet Sostack had determined was the transport's limited sensors and started scanning for the approaching ship.

"Gomez to Commander A-ZuRQuIL," she said after tapping her combadge. "Readings on the approaching vessel indicate it has the same power core signature as this transport vessel. Not sure what its purpose is, but the approaching ship was definitely built with the same technology as this ship."

"Maybe someone has come looking for her?" A-ZuRQuIL suggested, passing on Gomez's report to the *Sarek*.

"Confirmed, Captain," Novak stated. "I am now detecting the same power readings coming from the approaching ship as the transport. Approaching ship is much larger, however, comparable in size and volume to a Federation Intrepid-class starship. Crew of ninety-six. Now detecting multiple weapons ports, and... Captain! Approaching ship is arming weapons!"

"Raise shields!" Parker ordered before adding, "Hail the approaching vessel."

"Hailing frequency open, Captain," T'Reth confirmed.

"Unidentified vessel, this is the Federation starship *USS Sarek*. Please respond," Parker said aloud.

The next several seconds passed tensely before T'Reth reported, "We're receiving a response."

"On speakers."

"Federation starship *USS Sarek*, this is the Kolban Patrol Cruiser *Tise Zephyr*. We are responding to a distress call transmitted by the settler's vessel *Alacrity*, which recently departed our home system. We demand to know why you have attacked and taken captive our transport ship!"

"Patrol Cruiser *Tise Zephyr*, this is Captain Jo Ann Parker, in command of the *Sarek*. We have not attacked or captured your..."

"You lie!" the voice from the alien patrol ship accused through the speakers. "Our sensors already indicate there are nine alien life forms aboard our transport ship and no Kolbite life form readings. It is obvious you have killed the ship's passengers and crew in order to claim the ship and its valuable cargo for your own. But we will not allow this. Stand clear of our ship so that we may take it and its prize crew into our custody."

For the first time since the alien ship had been detected, Parker feared for the lives of her crew members and cadets aboard the transport if she was unable to clear up the current misunderstanding. Taking a deep breath, she said, "Patrol Vessel *Tise Zephyr*, we responded to the same distress call as you. We were merely in the process of preparing to tow the ship to our closest allied outpost where we hoped to determine its system of origin so that it could be returned."

Aboard the *Alacrity*, A-ZuRQuIL and the rest of the away team were listening to the exchange over subspace, wondering what would become of them if Captain Parker was unable to defuse the situation. Meanwhile, Brooks had started to pace back and forth, muttering to herself in what sounded like gibberish directly under the spot where the Kolbites settlers had been hung.

"Yes, I know! ...But they're not listening! ...Because they don't comprehend! What do you expect me to do?"

"Brooks! Brooks, what's wrong?" Cadet Koester asked, moving close to her fellow cadet but unwilling to reach out to her in fear the Betazoid would lash out in some manner.

"We must...! They're coming...! If we don't...!"

"What are you trying to say?" Koester asked.

Aboard the *Sarek*, Parker continued her negotiations.

"Patrol Vessel *Tise Zephyr*, we're more than willing to turn your derelict ship back over to you. All I ask is for the opportunity to retrieve my away team."

"You will not, repeat - NOT - dock with the *Alacrity* again," the voice demanded. "Withdraw from the vicinity. If we find you as innocent as you proclaim, your crew members will be returned to you in time."

"That is not acceptable," Parker replied, quickly adding, "Close frequency." Once T'Reth had complied, she ordered, "Helm, move us between the patrol ship and the transport in such a manner that we can keep one set of shields facing the patrol ship while we drop another set to beam the away team back aboard." As the helmsman acknowledged and began to comply, Parker said, "Commander A-ZuRQuIL, stand by for immediate beam-out."

“If we can get Cadet Brooks to stand still for a few seconds, we’re all ready to go,” the first officer replied.

“Why? What’s wrong with Cadet Brooks?” Parker asked.

“She’s highly agitated, Captain. Keeps saying something about ‘They’re coming.’ We’re not sure what she’s talking about, but whatever it is, it’s got her very upset.” *A-ZuRQuIL* then asked, “Captain, how do we know these Kolbites are who they say they are? Brooks is Betazoid. Maybe the cadet is actually picking up on something? How do we know they aren’t the ones that killed all these people and they’re here now to steal the ship?”

“We don’t,” Parker admitted. “We just have to take them at their word for the time being. Stand by.”

“Captain, we’re in position,” Lt Cdr Huff announced.

“Captain, the alien ship has locked several weapons ports on us. I think they’re trying to convince us to withdraw.”

“All in good time,” Parker said. “Tactical, on my mark, drop aft shields four and five. Re-route shield power to forward shields, in case the patrol ship opens fire.”

“Standing by, Captain,” Novak confirmed.

“Bridge to transporter room. Lock on to the away team. Initiate transport as soon as the aft shields are down.”

“Standing by, bridge,” the transporter chief acknowledged.

“Okay, everyone. Stay sharp. On three... two... one... Mark!”

Right as Ensign Novak dropped the aft shields, the transporter activated. Aboard the *Alacrity*, the away team felt the annular confinement beams take hold. A moment later reality melted away, to be replaced by the transporter room aboard the *Sarek*.

“Bridge, I’ve got all of them!” the intercom announced.

“Restore shields!” Parker ordered. “Helm, back us away from the transport.”

Slowly, the Galaxy-class starship moved away from the derelict ship. As the *Sarek* moved away, the patrol ship maneuvered closer, extending a docking tube from the ventral surface of the ship and attaching to a hatch on the dorsal side of the transport.

Unseen by anyone, several cables and wires from the *Alacrity* connected themselves to the short docking tube and hull of the patrol ship as soon as it latched onto the transport.

On the *Sarek*’s bridge, the upper turbolift door opened and *A-ZuRQuIL*, Kyler, and Tredworth emerged, Kyler resuming her post at tactical while the other two officers walked down the port ramp to the lower level of the bridge.

“I have Doctor Malin and Counselor Llewellyn giving the cadets who were over there a full exam. What we all saw over there was a real horror show,” the first officer reported as soon as he was standing in front of Captain Parker. He then thumbed toward the view of the two Kolbite ships on the main viewer and asked, “What’s going on over there?”

“The patrol ship docked with the transport just after we beamed you all back,” Parker said. “I can only assume they’re sending their crew aboard the transport as we...”

“Captain, we’re being hailed again,” T’Reth reported. “Visually this time.”

“On screen.”

The viewscreen changed to the image of a humanoid man, green-skinned, who could almost have been confused for an Orion if not for the light - almost pastel - shade of his pigmentation. His expression of anger, however, was unmistakable.

“I do not know how you managed to retrieve your prize crew, but what you have done aboard the *Alacrity* will not go unpunished!” the Kolbite commander announced. He then turned toward someone off screen and barked an order in his native language.

“Incoming!” Kyler shouted as a projectile similar to a photon torpedo launched from one of the Kolbite patrol ship’s weapons ports.

“All hands, brace for impact!” Parker called out, half-rushing, half-falling into her command chair and gripping the arms tightly.

The projectile was on a noticeably angled track. It passed over the primary hull of the *Sarek*, missing by only a few dozen meters.

"They missed!" A-ZuRQuIL exclaimed, finding it hard to believe their luck.

"More likely that was a deliberate shot across our bow," Kyler reported. "The Kolbite ship has been maintaining a solid weapons lock on us since they dropped out of warp."

"They're trying to force us to withdraw," Parker said, looking at her first officer. As she spoke, the forward turbolift opened, and Dr. Tim Malin, Ship's Counselor John Llewellyn, and Cadets Koester and Brooks stepped out.

"The cadets are doing fine," Malin reported to Parker. "Physically, at least. Counselor Llewellyn will be meeting with them periodically to determine if there is any residual trauma from what they witnessed aboard that ship. I also thought you might want to talk to Brooks and find out how and why she beamed aboard that ship."

"Another time, Doctor. We have bigger problems to deal with at the moment," Parker said. "We have an alien ship trying to force us to leave the area, and at this point, as long as we have our entire crew back aboard, I think I'm willing to consent to their demand. Helm, move us away from the two Kolbite vessels, back slow."

"Back slow, aye," Huff acknowledged as both the medical officer and ship's counselor disappeared into the forward turbolift.

The bridge crew watched the two attached ship slowly recede. Then suddenly, Brooks startled everyone when she shouted, "They're here!"

"What?" Parker asked, confused. "Who's here?"

At that precise moment, a warning indicator went off on Kyler's tactical console.

"Captain, another ship has just emerged from the behind the sensor shadow of one of the drifting asteroids, bearing 110 mark 355 off the starboard quarter! It's coming in fast and hot! Range 500,000 kilometers and closing fast!"

"On screen!"

Kyler touched a control, and the main viewer switched to the image of a large drifting asteroid almost half a billion kilometers away and the small, dart-shaped craft that had just emerged from behind it. From the image, it looked like the new vessel was coming straight at the *Sarek*.

"Kyler, arm weapons and stand by to fire," the captain ordered. "Helm, bring us around, course 110 mark 355."

"Captain, the new vessel is not heading directly at us," T'Reth reported. "The unidentified ship's course is aimed directly at the two Kolbite vessels."

"Kolbite patrol vessel is reacting," Kyler informed the captain. "They are undocking from the transport vess..."

Unexpectedly, a bright explosion at the edge of the main viewer caused the screen to dim in compensation. As the image cleared, the crew could see the transport ship was gone - nothing more than large pieces of debris that had once been components of the engines and hull drifting in every direction - and that the Patrol Cruiser *Tise Zephyr* was tumbling haphazardly, the ship badly damaged and leaking atmosphere in several places.

"What just happened?" Parker demanded to know. "I didn't see the new ship open fire in any manner."

"It appears the transport vessel was rigged with a booby trap," T'Reth said, consulting the sensor readings that preceded the explosion. "A trap that was activated by the two ships docking and initiated when the patrol ship separated from the transport."

"Captain, the Kolbite ship is transmitting a distress call," Kyler informed. "The signal is weak. It's unlikely it's going to be heard back on the Kolbite homeworld."

"On speakers," Parker ordered, curiosity getting the better of her. A second later the sound of the Kolbite commander's voice, barely audible through the static, sounded from the speakers.

"... are disabled... propulsion sys... powerless. Weapons useless. The Reapers laid a trap... ..tempting to restore... Will destroy my own ship before letting...Reapers come aboard! Repeat, my ship has been..."

The voice trailed off. A moment later, Kyler reported, "The transmission has ended, Captain."

“Reapers?” the captain questioned. “What are Reapers?” Then she noticed the look of shock on her first officer’s normally stolid face, unable to take his eyes off the viewscreen where the dart-shaped craft was still quickly approaching as he felt his way back into his seat. “Do you know something about this, Commander?”

“Only what I’ve heard over drinks in some of the bars along the Morain border, Captain,” A-ZuRQuIL replied, seeming to have difficulty forming coherent thoughts. “Some of their deep space surveyors talk about a legendary race they call the Reapers. Most people think they’re nothing more than a myth, really. It’s said they inhabit the depths of space beyond the Typhon Expanse, a race with no homeworld, and more brutal than any known star-fairing species. More than the Klingons, the Breen... More brutal than even the Kairn! According to the stories I heard, they travel through interstellar space at random, attacking and disabling ships they come across and killing the crews. It’s been said that if they capture the crew of a disabled spacecraft alive, the Reapers will rape them to death, consume their flesh, and sew their skin into their clothing, and not always in that order! That whenever they attack, they leave no survivors!”

“But you say these stories are myths?” Parker remarked.

“That’s what I believed,” A-ZuRQuIL said. “But some of the Morain I have met have told me they avoid certain areas of space that Reapers are rumored to inhabit.”

“What do we do, Captain?” Kyler asked. “If the Reapers were responsible for what we saw aboard the transport, we can’t simply leave the other Kolbite ship disabled and unable to defend themselves, even if they were rude and accusatory.”

“I agree,” Parker said. “Helm, reverse course. Move us between the *Tise Zephyr* and the Reaper ship.”

As the *Sarek* maneuvered back around to port, trying to block the path of the fast-approaching ship, the Reapers altered their course slightly as well.

“The Reaper vessel has changed course. I think we got their attention with our last maneuver,” Kyler reported.

“Captain, some kind of energy device is powering up on the approaching ship’s bow,” T’Reth said.

“Is it a weapon of some sort?” Parker asked.

“The power signature does not appear to be of a type normally associated with wea...”

The nose of the Reaper craft, which had started to glow white with energy, suddenly discharged a pulse of energy aimed at the *Sarek*. The pulse enveloped the starboard shields of the starship, and the crew noticed energy discharges playing across the surfaces of their consoles.

“We’ve been hit by some form of electro-magnetic pulse,” T’Reth said in annoyance. “Shields have collapsed and the entire starboard side of the ship has lost power. Attempting to re-initialize the power taps.”

“I’ve lost helm control, Captain,” Lt Cdr Huff reported. “We’re losing steerage way.”

“Bridge to engineering! We need power restored now!” Parker yelled into the intercom.

“Whatever hit us disrupted the magnetic field in the warp core. We had a momentary partial shut-down,” Gomez reported. “Attempting a warm-start. I should have main power back on-line in another minute - perhaps two.”

“It could have been worse,” T’Reth commented. “We were only struck a glancing blow since the Reaper ship was still maneuvering when they fired at us. If they had hit us full-on, it would probably have de-polarized all our isolinear circuitry and we’d be as dead in space as the Kolbite ship.”

“Where is the Reaper vessel now?” Parker demanded to know. “Is it still coming after us? Or after the...?”

Parker’s question was answered as the Reaper vessel appeared on the main viewer, which flashed with static periodically. The small ship passed the *Sarek*, slowing just beyond the Federation starship. As the crew watched, a hatch on the hull opened and what looked like a large harpoon gun, complete with attached cable, appeared, aimed directly at the disabled Kolbite vessel. A moment later the harpoon fired. Within seconds it pierced the hull of the larger patrol ship, sinking deep into the metal. Then the Reaper ship literally started reeling in the larger craft.

“If they manage to dock onto the *Tise Zephyr*, that crew doesn’t stand a chance!” Kyler commented, despair evident in her voice.

“Do we have phaser power?” Parker asked, her eyes never leaving the viewscreen.

“Negative, Captain,” Kyler replied. “Weapons systems dropped off-line when the EMP disrupted the power grid.”

“I need something, Commander!” Parker urged.

Kyler looked at the two cadets standing on the bridge, an idea occurring to her.

“Request permission to re-route emergency power, Captain.”

“Whatever it takes, Commander,” Parker responded.

“Cadet Koester, Cadet Brooks, I need your assistance,” Kyler said. As the two cadets rushed over, she directed Koester to the aft engineering console and Brooks to an access panel beneath the horseshoe.

“Now do exactly as I say, or we’re going to blow the entire tactical console,” the Bajoran/El-Aurian woman made clear as she moved down to the ops console and started tapping commands in over T’Reth’s shoulder. “Cadet Koester, re-route life support power to the emergency batteries.” Kyler then directed her next remark to the bridge crew in general. “The air is probably going to get a little stale in here.”

Koester tapped a series of commands into the console. On the monitor screen, power allocation was re-directed from the life support systems to the *Sarek*’s emergency back-up batteries. The subtle sound of the ventilation ceased in the background. Kyler resumed entering commands into the ops console as she said, “Brooks, remove the chip in slot B-9, transpose the two chips in slots A-16 and C-21, and press the reset key.”

It took about five seconds for Brooks to comply, after which she announced, “Reset has been keyed.”

“Commander, your tactical display has just turned all red,” Koester said, looking over from the engineering station.

“That’s what we want to see,” Kyler replied as she poised a finger over a blinking indicator on the ops console. “Brooks, on my mark, put the chip back into slot B-9. This has to be timed exactly!”

“What happens if it’s not?” A-ZuRQuIL asked.

“Then we blow the entire phaser array, the batteries, and probably most of the outer hull,” Kyler remarked matter-of-factly. “Everyone cross your fingers. On three... two... one... Mark!”

Brooks slipped the isolar chip back into its slot at precisely the moment Kyler pressed the indicator at ops. The lights on the bridge dimmed slightly and Kyler rushed back up the port ramp to her console, which was still completely red. “Yes!” she cheered. “Good job, Cadets! Captain, I have phaser power!”

“Engineering to bridge,” suddenly came the voice of chief engineer Gomez. “Something just happened to the power grid. I’m unable to continue with the warm-start procedure!”

“Stand by, Engineer,” Parker said. Then to Kyler she added, “Commander, target the cable the Reapers are using to reel in that *Tise Zephyr*. Fire when ready.”

“Targeting cable,” Kyler confirmed. “Firing phasers.”

The phaser strip on the ventral side of the saucer hull glowed a dull orange before a beam formed and shot out toward the Reaper ship and its cable. In an instant the cable was parted and the Kolbite ship adrift, though still moving slowly in the direction of both the Reaper vessel and the *Sarek*. The Reapers no longer seemed concerned by the Kolbite ship, however, as it quickly spun to face the *Sarek*, their full attention now centered on the Federation starship.

“Captain, the Reaper ship has activated its propulsion. I believe they may be intending to ram us,” Kyler warned.

“Confirmed,” Tredworth added, studying sensor displays on the science console above the starboard ramp. “The bow of the Reaper vessel is made of a specially hardened material shaped specifically to pierce a spacecraft’s hull and allow them to board.”

“Shields are still down, Captain,” T’Reth warned.

“Kyler, can you lock phasers on them and destroy that ship?”

“Their speed and angle of attack are making it difficult to lock phasers,” the Bajoran/El-Aurian woman said. “I can try but I can’t guarantee success.”

Kyler again fired phasers, but the beams just barely missed the narrow head-on aspect of the approaching vessel. She fired twice more, both shots missing the fast maneuvering ship.

“Batteries are depleted, Captain,” Kyler reported. “I have no more phaser power!”

“Six seconds until impact,” T’Reth announced. The Reaper vessel maneuvered directly for the windows of the 9/10-Forward lounge at the edge of the saucer hull. “Five... four... three...”

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a missile struck the Reaper ship broadside. The impact and explosion knocked the vessel up and sideways, just barely clearing the upper surface of the *Sarek*’s hull. A moment later, a second missile hit the ship, splitting it in two. Both sections tumbled away into the depths of space, the section containing the engines exploding brilliantly only a few hundred meters away from the *Sarek*.

“Those missiles came from the *Tise Zephyr*!” Kyler exclaimed, a broad grin appearing on her face.

“I guess the Kolbites weren’t as defenseless as believed,” Parker remarked. “I wonder if they believe we had nothing to do with the killing of the settlers now?” She then slumped slightly in her command chair, allowing herself to relax slightly for the first time in a few hours before saying, “Helm, using maneuvering thrusters, move us alongside the *Tise Zephyr*. Bridge to sickbay.”

“Sickbay. Doctor Malin.”

“Doctor, prepare to send medical teams aboard the Kolbite ship. They probably require medical aide. Bridge, out. Bridge to engineering.”

“Gomez.”

“Commander, we’re out of danger for the moment. You have permission to bring the mains back on-line at your convenience.”

“Aye, Captain. We’re going to have to perform a cold-start procedure now. It may take a couple of hours.”

“Take your time, Commander. Just inform me when primary systems are back on-line. Bridge, out.” Parker then looked at her first officer and said, “You have the conn, Commander. I’ll be in my ready room. I need a good strong cup of coffee right now.”

“Aye, Captain,” *A-ZuRQuIL* replied as he moved over into the center seat.

\* \* \* \*

*Captain’s log, stardate 66058.3:*

*Once the Sarek’s systems had been restored and the Kolbite patrol ship Tise Zephyr rigged to be towed back to Kolba II, the commander of the ship, Commander Fendi Anan, formally apologized for his accusations against us, explaining that on Kolba II the Reapers were thought to be only a story parents told their children to scare them into being well behaved – until today. He also expressed the desire that the Kolbites and the Federation work together again in the near future to foster greater understanding between our cultures. It is a desire I share as well.*

*I have to admit, this incident was not exactly how I hoped to introduce our visiting Academy cadets to life in Starfleet.*

*Parker, out.*

Captain Jo Ann Parker entered the lounge on deck 17. It was one of the larger crew recreation facilities, aside from 9/10-Forward, located close to the living quarters of the crew, and as such had been more or less taken over by the visiting cadets. Some were playing games, including at least one kadis-kot match and an attempt at kal-toh, while others were studying or reading procedure manuals specific to the division they had been assigned aboard ship.

One of the cadets noticed Parker enter out of the corner of his eye and suddenly jumped to his feet, yelling, “Attention on deck!” Every cadet in the room dropped what they were doing and likewise stood at attention.

“As you were,” Parker called out. “I only came to apologize to all of you. I didn’t think your training cruise would be quite so exciting. At least not so soon.”

Cadet Gem Koester and several of her friends stepped closer to Parker. They all looked at each other, having just been discussing the day's events in detail when Parker stepped into the lounge, then back at the commanding officer. "Captain, after three years of classrooms, simulators, and boring, tedious class instructors," Koester said, speaking for the entire group, "our training cruise is already everything we hoped it would be!"

**The End**