

Captain K'Lith Baber, the half-Klingon commanding officer of the Odyssey-class starship *USS Sun Tzu* – recently assigned a mission of exploration in the newly opened sectors of the Federation Fifth Fleet AOR – sat in his ready room reviewing reports on crew readiness and ship's operational status – the *Sun Tzu* having only been launched the previous year and commissioned just prior to being assigned to the Fifth Fleet, when his first officer, Commander James 'Bishop' Mariner, entered.

"We just received new orders, Captain," the human first officer said as he handed a padd to the captain. "We're to divert to sector 50106."

"What's going on, Bishop?" Captain Baber inquired, glancing at the padd he was handed.

"Starfleet has received a coded communiqué from the cultural observation post on Liber II. The observation team there reports one of the Liberian countries will be capable of launching a manned space mission within the next week or so, and Admiral Raijah wants both us and the *Lexington* to observe the expected launch from orbit to determine the true purpose of the mission."

"I would think the purpose would be obvious," Baber stated. "Every emerging civilization sooner or later takes their first infant steps into space. Why would this situation be any different? And why assign two starships to such a routine mission?"

"Apparently because the country preparing the launch, Panjan, is one of the least trusted nations on that particular planet, akin to how North Korea was viewed during Earth's late-20th and early-21st centuries," Mariner explained. "The observation team manning the post are not entirely certain the launch is for peaceful purposes and think it may be cover for a weapons test of some sort. Perhaps even a surprise attack. Admiral Raijah wanted two ships present in anticipation of any potential problems, especially considering our observation post is located within the borders and relatively close to the capital city of the country considered Panjan's primary opposition."

"So this is not merely a simple observation, but potentially a rescue mission," Baber remarked with a scowl. "Very well. Set course for the Liber system, maximum warp, and inform all department heads of our mission and what we may expect. Then make contact with Captain Salamone aboard the *Lexington*. I want to coordinate operations with him."

"Aye, Captain," Commander Mariner replied before turning and exiting the ready room. Meanwhile, Baber glanced back at the padd displaying the new orders.

"I just hope this mission is not a waste of our time," he remarked to himself.

Space, the Final Frontier...

Star Trek: Lexington
Star Trek: Sun Tzu

"Operating in the Blind" By PJK

Several days later, the *Sun Tzu* and the Nebula-class *USS Lexington*, another recent addition to the Federation Fifth Fleet, were both in orbit over the blue-green planet Liber II, where a Federation pre-warp cultural observation post – commonly called a Duck Blind – had been constructed and remained hidden under holographic camouflage in the Liberian country of East Danrea, built nearly two years earlier by the crews of the fleet flagship *USS Dauntless* and completed by the *Vedrex*, a Romulan vessel working with the Fifth Fleet during the turbulent period of Romulan reconstruction following the Hobus Tragedy.

Captain K'Lith Baber and Commander James Mariner had beamed over to the *Lexington* and were waiting in the starship's ready room with *Lexington's* commanding officer, Captain Raymond Salamone, when the ready room doors opened and two human men and a male Romulan military officer stepped in.

“Captain, this is Doctor Louis Fossey, head of the Liber II Observation Team and Sub-Lieutenant D’Sira, the representative of the observation team’s Romulan members,” Commander Graham Waring, the *Lexington*’s first officer, said in way of introduction.

Captain Salamone stood up and offered his hand to Fossey, saying, “Welcome aboard the *Lexington*, Doctor.” He then introduced the doctor to the other officers present, but it was quite obvious to all present that he purposely snubbed the Romulan officer, offering neither a greeting nor handshake as Baber and Mariner had.

“What’s the situation on the surface of Liber II?” Salamone asked once everyone was seated. “And what are the capabilities of your outpost, Doctor? We need to know what to expect and what resources we have available in case this mission goes south.”

“Our Duck Blind is of a standard design,” Dr. Fossey explained. “Perhaps our most unusual feature is the staff. Liber II is manned by a combined crew of civilian scientists and Starfleet personnel and several Romulan military officers for a total of thirty five, including myself and Sub-Lieutenant D’Sira.”

“If you don’t mind me asking,” interrupted Captain Baber. “Why is this observation team, all the way out here beyond the Typhon Expanse, a combined Federation and Romulan crew?”

“We made an agreement to share operation of the Blind with the Romulan provisional government when the outpost was established two years ago due to the fact the facility was completed by and initially manned by the crew of the warbird *Vedrex* when they were assigned to operate with the Fifth Fleet,” Dr. Fossey explained, prompting D’Sira to nod. “As for our capabilities, the Blind is powered by a low-output, low-emission fusion reactor with a back-up pergium reactor for emergency life support. We can operate completely independent of the Liberian atmosphere for weeks, perhaps months if needed. We maintain a holographic camouflage to blend in with the landscape in the countryside approximately thirty kilometers west of the outskirts of East Danrea’s capital, Joti City. The holographic cloak also acts as a sensor jammer, making it difficult – if not impossible – to take sensor readings of the Blind. In effect, the only way to find our outpost is to know where it is. The facility includes an underground hanger, where we maintain a Danube-class runabout equipped with a cloaking device, courtesy of our scientific partners...” The doctor nodded at his Romulan companion. “...that we can use for transport and observation and – if necessary – evacuation as far as the system’s furthest orbit. The Blind is also equipped with defensive phaser banks, on the off-chance we are ever discovered and the Liberians react hostilely to our presence, but only as a last resort until we can evacuate the facility and destroy all evidence of Federation or Romulan technology.”

“What do you mean by ‘defensive phaser banks’?” Mariner asked.

“It means the phasers are only capable of stunning,” D’Sira explained, looking at the *Sun Tzu*’s first officer. “Nothing more.”

“What else should we be aware of?” Captain Salamone asked.

“Shortly after completing the Blind, the crew of the *Vedrex* managed to place remotely operated surveillance sensor clusters in several of the countries across Liber II,” Sub-Lieutenant D’Sira answered. “They are disguised within ordinary objects – lamp posts, trees, decorations on buildings and small structures – and generally concentrated in the capital cities and major trade centers of the various countries on Liber II. Through those remote sensors we have learned several alarming facts.”

Salamone, who appeared to have been studying his computer monitor while the Romulan spoke, looked up at Fossey and asked, “Doctor, do you have some way of observing other areas of the planet besides the country where your duck blind is located? How do you confirm the intelligence you receive?”

Fossey looked at Captain Baber and the two first officers, unsure at first if he heard the *Lexington*’s commander correctly considering D’Sira had literally just answered Salamone’s question. Commander Waring gave the scientist an embarrassed shrug.

“As Sub-Lieutenant D’Sira just explained, Captain,” Fossey finally replied, “we have remote access to sensors hidden in almost every country on the planet. We also use our runabout to transport holographically-cloaked observation teams to various areas. The one drawback is the cloaking suits cannot operate indoors. All away teams must make outdoor observation only, and then only when the weather is clear and mild. However, we have been able to confirm that at least four separate countries on this planet are independently developing

technology that can be used in either manned or un-manned space programs. We have been able to verify that Cardu's program is purely for research and peaceful purposes. Of the other three; Z'Sconi, Panjan, and this country, East Danrea, we are unable to determine with any certainty if their plans are peaceful or if they are developing means of delivering weapons of mass destruction, of grave concern considering East Danrea and Panjan have both recently tested thermonuclear weapons capable of being launched on intercontinental ballistic missiles successfully on an archipelago of uninhabited islands in the eastern ocean. That's why we need your ships here, Captain."

While he was listening intently to Dr. Fossey's briefing, Captain Salamone spent the entire time glaring at the Romulan officer sitting across from him. Dr. Fossey could sense the tension in the ready room coming from Captain Salamone and directed at his Romulan counterpart. He decided to cut the meeting short by telling the two starship commanders what he expected of them during the upcoming days.

"Through our observations, we have determined Panjan is preparing to launch an orbital rocket, similar in design to those used by the United States and the Soviet Union in the mid-20th century. What we have not been able to confirm is if the rocket will indeed be manned by an astronaut, as the government of Panjan insists, or if their announced plans are a deception to cover the launch of a first strike against an enemy government – the most likely target being East Danrea and in particular their capital city. If Panjan uses nuclear weapons in such an attack, as they have threatened to do in the recent past, the Blind is well within the predicted area of devastation, and we will have little time to react to such an attack."

"Can't we simply wait until they launch their rocket, use sensors to determine if it contains a warhead, and blast it out of the sky if it does?" Commander Mariner asked.

"Firstly, if these people choose to blow themselves to extinction, we can do nothing to stop them," Dr. Fossey replied. "To do otherwise would be a violation of the Prime Directive."

"Likewise, if their space launch is peaceful as they claim it to be," D'Sira added, "any starship attempting to determine if the craft contains a weapon would have to get close enough to risk being seen by any astronaut aboard, again violating your Prime Directive."

Captain Baber noticed the *Lexington's* commander still glaring at the Romulan officer, almost as if he was annoyed the Romulan had spoken factually. Attempting to head off any potential problems, the half-Klingon captain asked Fossey, "What do you need our ships to do, Doctor?"

"For the moment, very little," Fossey replied. "The Liberians still use radio as their primary form of long-distance communication. Monitor communications channels, military channels in particular, for key words. I will have my staff send our updated Liberian syntax files up here to you as soon as possible. Fortunately, in spite of the numerous countries, there are only three distinctly different languages used on Liber II with some regional dialects, so it should be simple programming the computer to monitor all transmissions coming from the surface. And one of you must closely monitor the launch site in Panjan. If it appears they are preparing to launch early, or without any evidence of manning the rocket, we need to know immediately and evaluate."

"That will require one of our starships to maintain geosynchronous orbit above the launch site," Salamone remarked. He looked over at Baber and said, "K'Lith?"

"I will accept such an assignment," Baber replied. "It will help me better know the rulers of Panjan, and falls in line with the philosophy of my ship's namesake. 'Know your enemy and know yourself, and you will always be victorious.'"

"Good. I will await your reports and keep you updated on anything new we learn," Fossey said. He then turned to his Romulan counterpart and said, "Let's get back to the Blind, Sub-Lieutenant. We may need to move out rather quickly."

Waring escorted the two visitors back to the *Lexington's* transporter room. As the ready room doors swished shut behind them, Baber looked at Salamone and asked, "What was that all about?"

"What do you mean?" Salamone asked in return.

"First you try to ignore the Romulan. Then when that proved pointless, you acted so coldly toward him I'm surprised his uniform didn't develop a layer of frost!"

"I had no idea a Romulan was coming aboard my ship," Salamone responded.

“If you were in any way familiar with the background of the Liber II Observation Post, you should have at least expected such an occurrence, Captain,” Commander Mariner said. “After all, the first crew to man the Blind was entirely Romulan, and several of them stayed on to continue their research.”

“You have something against Romulans, Raymond?” Baber asked.

“Let’s just say I had a few ‘diplomatic’ encounters with the Romulans before the Dominion War. I’m not comfortable with having one aboard my ship, especially when they’re uninvited. I’ve never trusted Romulans, and I never will!”

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Captain’s log, stardate 66504.8:

At my suggestion, both starships will beam away teams surgically disguised as native Liberians down to the surface of Liber II; the team I will lead personally from the Sun Tzu to the vicinity of where the expected rocket launch is to take place in Panjan, the away team from the Lexington down to the capital city of East Danrea, where they will coordinate with members of the observation team and determine – if East Danrea is truly the target for a preemptive attack – what the leaders of that country are prepared to do, as well as helping to determine what our two crews can do to ease the tensions of the situation without violating the Prime Directive.

Baber, out.

Captain K’Lith Baber and his away team materialized in a darkened back alley in the industrial city of the country of Panjan where the rocket technology being developed was assembled and tested and being prepared for launch. The captain had decided to lead the away team personally, over the objections of his first officer, because he wanted to learn more about the citizens of Liber II in general and Panjan in particular himself, not through the lens of some written post-mission briefing report or a hurried vocal transmission from the surface, but to experience the culture for himself – feel the public sentiment of the current situation as their country teetered on the threshold of hostilities on the eve of what could be either their greatest technological achievement or the start of a war that would likely devastate their entire planet.

Fortunately it was easy enough for the *Sun Tzu*’s away team to blend into the general populous, particularly for Captain Baber. Liberians were a humanoid species, their skin tones generally running toward the dark pigments and what appeared to be their hair long – often hanging loosely down their backs. It was the observation team in the Duck Blind who had learned what they originally believed was the Liberian’s hair was in fact an olfactory sensing organ – akin to the human nose and its sense of smell – allowing the Liberians an enhanced ability to smell and taste their immediate environment to a greater degree than the average human – or half-Klingon – could ever hope to. It was not uncommon to see Liberians allowing their ‘hair’ to run along and over the food they purchased in their markets and stores, sensing the items freshness and flavor. As a result, the nose on the Liberian’s faces were strictly for breathing, and a punishment meted out by the Liberian justice system in several of the planet’s countries was the shaving of a criminal’s head, thus depriving the convict of their sense of smell and taste for the weeks or months it would take for the organ to grow back to a usable length.

Baber’s security officer, Lt Thalos, carefully pulled out his tricorder from within the folds of the ordinary civilian Liberian clothes he was wearing and took a quick scan of the immediate area.

“We do not seem to have generated any notice, Captain,” the disguised Andorian reported, satisfied that their materialization had gone unseen. “The launch facility we are here to evaluate and observe is located five kilometers almost due south of here. Recommend we split into two groups as we briefed before leaving the ship; Team one will observe the launch site and see if they can determine if the rocket being prepared is of a manned

design or strictly for use in carrying a warhead. Team two will infiltrate this city's commercial district and blend in. There is much to be learned simply by listening to what is going on around you."

The *Sun Tzu's* away team split into two groups; security chief Thalos, science officer Olivares, and engineer Pedz heading toward the launch complex several kilometers away; Captain Baber, medical officer T'malia, and security officer West heading toward the center of town, where the city's commercial and business districts were located, where they hoped to blend in and learn what they could from those living their normal day to day lives.

Meanwhile, several thousand kilometers away, almost a third of the distance around the planet, the away team from the *USS Lexington* under the leadership of Commander Waring materialized in a little utilized alley in the capital of Joti City in East Danrea.

"First priority is establishing contact with the Duck Blind," Waring said as he activated his combadge hidden beneath the outer jacket he was wearing replicated to look like a popular East Danrea style. "Commander Waring to Liber II Observation Post."

It took several seconds for a response to come through, but eventually a female voice responded, "Liber II Blind. Go ahead, Commander." Waring thought the voice sounded a little odd, and realized it was because the voice had a slight Romulan accent, leading the *Lexington's* first officer to assume the person to whom he was speaking was probably one of the Romulan observers.

"*Lexington* away team has successfully beamed down to Joti City. We're going to make a quick survey of the city in the vicinity of the government center."

"Very well. Doctor Fossey has stated you are to be given access to all files we have on hand to aid your infiltration. Are you capable of receiving on subspace frequency 29.9?"

Waring looked over at his team's science officer. The officer in question had been looking at her tricorder to confirm it was operating correctly and taking a quick scan of the vicinity to assure the away team was unobserved. She looked up at Waring and nodded in response to the inquiry.

"Our tricorder is capable of receiving," the first officer confirmed.

"Very well. Linking our library computer to your tricorder," the voice reported. "That way you will be able to answer any routine questions should you get stopped for any reason."

"Is that a likely occurrence?" Waring asked as he gestured for the away team to follow him out of the alley and into the street beyond.

"The government of East Danrea has been growing ever more paranoid in recent weeks, since the announcement by Panjan that they plan to launch their rocket soon. They believe Panjan may have spies in place ascertaining potential targets for attack. One of our observation teams was stopped for suspicious activity two weeks ago, but fortunately were up on the latest sports statistics and were able to answer the routine questions to the satisfaction of the security force leader."

"Thanks for the heads up," Waring remarked. "We'll try and be careful."

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Not far from where the *Lexington* away team had beamed down and were now heading into the city, in an underground bunker run by the East Danrea security forces, a security officer turned around to look toward her commander's desk.

"Commandant Pahi, I am detecting transmissions on that frequency within subspace you advised we watch for," she reported.

"Can you determine what is being transmitted?" the leader of the country's security forces asked, logging into his own computer to look at the data coming from his subordinate's equipment.

"It appears to be voice comms, but in a language I have never heard before, Commandant," the officer replied. "Attempting to triangulate the origins."

“Commandant, it appears a new frequency has been activated, also in the subspace band,” a second officer at a console across the bunker reported. “This one appears to be a data transmission. Origin point outside the city, approximately twenty kilicks west of city center.”

“Where is it transmitting to?” the commandant wanted to know.

“I believe it is transmitting data to the origin of the voice comms within the city limits,” the female security officer replied. “Attempting to pinpoint the location, but interference from buildings and extraneous EM emissions is making exact location difficult. I can narrow it down to a five block region.”

“Good enough for now!” the Commandant of Security Forces exclaimed. “Cordon off that area of the city and start narrowing the search. We have spies from Panjan among us, and I WILL find them and deal with them!”

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Several hours later, the *Lexington* away team had neared the capital building of East Danrea. One of the away team had suggested the vicinity of the capital was the best place to learn what both the country’s legislators and the ‘common man’ thought of the situation they now faced, the real possibility of war quickly descending on them. But to the team’s surprise, they found very few people out and about, and they could not simply walk into the capitol building and ask anyone they saw for their opinion of world events, as it would have seemed suspicious and perhaps even alarming. Waring opened a channel to the *Lexington* in order to find out what Captain Salamone suggested they do to fulfill their mission.

Little did they know at the time that they were surrounded and a trap was about to be sprung.

In the security bunker, the female security officer that had been maintaining a close watch on the communications frequency between the away team and the hidden Duck Blind had also intercepted the new transmission.

“Commandant!” she called out, standing up and facing the security force commander. “I’m now detecting a second communications channel broadcasting to the group we have under surveillance near the capitol building!”

“Is this a new group joining the first, or have we detected another secret base?” the commandant asked as he strode toward the security officer’s console.

“Neither, sir. This is much more alarming! The new signal is coming from orbit!”

“Orbit?!?” the commandant gasped. “You mean the damned Panjans have already launched something – perhaps even a weapons platform – into space without us detecting it?”

“I don’t know how, sir, but I would have to say yes,” the female security officer agreed.

The Commandant looked at the black and white monitor screen, where covert images of the enemy spies were being projected. The image of the East Danrea Capitol Building were plainly visible in the background, it’s copper-colored dome rising high over the rest of the city. A pang of alarm crawled down the security force commander’s spine and his olfactory sense could smell the fear building in his own command bunker.

“We can wait no longer. We must stop the Panjan spies before they put whatever plan they have into action.” He looked at the security officer beside him and ordered, “Tell the tracking teams to move in and make the arrests. Have them do it quickly and quietly to avoid setting off a panic among the civilians. Have them brought to the nearest security precinct, and inform them I will be there shortly to conduct the interrogation personally.”

“Yes, Commandant,” she responded as the security leader turned away, grabbed his coat, and headed out the heavy steel door of the bunker.

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“What did the Captain say, Commander?” Lt Tom Meehan, *Lexington*’s chief of security, asked as Waring deactivated his hidden combadge.

“He suggested we relocate to the city’s main marketplace, where we’ll be more likely to find civilians going about their daily business. In the meantime...”

Waring noticed movement out of the corner of his eye. He reached under his shirt to pull out a type-1 hand phaser, but before he could say anything his team was surrounded by security forces with what looked like ancient projectile firearms pointing at them.

“Freeze! You are under arrest for espionage against the sovereign nation of East Danrea. If you move, you will be incapacitated. Empty your hands!” the security team leader ordered.

Waring had little choice. He dropped the small hand phaser to the ground by his feet while his science officer likewise dropped a folded and deactivated tricorder. One of the security officers collected the dropped items just before the entire away team was roughly shoved to the ground, their hands cuffed behind their backs, and they were frisked. The security officers pulled several hidden items from their clothing; combadges, another tricorder, and several type-2 phasers being carried by the security guards, which the Danreans looked at with puzzlement, not understanding what the equipment’s purpose was.

“This is all they were carrying, Sergeant,” one of the officers said as he offered the box of collected equipment to their senior officer. “I’m... I have never seen anything like these. I don’t know what they can be.”

“Obviously Panjan espionage equipment,” the sergeant remarked as he picked up a phaser in one hand and a communicator in the other, turning them in all directions in his hands but not having any better idea of what they did than his subordinate. “Take it to the security precinct for analysis. And transport the spies there as well. The Commandant wants to interrogate them personally.”

“Yes, Sergeant,” the officer responded as several ground vehicles with flashing green lights on their roofs arrived and the scowling members of the away team were loaded inside for short trip to the local precinct house.

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“What do you mean, we’ve lost contact with the away team?” Captain Salamone asked his operations officer, Lt Yun.

“The away team is overdue on their standard periodic check-in,” Yun reported. “I’ve tried contacting Commander Waring, but am not receiving any response. I am receiving carrier wave signals, so we know all six communicators are still active and operating, but no one is responding to hails.”

“Perform a sensor scan of their last known location on the surface and increase the search radius by one kilometer every five minutes until we locate them and ascertain their condition,” Salamone ordered.

“Aye, Captain. But keep in mind, Liberian life-signs are not all that different from human life-signs. It may be hard to separate the away team from a group of Liberians if they are in close proximity. It may take some time.”

“Do your best to find them. And let me know if Commander Waring gets back in contact with us or the Duck Blind on the surface,” Salamone ordered.

* * * *

The six members of the *Lexington* away team sat in a basement room in the local security precinct building, their hands tied behind the backs of the seats, their legs bound to the steel legs of the chairs – which were in turn bolted to the cement floors of the basement.

The Commandant was pacing back and forth in front of his prisoners, periodically stopping in front of each one randomly to spout off a brusque question or two.

“How did you get here?”

“When did Panjan launch the weapons platform now orbiting over our country?”

“What is your purpose for being here?”

“What are your country’s plans? Do you intend to attack us?”

“What purpose does the equipment you brought with you serve? Are they surveillance equipment? Are they weapons? Are they sabotage devices? Are they bombs?”

“Are you here to assassinate our government officials in the hopes of plunging our government into confusion? If so, who are you here to assassinate?”

The Commandant was growing ever more frustrated, as his prisoners refused to answer even the simplest questions: Who were they? What were their names? It was time to employ more radical methods to obtain the information he sought. He nodded to one of his subordinate security officers, who quickly left the basement interrogation room.

A few minutes later, two more Liberians entered the room. From their manner and dress, Waring assumed they were medical personnel of some sort. He knew their presence, under the circumstances, did not bode well.

As the two medical technicians put on air-tight masks and handed one to the security force leader, one of the technicians opened a bag he had carried into the room and removed a container. He unlocked the top, then stepped around behind the bound prisoners, running the open container through their loose flowing hair.

“I’m sure you can tell by the scent that I am preparing to use rutajute extract to loosen your tongues,” the Commandant remarked. “You may protest that the use of rutajute is against the conventions signed by most of the governments of Liber II, but you have left me no other choice.”

Meehan glanced over at Waring, who looked back with a silent though confused shrug. The Commandant noticed the looks and grew both even more puzzled and frustrated, as he had seen prisoners immediately break down and confess their crimes at the mere mention of rutajute extract, yet it seemed these prisoners remained unconcerned – as if they were not experiencing the burning sensation in their olfactory sensors that preceded rutajute poisoning.

“Are you sure that is rutajute?” the Commandant demanded.

“Positive, Commandant,” one of the med techs assured.

“This is impossible!” the security leader shouted, growing angry. He then stepped closer to Waring, the prisoner he assumed correctly from his demeanor was the leader of the espionage ring, and shouted at him, “Tell me what I want to know, or I will have no other choice than to apply the extract directly onto one of your co-conspirator’s olfactory sensors!”

Still, the away team members remained silent, certain in the fact their starship would already have realized they were missing and beam them back aboard at any moment.

The Commandant stepped over to the bag the medics had carried the rutajute extract container into the interrogation room in and removed a pair of gloves before stepping behind the prisoners as he put them on and grabbed the toxic container away from the medical technician. He reached into container and removed a handful of the extract, immediately applying it to the head of the *Lexington*’s science officer. The disguised woman of course felt the pressure of the Security Commandant’s hand and the feel of the substance he was spreading atop her head, but due to the fact her Liberian ‘hair’ was nothing more than a clever wig – part of her surgically enhanced disguise to blend in with the Liberian populous – there was no other effect. Certainly not the screams of pain the Commandant had been expecting as the extract chemically burned the olfactory sensors. Dropping the extract container in shock – and causing the two medical technicians to jump aside to avoid getting any of the splatter on themselves – the Commandant stormed around the chairs of his prisoners, staring at them through the transparent viewport of his breathing mask with wide, unbelieving eyes.

“What are you?!?” he demanded to know. “What unholy creature spawned you?!?”

For the first time since being captured, Waring spoke as he said, “You’re interfering with things far more complex and far more critical than you realize, Commandant. You must let us go!” He hoped – under the circumstances – that the security official would comply with his request.

Realization began to dawn on the head of the security forces. Disparate pieces of information he had been given since the beginning of this incident started to come together and make sense. The hidden base somewhere outside the capital city... The orbiting weapons complex... Abnormal broadcast frequencies in the subspace band... There could only be one answer!

The Commandant stared at his prisoners, a single word escaping his lips.

“Aliens!”

* * * *

Aboard the *Lexington*, Captain Salamone paced his bridge for several more minutes before pausing near the operations console.

“Any luck, Lieutenant?”

“As I said earlier, Captain, human life-signs are difficult to differentiate from Liberian life-signs. I cannot pinpoint the away team’s location.”

* * * *

“*Sun Tzu* to away team.”

Captain Baber subtly put his hand to his right ear, activating the small communicator earpiece located there, and quietly said, “Now is not a good time, Commander.”

Part of the *Sun Tzu*’s away team had joined a crowd of Panjan citizens in a large city square near the main marketplace, where a large screen had been set up showing the progress of the much-vaunted upcoming rocket launch. The crowd was watching as the rocket, resembling a mixture of the Atlas and Vostok rockets that first launched humans into space in Earth’s mid-20th century, was lifted from its horizontal transport platform to the vertical launch position. According to what Baber and his crew were hearing, it was only another day or so before the launch was scheduled to take place and they were still unsure if the rocket was going to be manned, empty, or carrying some type of warhead. The half-Klingon captain knew they needed to complete their mission before it was launched or risk either being discovered or the planet beginning a devastating war.

“Captain, are you alright?” Commander Mariner asked, concerned.

“We’re fine,” Baber answered quietly. “We’re just in a large crowd with many security officers present and I don’t wish to be overheard and thought to be talking to myself. The Liberians have not yet invented portable wireless communications devices yet.”

“I just wanted to report to you, there has been a problem in East Danrea,” Mariner explained. “The *Lexington*’s entire away team had gone missing, and Captain Salamone is concerned they have either been captured or killed somehow.”

The report from his first officer alarmed Baber. He looked around cautiously, checking to see if anyone was watching either him or his two other crew members with anything other than routine curiosity, wondering if the away teams had somehow been betrayed by either their actions or someone reporting to the Liberians that they were there. To his relief, everyone seemed intent on watching the broadcast of the launch preparations.

“Team one is closer to the launch complex, but when Lieutenant Thalos checked in with me a short time ago he did not report anything out of the ordinary,” Baber said to Mariner. “Just a crowd of curiosity seekers gathering to watch the launch as you might expect. And team two has received only a slight bit of notice from the residents here, but I believe that may be due more to the fact that strangers in this region are rare than to the fact we have been perceived as not actually being Liberians. But keep me informed as to what is going on with Captain Salamone’s crew. I want to know if either they or we have been compromised.”

“I’ll keep you in the loop, Captain,” Mariner promised. “*Sun Tzu*, out.”

As Baber deactivated his communicator, T’malia moved closer to the captain and whispered, “Something wrong, Captain?”

“*Lexington* has lost contact with their away team. Tell Commander West to be ready for beam up at a moment’s notice, just in case something happens here too. I’ll get in touch with Thalos and team one and advise them of the same.”

* * * *

The Commandant looked at the body lying on the exam table, her chest still wide open and internal organs exposed, as a senior medical official presented him with a written report.

“It is confirmed, Commandant,” the doctor said, still not quite believing what his own eyes had seen. “Her olfactory sensors were nothing more than an elaborate façade, which explains why they were able to withstand the

rutajute extract. Blood is iron-based and red. Several internal organs I cannot even begin to guess at their purpose. Reproductive organs located at the lower end of the torso instead of the middle, and only two lungs. This... this creature..." The doctor gestured toward the corpse of the *Lexington's* science officer on the exam table. "...Is definitely not of our planet. You were correct, Commandant. I only wish we did not have to terminate her to learn what we have learned. Imagine the information she must have possessed...!"

"We have five others in custody, Doctor, and perhaps many more. It appears these alien invaders have a secret base somewhere west of Joti City. And we will learn the location of this secret base and find it and learn once and for all if these alien invaders are indeed working with Panjan to take over our planet like I suspect!"

The Commandant tossed the doctor's written report – unread – atop the corpse on the exam table and walked out of the autopsy suite and down the long hall to where the remaining five alien prisoners were still being held. He slammed open the heavy door and stormed right up to Waring, leaning down in the commander's face and growling, "You WILL tell me what I want to know."

* * * *

Several hours later, a small convoy of security and military vehicles departed Joti City on the highway heading west. In the back of the leading truck, the Commandant watched a severely bruised and battered Commander Waring, his Liberian disguise now completely gone with the exception of the darkened skin color on his face, lower arms and lower legs, as a scientist accompanying the military convoy studied one of the tricorders taken from the captured away team – to which one of the combadges had been attached to the device's sensor plate.

"I'm still not entirely sure this device is working properly, Commandant," the scientist remarked. "The technology is decades – perhaps centuries – ahead of our own."

"Does it still indicate the signal is coming from the west?" the Commandant asked, briefly glancing at the scientist.

"Yes."

"Then it is working well enough," the Commandant remarked with another sharp look at Waring. "We cannot risk the aliens having shared this technology with the government Panjan! It would mean the end of East Danrea for sure!"

Waring looked up painfully at the commandant, one of his eyes still swollen shut from the beating he had taken. "I told you, Commandant, we are not allied with Panjan or any other government on your planet. We're simply here to study you and monitor your progress toward..."

"Study us for eventual invasion!" the Commandant interrupted. "Monitor us so that we do not become too powerful to resist your attacks!" The commandant removed the small type-1 phaser that Waring had been carrying when the away team had beamed down to the surface and slowly turned it around and around in his hand as he studied it, remembering his own astonishment as he first attempted to learn what it was and how it was used by aiming it at another of the alien invaders. The beam it had produced after the commandant had pressed the level button to its maximum power indication had literally vaporized one of the *Lexington's* security guards as well as the chair he was sitting in – to the astonishment of all the Liberians in the room. "How much further?"

"If I am interpreting these readings correctly, only another two kilicks."

The commandant leaned toward the cab of the truck and opened a small sliding door between the cab and the back cargo area.

"Continue on one additional kilick beyond the signal's origin and stop there. We will approach the hidden alien base from the rear and take them by surprise!"

"Yes, Commandant," the military leader in the front seat of the truck agreed.

* * * *

Dr. Fossey entered the main control room of the Duck Blind, where several Starfleet, Romulan, and civilian observers were working – still trying to determine Panjan's true intentions and East Danrea's probably reaction to

the launch of an orbital rocket. The room was dominated by large windows providing an unobstructed view looking southeast which were hidden behind the holographic projection of a rocky outcropping. A short distance away was a two lane highway, upon which the observers had noticed a military convoy pass only a short time before – undoubtedly part of East Danrea’s reaction to Panjan’s proposed launch.

“Any word on the *Lexington*’s away team?” the observation post leader asked.

“Negative, Doctor,” Sub-Lieutenant D’Sira replied.

“Well, let me know if...”

Fossey noticed the facial expression on one of the technicians near the communications panel suddenly look confused. He was about to ask her what was the matter when she in turn looked at him and said, “Doctor, I’m receiving a transmission from Commander Waring.”

“Oh, thank God!” Fossey said, his relief evident on his face. “Where are they? What happened to them?”

The technician passed on Fossey’s questions, her look of confusion returning briefly as she looked back at the doctor and said, “The Commander is requesting we open the back door.”

“The away team is here?” Fossey asked, confused. “Something must have gone very badly wrong for them to come all the way out here instead of beaming back up to their ship.” The doctor then looked at D’Sira and asked, “Would you go open the back door, Sub-Lieutenant?”

“Are you sure this is wise, Doctor?” D’Sira asked. “Something doesn’t feel right about this.”

“I’m sure something unusual has happened, otherwise Commander Waring and his team would not be here now, would they?” Fossey remarked. “Go let them in! They may be injured and in need of aid!”

“Yes, Doctor,” D’Sira replied before heading toward the back door, a carefully hidden entrance not disguised by the holographic cloak that protected the majority of the Blind.

* * * *

“Captain!” Yun called over the intercom. Salamone quickly activated the intercom in his ready room, hoping that his operations officer would have good news.

“What is it, Lieutenant?”

“Doctor Fossey has just reported the Blind has re-established contact with the away team. For some reason the team is now at the Blind.”

“I’ll be right out!” Salamone said, quickly deactivating the intercom and rushing out onto the bridge. On the main viewscreen, Dr. Fossey could be seen, his back to the large windows overlooking the Liberian landscape. “Doctor, you’ve found my wayward crew?”

“More like they found us, Captain Salamone,” Fossey replied. “For some reason your away team...”

Salamone and the bridge crew saw Fossey suddenly turn away from the viewer at what sounded like an explosion and – to the captain’s disbelief – gunfire. Suddenly the visual transmission broke up into static and ended completely.

“What’s going on?” Salamone demanded to know. “What happened?”

“Transmission cut off at the source,” the bridge tactical officer reported as he attempted to re-establish communications.

“That sounded like an explosion,” Yun remarked. “You don’t think one of their power generators...?”

“Considering everything that has happened during this mission so far, let’s hope the explanation is as simple as a power generator failure,” Salamone replied, staring almost longingly at the main viewscreen.

Nearly a minute later, the officer sitting at ops reacted.

“Captain!” he said. “Receiving a voice transmission from the Blind!”

“On speakers,” Salamone ordered. “Doctor Fossey, what happened? We heard what sounded like an explo...”

“My name is Pahi Ozopoc Hitezin, commandant of the East Danrea security force headquartered in Joti City,” said a gruff-sounding and determined voice. “We captured your alien spies yesterday, and today we have

taken control of your hidden base. You will obey our demands or – one by one – our hostages will be put to death for treason against the sovereign nation of East Danrea, starting with the strange pointy-eared ones.”

A look of shock crossed Salamone’s features very briefly before he regained control of himself. Then he cleared his throat before saying, “This is Captain Raymond Salamone. I am the commanding officer of the people you have captured, Commandant.”

“Good,” the voice responded. “Straight to the top. Our demands are simple; We want all the intelligence you possess on the nation of Panjan, including the data, purpose, and capabilities of the rocket they are planning to launch in the next day...”

* * * *

An hour later, Captain Baber and the *Sun Tzu*’s away team were back aboard their ship after having been informed about the situation in East Danrea. Baber, no longer looking like one of the Liberians, was sitting in his command chair discussing options with Captain Salamone over the main viewer.

“Commandant Pahi believes we are siding with Panjan and plan on using their new rocket to somehow neutralize all of East Danrea’s military forces as a prelude to ‘alien invasion.’ I’ve tried explaining to him that we are here merely as observers with no intention of interfering in their society, but understandably he doesn’t believe me.”

“What’s going on with your away team and the observation post staff?” Baber asked.

“Pahi allowed me to briefly speak with my first officer to confirm his demands. Waring confirmed two of his away team have been killed, but the rest of the away team and the Duck Blind staff are – for the moment – alive and relatively well. But the Liberians want access to our advanced weapons in order to neutralize all their country’s enemies.”

“All?” Baber remarked.

“Yes,” Salamone confirmed. “Pahi figured as long as they’re planning on taking Panjan out of the picture, they might as well do the same to all the other nations not allied with East Danrea and – as he put it – bring peace to Liber II for the first time in generations.”

“We cannot allow that to happen,” Baber remarked. “Already the Prime Directive has been...”

“I know we can’t comply!” Salamone exclaimed. “But if we don’t give in to their demands, Pahi has promised to kill a hostage one by one periodically, starting with – as he stated – ‘the strange pointy-eared ones.’ Personally, I could not care less what happens to the Romulans down there. They shouldn’t even be there as far as I’m concerned. But I can’t allow Doctor Fossey’s staff or my away team to be senselessly killed.”

Baber thought for a moment, before glancing over at Captain Rico Cruz, his Hazard Team leader.

“Perhaps I should prepare my Hazard Team for an assault on the Duck Blind?” he suggested.

“What is the likelihood of a full-frontal assault rescuing the hostages without heavy casualties?” Salamone asked.

Baber looked over at his Hazard Team leader and asked, “Captain?”

“It would be risky, sir,” Cruz replied. “The same sensor-blocking abilities the Duck Blind uses to remain hidden from the native populous also make it difficult if not impossible to determine the number of Liberians that have invaded the outpost, what kind of weapons they possess, and where inside the outpost they are located. And when active, it also prevents beaming directly into or out of the outpost.”

Cruz activated a control on his console, then stepped toward the center of the bridge in front of Baber as a holographic representation of the hidden outpost appeared in mid-air. Cruz pointed out several areas inside the outpost – including the shuttle maintenance bay and the private living quarters as he said, “The outpost has too many areas which are easy to defend by an entrenched force. I have no doubt that my Hazard Team could recapture the outpost – especially given the fact the Liberians are likely using old-fashioned projectile weapons as their primary defense – but it would be costly.”

“How costly?” Baber asked, knowing there would be at least a few casualties on either side during an assault and willing to live with the loss of up to half a dozen crew, hostages, and Liberians combined.

“We’re talking the range of 40 to 50% casualties within the Hazard Team alone.”

“40 to 50%!!” Baber exclaimed.

“And that’s just among my team,” Cruz remarked. “We’re looking at 80 to 90% casualties among the hostages, and likely 100% among the Liberians who have taken over the outpost.”

“Unacceptable!” Baber stated.

“Agreed,” Salamone said over the viewer. “I want my first officer and what remains of the away team back intact.”

“We need to come up with some other plan. One that doesn’t reveal ourselves to the entire planetary population or break the Prime Directive,” Baber announced.

“How far are you willing to bend it, K’Lith?” Salamone asked.

* * * *

“Captain, we’re receiving another transmission from the Duck Blind,” Yun announced.

“On speakers, Lieutenant,” Salamone ordered.

“You are wasting my time, ‘Captain,’” Pahi stated without preamble, pronouncing Salamone’s title with sarcasm. “I see I must prove to you how serious I am. Since you have not given me what I have demanded, I have had two of the hostages killed.”

A shock ran down Salamone’s spine before he asked, “Who?”

“Names are not important to me,” the commandant responded. “Both had those deformed ears many of your people seem to have. I think one of them was called D-Silva or something like that.”

Salamone surprised himself as he realized his feelings for the now dead Romulan hostages was no less emotional than if it were his own crew that had been killed, in spite of what he had said to Captain Baber earlier.

“Sub-Lieutenant D’Sira, actually,” he corrected unintentionally.

“No matter. My demands have increased, and if you try my patience any further, I will kill all the hostages. I want access to all your technological achievements. Weapons, computers, anything that will aid East Danrea to defeat its enemies! I want to wipe out all opposing governments, and I want to do it quickly, cleanly, and without giving them any chance to retaliate against us.”

“I’m sure my first officer has told you doing anything like what you demand is against our highest laws and regulations?”

“Captain,” Pahi replied, his tone like one talking to a child losing a simple board game in order to keep them from having a tantrum. “If these supposed laws and regulations mattered to you, you would have simply abandoned your hostages and left our planet. The fact you are still here tells me you consider your hostages more important than your ‘laws.’ And I plan to use that. Give me what I demand.”

In the background, another of the hostages could be heard screaming, as the Liberians did something unseen to them. The scream suddenly cut off, and Salamone almost leapt out of his command chair before his operations officer reported, “Transmission cut off, sir.”

“We must do what Pahi demands!” Salamone started to say.

“But, sir...!” Yun protested.

“Open a channel to the *Sun Tzu*,” Salamone ordered. “I’m going to tell K’Lith I’m giving in to Pahi in order to free those being held captive.”

Moments later, K’Lith Baber’s image was displayed on the *Lexington*’s main viewer. The half-Klingon captain was scowling at Salamone.

“You cannot do this, Raymond!” Baber exclaimed.

“I have to, or the observation team and my away team will die! I can’t live with that on my conscience!”

“If you give into the Liberian’s demands, not only will you have broken the Prime Directive, but hundreds – perhaps thousands or even millions of innocent Liberians will die! Can you live with that any easier?”

* * * *

On the surface of Liber II, one of the East Danrean scientists the commandant had included as part of his team – a computer specialist normally working in the development of faster and more powerful computing systems – made a breakthrough.

“Commandant! I’ve cracked the encryption the aliens used to lock out their computer systems!”

Pahi rushed over to the main control console almost directly beneath the large windows that overlooked the Liberian landscape.

“Excellent!” he exclaimed. “What do you have access to?”

“Observation records. What appear to be log entries. Sensor systems. And...” The computer expert looked at the commandant with a grin. “...Weapons systems!”

“Excellent! Can you determine the location of the alien weapons platform in orbit? Perhaps we can use their own technology against them!”

“Searching...,” the scientist replied. It only took a few seconds before he added, “Alien platform located, orbiting at an altitude of 1500 kilicks. Its...”

The commandant noticed his computer expert’s eyes go wide. “What is it?” he asked.

“The alien weapons platform! It is five times larger than our largest ocean-going battle vessel! And bristling with weapons I cannot even begin to comprehend. If they were to choose to turn their weapons on East Danrea, there is no hope our nation would survive!”

“Which is why we hold these aliens hostage,” Pahi said as he glanced toward where several of the hostages were tied to chairs nearby, including Commander Waring and Dr. Fossey. “As long as we have them, the aliens will not dare attack us!”

The Commandant walked over toward the tied-up hostages. In the hours since capturing the observation post, Pahi had managed to learn much about his prisoners, more from simple observation than interrogation. Enough to have determined Waring was the leader of the alien invaders captured in Joti City, Fossey was the leader of the observation team, and that Meehan was the alien’s weapons expert.

The commandant brandished one of the phasers captured from the away team and then directed one of his security officers to untie Meehan and forcibly move him toward the panel his computer expert had just accessed.

“There is no use lying to me,” he said as he pushed the phaser’s emitter against the security chief’s temple. “I know you are the invader’s weapons expert.”

“I am,” the lieutenant acknowledged, wondering where this line of conversation was leading.

“Turn this base’s weapons on your own orbiting weapons platform.”

Meehan looked sidelong toward Waring, wondering what to do, knowing the Blind’s defensive phaser system was designed simply to repel a small hostile force on the planet’s surface without killing anyone. Against a starship it would amount to nothing.

“You realize if I comply, my vessel will know the instant I aim the weapons at them.”

“Yes,” Pahi responded. “I’m counting on it.”

* * * *

“Captain!” shouted Lt Mike Lutzky, the tactical officer standing behind the horseshoe railing. “We’ve just had phasers locked on us!”

“Phasers?!” repeated Captain Salamone. “From where??”

“The Duck Blind on the planet’s surface!” Lutzky reported.

Before Salamone could react further, the operations officer announced, “We’re being hailed by the surface again, Captain.”

“On speakers.”

“Attention, Captain,” the Commandant’s voice said evenly. “By now you have undoubtedly detected that I have taken control of this spy base’s weapons, and have turned them on your orbiting weapons platform.” Salamone was irritated by the fact that not only had the Liberians managed to gain access to systems he believed secure, but that they still insisted on calling his vessel of exploration a weapons platform. At the same time he was relieved the

Liberians were apparently only aware of his own starship in orbit and not the *Sun Tzu* in its much higher orbit. Perhaps he could use that omission to his advantage? “I am told your orbiting platform is many times more powerful than this small outpost. Be that as it may, you will do as I require, or I will force your vile alien construct from our skies!”

“What is it you want now, Commandant?” Salamone asked.

“Our intelligence suggests the Panjan rocket will lift off within the hour. Use your platform’s weapons to destroy it! Destroy it, or we will destroy you!”

“I can’t...”

“You will do as I order, or I will kill everyone aboard your orbiting platform and all the hostages here on the surface, then I will turn this outpost’s weapons on the enemies of my country myself! You will comply! You have no other choice.”

Salamone opened his mouth to speak, but Lt Yun reported, “Frequency is closed, sir.”

Beginning to feel desperate, Salamone stood up and turned to face his officer at tactical.

“Lieutenant, I was told the phasers on the Duck Blind were for defensive purposes only. Can they harm us with those weapons?”

“Normally I would say no, Captain,” the tactical officer replied. “But considering a bunch of primitive pre-war humanoids with almost no knowledge of the galaxy in general have managed to capture our away team and then locate and raid an outpost hidden using holographic technology, I wouldn’t put it past them that they have somehow managed to increase phaser strength to the point where it could potentially damage our shields. Perhaps even overcome them.”

“This situation is rapidly spinning out of control,” Salamone remarked with exasperation before looking at Lutzky. “I can’t take any chances. Lieutenant, arm phasers and torpedo tubes. If the Liberians want us to take down that rocket in order to save our shipmates, we’ll do it!”

“But, Captain...!” Lutzky started to protest.

“Lieutenant, for all we know, that rocket contains a warhead intended to wipe out Joti City or some other Liberian capital,” Salamone proclaimed. “You read the briefing! None of the countries on Liber II trusts Panjan! And even if it turns out the rocket IS manned, is it not better that only one person dies today than then entire crew of the *Lexington*?”

Lutzky looked across the bridge, sharing eye contact with Yun, unsure what to say.

* * * *

Aboard the *Sun Tzu*, the atmosphere was tense.

“Sensors indicate the Panjan’s have completed fueling the rocket,” reported Ensign Six of Twelve, the former Borg drone. “According to the transmissions we are intercepting, we should expect lift-off within the hour, Captain.”

K’Lith Baber stared at the main viewer, his chin held up on the knuckles of his right hand, watching the image of the rocket bathed in brilliant lights. Sunrise would occur at the launch site in just over fifty more minutes, and he was certain the Panjans were scheduling the launch for the early morning hours just after the sun rose over the horizon. However, due to the distance involved in maintaining a geosynchronous orbit, the image on the viewer looked tiny, the tall rocket barely visible between the gantries on either side.

“Any indications the rocket is armed with a warhead?” the captain asked.

“Still not detecting any radiation signature that would indicate a thermonuclear device of any kind,” Lt Thalos reported. “That does not preclude the Panjan’s use of a conventional warhead, of course.”

“Radio transmissions appear to indicate an astronaut is boarding the craft,” Six reported.

“Can you confirm this?” Baber asked.

“Not yet. There are way too many Liberians crawling all over those gantries, as you might expect. Probably be able to determine if the capsule is manned just prior to launch, when the ground crews retreat from the launch site.”

“Any word from the Lexington? Has there been any change of status to the situation at the Duck Blind?”

“Negative, Captain. In fact, it appears the Lexington has gone radio-silent.”

Baber growled deep in his throat, not liking how this situation was progressing, but unable to do anything to change what was happening. At least, not yet.

“Keep me informed. And hail the *Lexington* again. I must speak with Captain Salamone.”

“Aye, sir.”

* * * *

“Captain, the *Sun Tzu* is attempting to hail us again,” Yun reported.

“Continue to ignore them, Lieutenant,” Salamone replied. “If K’Lith find out we’re under duress, he’ll be forced to act, and that would put lives on the surface at risk. Just keep sensors pointed at that horizon and inform me the instant that rocket emerges over the curvature of Liber II!”

* * * *

“Captain, the launch is in its final countdown stage,” Six reported. “Less than a minute to anticipated lift-off.”

“Helm, move us out of geo-synch orbit and closer toward East Danrea air-space,” Baber ordered. “If the rocket is actually a prelude to attack, at least we’ll be in a position to prevent it from reaching its target.”

“But, K’Lith,” said Commander Mariner. “Wouldn’t that be a violation of the Prime Directive?”

“As Captain Salamone said earlier, we cannot break the Prime Directive, but perhaps we can bend it just enough to save some lives? Perhaps even an entire civilization! Helm, change orbit!”

“Coming about to standard orbital altitude,” confirmed Tora’El, the *Sun Tzu*’s helmsman.

“Captain!” Six exclaimed suddenly. “We have lift-off!”

“Thalos, scan that rocket!” Baber ordered. “Tell me without a doubt if there is an astronaut aboard or not!”

* * * *

“Captain, sensors have detected a conventional rocket heading toward orbit from the planet’s surface!” Lutzky reported.

“Finally!” Salamone exclaimed. “Helm, plot an intercept course. Tactical, lock phasers on target. Prepare to fire at my command.”

“Captain, are you sure this is absolutely necessary?” Yun asked, turning to look at Salamone.

“We have no other choice, Lieutenant,” Salamone insisted.

“But, Captain! The *Sun Tzu* is saying the rocket is manned! There’s an astronaut on board!”

Yun touched a control on his console and the voice of Ensign Six could be heard throughout the *Lexington*’s bridge saying, “*Sun Tzu* to *Lexington*! I repeat, the Panjan rocket is manned and heading toward a stable orbit! The rocket is not – repeat NOT a weapon. *Lexington*, please respond!”

“Captain?” Lutzky asked.

“You have your orders, Lieutenant,” Salamone replied, his eye never leaving the main viewer. “Are phasers locked on target?”

Lutzky hesitated for a moment before exhaling sharply and saying, “Phasers locked on the rocket. Photon torpedoes loaded, armed, and standing by.”

Salamone could now see the bright exhaust trail of the rocket on his viewscreen. It was obvious the primitive craft was heading for orbit and in a direction that would not take it over East Danrea – at least not for several orbits.

“Lieutenant...,” Salamone said, pausing briefly to take a deep breath and closing his eyes. “Fire phasers.”

Reluctantly, Lt Lutzky pressed the phaser activation. An orange glow formed at both ends of the Nebula-class starship's upper phaser array, quickly traveling across the array toward each other before erupting in a powerful beam aimed in the direction of the approaching rocket.

Suddenly a blur of grey and silver crossed the viewscreen. *Lexington's* helmsman, ops officer, and tactical officer all yelled in shock and surprise as the Odyssey-class *USS Sun Tzu* maneuvered between the *Lexington* and the distant rocket, the other starship's shields absorbing the phaser beam – barely. Salamone had opened his eyes just in time to see the *Sun Tzu* take the hit and then maneuver around the *Lexington* toward the planet.

“No! K'Lith, no!” he shouted.

* * * *

In the observation post, Commandant Pahi was approached by one of the subordinate East Danrean military soldiers.

“Commandant, we have received word that Panjan has launched its rocket. If anything is going to happen, it will be very soon.”

“Thank you,” the commandant replied before turning to Waring and brandishing his captured hand phaser again. “For your sake, I hope your captain is doing something about the situation as we speak before turning over your advanced alien technology to my government so that we can then deal with Z'Sconi, Laniea, Jormungand, and any other nation that would oppose us.”

“Captain Salamone would never knowingly violate our Prime Directive,” Waring replied before turning to look out the outpost windows at the landscape beyond. Meanwhile, after dismissing Waring's remark, Pahi looked back to his computer expert.

“Any change in the readings?” he asked.

“If I'm interpreting these symbols correctly,” the computer expert replied, “then Panjan's rocket has just cleared the horizon. It appears the alien weapons platform had already maneuvered to intercept it. I cannot tell if they have already...”

The technician looked at the display readings in puzzlement for a second before a look of shock crossed his dark features. “Commandant!” he cried. “I believe I am detecting another alien space platform of some kind, perhaps even larger than the...”

The last anyone in the observation post knew, the landscape outside the window started glowing a bright orange color.

* * * *

The next thing Commandant Pahi was aware of was the sound of the wind blowing through the branches of several nearby trees and the distinct smell of dirt through his olfactory sensors. The sun was just starting to rise in the east. Raising himself up on his elbows, he looked around to find all his men lying haphazardly around him, surrounded by the trucks and military equipment they had brought out to the alien...

A sense of shock ran through him as the commandant quickly got to his feet and looked around. They were outside, and none of the alien invaders they had captured were still with them.

It took several minutes to awaken the rest of the combined security and military team. Once everyone was awake and coherent, they determined none of their own number were missing – only the aliens, of both pale-skinned and pointed-eared variety. All their equipment, including their weapons, were still with them. But try as they might, they could not find the hidden alien spy base, nor any of the captured alien technology, again.

“I don't understand it, Commandant,” one of the security officers remarked after several fruitless hours of searching. “We're in the right general vicinity. The highway is right in view, as is the hill where I am sure we entered the hidden base, but we cannot find any evidence the door ever existed.”

Pahi looked out toward the nearby highway, the view almost exactly as he remembered it from the windows of the alien base's control room. He should be standing almost directly atop the hidden base – perhaps

even within – but there was no evidence it had ever existed. And it was impossible it could have all been a dream! Then he remembered the evidence back in the security precinct where they first brought the captured alien invaders, including the remains of one of the bizarre aliens!

“Let’s return to Joti City,” the commandant ordered. “At the least, we can report what we have seen and heard to government officials. And we should still be able to detect the alien’s weapons platform in orbit. It is too big to hide.”

The military and security team made the journey back to the nearby capital city of East Danrea. As they entered the city, the team was surprised to see many crowds out in the streets, apparently celebrating.

“Stop the truck,” the commandant ordered his driver before lowering his window and calling out to the nearest citizen. “What is going on? Why is everyone celebrating?”

“Haven’t you heard?” the Liberian asked with astonishment. “It’s the most exciting news in years!”

“Heard what?”

“Panjan launched a Liberian into orbit yesterday! He safely returned just a few hours ago! It’s a whole new era!”

“Yesterday!?” Pahi remarked, looking at his driver in shock. “Quickly, back to the military base!”

It took several more minutes for the small convoy of trucks to reach the main gate of Joti City’s main military base. Almost as soon as the trucks were all through the gate, the general in charge of East Danrea’s army walked out of his headquarters building and approached Commandant Pahi.

“Where have you been for the last two days, Commandant?” the general demanded to know. “You consign a platoon of my finest troops for some fool’s errand...”

“It was no fool’s errand!” the commandant insisted. “My security teams captured alien invaders near the capitol building. They were working with Panjan preparing to invade...”

“Alien invaders?!?” the general exclaimed, looking at the commandant as if he was expecting the man to reveal the punch line of an elaborate joke.

“Yes!” Pahi insisted. “They are cooperating with Panjan in order to take over our nation, and eventually the entire planet!”

The general looked at Pahi skeptically, his olfactory sensors bristling slightly. “Panjan has successfully launched a Liberian into orbit and returned him safely to the surface of the planet. Their government then contacted ours and several of our allies, wishing to open new talks leading toward greater cooperation and peace between our nations. Panjan has never intended to attack us. Alien invaders?!? What did these... ‘alien invaders’... look like?”

“They had pale skin,” the commandant explained. “Some of them had strange looking pointed ears. And their blood was red. Except for the pointed-eared one, whose blood was green!”

“Only SOME of them had pointed ears?” the general asked, amused. “Red and green blood? I think I know where you’ve been for the last two days.” The general snapped his fingers and pointed at the commandant. Several military police approached and placed the entire security team under arrest. “I don’t know if it is alcohol or drug use, but whatever has given you these hallucinations will wear off soon enough. It is obvious you have been neglecting your duties. Once you are sober again, we can get you the help you need while I file charges against you for misuse of military resources!”

“I’m not hallucinating!” the commandant insisted as the military police took hold of him and started half-escorting/half-dragging the security leader away toward the brig. “I have evidence at the security precinct! All the proof you need! We are going to be invaded by aliens with amazing advanced weaponry! And now there will be nothing we can do to stop it!”

* * * *

Captain's log, stardate 66515.8:

Both USS Lexington and USS Sun Tzu remain in low orbit behind Liber II's lone moon, where we can monitor communications from the planet's surface to determine if our presence has in any way affected the Liberians. So far, it appears as if we made a clean get-away.

Both ships are now hiding in low orbit behind Liber II's lone moon, operating on reduced skeleton watches to allow the majorities of both our crews some well-deserved rest after quickly dismantling the entire observation post on Liber II in just six hours immediately following my vessel stunning everyone and everything within a five kilometer radius of the Blind with the ship's phaser banks, leaving only the Liberians who captured the Lexington's away team behind. We left no evidence the Blind had ever existed, and even managed to retrieve the remains of the Lexington away team members killed by the Liberians and all records and evidence regarding their presence on the planet from the security bunker in the capital city.

Captain Salamone has already apologized to both his own crew and to me for his actions during this mission, admitting both his concern for his crew and his hostility toward the Romulans affected his thoughts and actions during this crisis. I cannot say I blame him entirely. I wonder what I would do if my crew were being held hostage, my vessel targeted with no knowledge of exactly how serious the threat was?

Baber, out.

Captain K'Lith Baber exited his ready room and stepped out onto the bridge of his Odyssey-class starship, walking over to where Commander James Mariner was sitting in the center seat.

"Any change of status, Bishop?" he asked his first officer.

"Only that video broadcast networks in most of the countries on Liber II have announced they will be interrupting normal programming for a special announcement later today," Mariner replied. "There will be a slight delay in reception, since the Liberians are still using sub-light frequencies for their broadcasts, but Six of Twelve assures me we should be able to receive and watch the broadcast. What do you think it's about?"

"Perhaps they will announce to the population just how close they came to war in the last couple of days?" Baber suggested. "Speaking of frequencies, I heard Commander Waring of the *Lexington* say his away team was caught because the East Danreans managed to intercept their ship-to-shore and shore-to-outpost communications and track down the signals." The half-Klingon captain looked over at his science officer and asked, "How were they able to do that, Commander?"

Kaguya Olivares looked at the captain and said, "According to some of the observations logged by the former observation team, several of the more developed countries on Liber II – East Danrea in particular – had been experimenting with subspace applications. They have an amazing understanding of the concept of subspace and its uses, just not the technology to fully exploit their knowledge. But Doctor Fossey has stated he firmly believes – in spite of their current levels of technology – the Liberians will likely develop warp drive within the next two decades."

"First Liberian in space to warp drive in only twenty years!" Mariner remarked. "Impressive, if proven true."

Baber's response was cut off as Ensign Six of Twelve turned around and said, "Captain, Commander, the transmission we have been expecting from Liber II is beginning."

"On screen, Ensign," Baber ordered.

The main viewscreen, which had been displaying the image of the planet Liber II in the distance over the horizon of a bleak and grey lunar landscape, changed to show a Liberian wearing their version of business clothes

and sitting behind a desk, reading from printed pages in his hand. With the exception of the Liberian's dark skin and long hair-like olfactory sensors, a viewer could be forgiven for mistaking him for a mid-20th century Earth news anchor man. The broadcast being received was from East Danrea, which Commander Mariner felt would have the most relevant information of interest to the Starfleet crews to determine if they left any cultural contamination behind, like reports of alien invasion.

"An important announcement of interest to all our citizens," the news man stated. "Less than twenty seven hours ago, the country of Panjan launched the first manned space rocket from their territory. The capsule, with one Liberian aboard, successfully reached orbit, where it circled the planet more than fifty times before returning safely to the surface. The first Liberian astronaut, Colonel Kotan Dole, is alive and well and is planning to address the press sometime in the coming hours.

"In the meantime, the launch of the Panjan rocket has stoked new calls for cooperation between nations in regards to scientific endeavors. Already, the East Danrean military has offered Panjan assistance in designing and building a new even larger rocket that will hold up to three astronauts for the purpose of scientific exploration and research, and calls for military disarmament are spreading across the planet..."

Baber looked at his first officer, the hints of a smile on his face. Mariner smiled back broadly.

"Not only have they not said anything about aliens among them, but it appears the launch has opened the door to new cooperation between the Liberians, Captain," Mariner remarked.

"If Doctor Fossey's prediction of the Liberians inventing warp drive within twenty years comes true, we should be able to welcome them into the galactic community as a united people with open arms," Baber replied. He then asked, "Now that this mission is behind us, what do we have at hand?"

"Mission logs and reports have already been transmitted to *Starbase 719* and the fleet flagship. I believe we're ready to move on to the next sector and continue our primary mission, Captain. I understand there are several class-M planets worthy of further study there."

"Very well. Ensign Six, transmit my compliments to Captain Salamone and inform him the *Sun Tzu* is resuming our primary mission," Baber ordered.

"Aye, Captain," Six replied.

"Orders, Captain?" Tora'El asked.

"Break orbit. Lay in course 030 mark 9, ahead warp factor five."

The *Sun Tzu* maneuvered away from the Nebula-class starship *Lexington*, quickly facing toward deep space. Within seconds, the vessel's warp drive engaged, and the *Sun Tzu* disappeared in a flash of light and sound like a thunderclap.

The End