

The small spacecraft, a few meters shorter than a standard Danube-class runabout, dropped out of warp and correct its course slightly as it returned to its mothership.

Sitting in the cockpit of the *Radiant Cat* was a tall Capellan warrior wearing a skant-type Starfleet uniform with a sash of blue feathers and several small mementos attached to it across his chest. He touched the control to activate the communications system, which chimed obligingly.

“*Radiant Cat* to *USS Sarek*.”

“This is the *Sarek*. Welcome back, Commander A-ZuRQuIL,” replied the voice of the Andorian operations chief Lt T’Reth. “What is your status?”

“I just dropped out of warp on the edge of the Brani system. According to sensors, I’m about an hour out from rendezvous,” A-ZuRQuIL answered.

“Acknowledged,” T’Reth said. “Contact the deck officer for landing vector upon final approach. Glad to have you back, Commander. *Sarek*, out.”

A-ZuRQuIL deactivated the subspace transmitter, then entered another minor course correction into his helm control, placing his personal ship on a more direct course toward the Galaxy-class starship in the distance. Little did A-ZuRQuIL know that he was not alone.

Space, the Final Frontier...

These are the voyages of the starship *Sarek*!

Star Trek: *Sarek*

“Grignak” By PJK

After touching down in shuttlebay three, A-ZuRQuIL shut down the *Radiant Cat*’s systems and disembarked, turning briefly to watch the elevator lower his personal vessel down into the storage hanger one deck below – where the deck crew would give her a once-over before placing the Cat into storage again – before turning back toward the egress and the corridor behind.

“Welcome Back, Commander,” Captain Jo Ann Parker, commanding officer of the *Sarek*, said just as A-ZuRQuIL passed through the doors, nearly causing her exec to jump with surprise. “How did your ritual go?”

A-ZuRQuIL took several deep breaths to calm himself before falling into step beside Parker and replying, “I must admit, I wish Commander Kyler were still assigned to the *Sarek*. She would have made an excellent ceremonial partner, in spite of not being Capellan. However, my time-honored ritual WAS successful.” He pointed out a new token displayed on his uniform as he added, “As you can see, I have added a new memento to my sash in commemoration of the victorious occasion.”

Parker glanced at the item attached by thin wire to the blue-feathered sash. It looked like a smooth white stone, rounded and polished as if having spent years beneath the surface of a swift-moving river.

“What is it? A rock? I thought your ritual hunt was commemorated by bringing back something from the animal you stalked and killed?” she asked.

“This may look like just a rock, Captain,” A-ZuRQuIL explained. “But it is actually something quite different. The traditional Capellan quelling commemorates the time when the tribes prepared for their seasonal movement. The Capellan tribes never formally developed farming, as our ancestors were constantly on the move to avoid the cold winter seasons or the stormy summer floods, though they often kept nearly-domesticated animals – much like the bison of your Earth’s North American plains – close by. Since the tribes could not transport entire herds of these animals over vast stretches of mountain and forest, just prior to the closing of the camp, the warriors would hunt several of these animals down and every single part was used for some purpose; the meat was preserved

for food for the coming journey, the blood stored in containers to slake the warrior's thirst, bone and sinew were used as building materials along the route or for when the tribe reached its destination. The ritual hunt preserves these traditions. The animal I stalked was used in almost its entirety to sustain me and return me here to the *Sarek*. This item..." The Capellan pointed to his latest acquisition. "...Is some kind of bone-like growth I removed from the animal's carcass."

"Fascinating," Parker remarked, unwilling to ask specifically what her first officer did with the bones and internal organs of the beast he had slain, sure she did not really want to know the details.

"How have things gone in my absence? I hope the ship remained relatively quiet with Major Mendez in charge of security while I was gone."

"Everything went quite well," Captain Parker assured. "We completed the survey of Brani IV and determined it would make an excellent location for the joint Federation-Romulan colony the Federation Council has been proposing. Commander Gomez finally managed to complete that engine tune-up she has had in the planning for the last six weeks. And Major Mendez ran a series of security drills in your absence."

The last remark caught A-ZuRQuIL's attention the most. "And what was your evaluation?"

"She still needs to remind herself the security department aboard the *Sarek* is Fleet Security, not Starfleet Marines like she was used to aboard the *Dauntless*," Parker remarked, prompting A-ZuRQuIL to frown slightly. "But on the whole, the drills went well. I would rate the results as above average."

"Still not sure that's good enough," A-ZuRQuIL remarked.

* * * *

A-ZuRQuIL carefully stalked through the tall grass, down-wind of his prey. The beast – the size of a Terran Great Dane – was chewing on some of the grass among which it was standing and was as yet unaware of its hunter's presence. A-ZuRQuIL hefted the spear he had hewn from some of the native wood upon his arrival into a better throwing position in his hand and moved another step closer to his quarry as he began to lift his weapon. Finally in position, he stood up taller in the grass and...

"Crew lounge six to Commander A-ZuRQuIL!"

The Capellan's eyes bolted open and he wiped the drool that had run out of the corner of his mouth as he sat upright in bed. He reached for the combadge sitting on the nightstand next to his pillow and tapped it.

"This is A-ZuRQuIL."

"Commander, Ensign Novak in crew lounge six. We've had an attack down here. There were several casualties."

"I'm on my way," A-ZuRQuIL stated as he got out of bed and put on his uniform.

A few minutes later, A-ZuRQuIL entered the crew lounge. The room showed signs of a tremendous struggle, with blood of at least three distinct shades splattered along one wall and pooling on the deck. Smashed furniture, eating and drinking utensils were scattered around the lounge. There were several security personnel present, including Ensign Novak, the security officer in charge of Delta watch, scanning the scene and recording everything for their investigation. A-ZuRQuIL also noticed both Major April Mendez and Captain Jo Ann Parker were already present. He stepped over to where the Chief of Security stood reading a padd.

"What happened here?" he inquired.

"We're still interviewing witnesses, trying to figure out exactly what happened," Mendez replied. "But what we know for now; Lieutenant Ralph Markson of the engineering department entered the lounge at about 0230 hours and without provocation started attacking other members of the crew who were in here."

"Was anyone hurt?" A-ZuRQuIL asked.

"Two dead. Another four in sickbay with various injuries. One of them may not survive."

"And Markson? Where is he?" the Capellan asked, looking around at the damage inflicted on the room.

Mendez pointed across the room at two bodies covered by white sheets as she said, "He's among the two dead. And to be honest, we don't know why."

"What do you mean?"

“According to witnesses, no one was able to stop him,” Mendez explained. “It was like he suddenly had super-human strength. When my security officers arrived on the scene, one of them shot him with a phaser set on medium stun. They may as well have just thrown a feather pillow at him for all the good it did. Markson remained on his feet and started moving toward the two security guards.”

By now, Parker had joined her two senior officers and had heard what Mendez was reporting to A-ZuRQuIL. “Did they increase the phaser to kill?” she asked.

“Ensign Stivak was in the process of doing so when Markson simply collapsed for apparently no reason,” Mendez replied.

“Delayed response to the stun beam?” A-ZuRQuIL asked.

“Possibly, but I doubt it,” Mendez said. “Because when Novak reached him, Markson was dead. No sign of any injury... well, one sign.”

Mendez motioned for Parker and A-ZuRQuIL to follow, then led them both to the two covered bodies. She pulled back the sheet covering Lieutenant Markson. The man looked like he could have simply been asleep until Mendez started rolling the corpse over on its side.

“See here?” she asked. “Look at this.”

Both Parker and A-ZuRQuIL leaned closer, looking at here Mendez was pointing at the back of the attacker’s neck.

“What is that?” the Captain asked.

“It looks like... a swelling of some kind,” A-ZuRQuIL opined.

“We’ll probably know more after Doctor Malin gets an opportunity to perform an autopsy,” Mendez remarked. “Maybe someone managed to hit Markson in the back of the neck during the attack and no one noticed, but it could be responsible for his sudden collapse.”

“I’m more concerned by why one of my crew would suddenly turn murderous and attack his own shipmates,” said Parker. She looked at her first officer. A-ZuRQuIL nodded back.

“Major, I want you to conduct a full investigation into Lieutenant Markson’s background,” A-ZuRQuIL ordered. “I want to know if there’s anything – even the slightest indication – that could explain why this occurred.”

“Yes, Commander,” Mendez acknowledged with a nod before looking back toward Novak. “Ensign Novak, I want a briefing and status report prepared by 0800.” Novak likewise acknowledged.

* * * *

At 0900, Major Mendez was standing in front of Parker’s desk in the *Sarek*’s ready room. Sitting on the couch near the door was Commander A-ZuRQuIL, while Lt Commander Sonya Gomez – Markson’s department head – stood at the opposite side of the captain’s desk, pacing back and forth with agitation.

“Lieutenant Markson came from a typical family living on Deneva Prime,” Mendez explained, reading off the padd she was holding. “His parents were employed by one of the companies that mines the system’s asteroid belt. No problems growing up. No records of any arrests or disciplinary problems. He entered the Academy in 2378, graduated in the top fifteen percent of his class in 2382, and assigned engineering duty aboard the *USS Forrestal*. Received two citations from Captain th’Arhrhc. Transferred to the Fifth Fleet and the *USS Sarek* two years ago. Nothing but good evaluations since then.”

Now Commander Gomez started speaking. “Markson was a very gifted engineer. He detected a flaw in the dilithium matrix of the crystal we had installed in the articulation frame several months ago that even the computer had overlooked. If that hadn’t been discovered, the crystal would have shattered and the chamber could have suffered a breach if we maintained high warp speeds. This act was completely out of character! I don’t understand why he would have attacked other members of the crew all of a sudden!”

“Neither do I,” Mendez added. “Every indication we have is Lieutenant Markson was a superb engineer and officer. There was no indication he would go off the deep end like this.”

“There has to be some explanation,” A-ZuRQuIL remarked. “Has Doctor Malin completed his autopsy of the body yet?”

“He hasn’t finished yet,” Mendez replied. “But I asked about that apparent injury on the back of his neck near his spine. The Doctor said his preliminary scans indicate nothing out of the ordinary. He surmised – like I did – that maybe Markson was hit by something there during the struggle, but he wanted to complete a few tests first before he offered a conclusion.”

“Very well,” said Parker. “Keep me apprised. Dismissed.”

Both Mendez and Gomez departed the ready room. Parker looked to her left, where A-ZuRQuIL remained sitting on the couch beneath the painting of the starship *Sarek* superimposed over the portrait of the Federation’s greatest ambassador, his hand perpetually raised in a Vulcan salute.

“You have something to add, Commander?” the captain asked.

“Just wondering how this will all turn out,” the Capellan replied. “Everything Mendez has dug up so far indicates Markson would have been unlikely to commit an act of violence like this. But I think she needs to dig deeper into this. There has to be some other explanation.”

“I agree, but until we can determine what that other explanation is, I’m afraid I’m going to have to log this as an act of random violence.”

“Perhaps I’ll do some digging myself?” A-ZuRQuIL suggested.

* * * *

Captain’s log, stardate 68442.0:

It has been two nights since Lieutenant Markson’s attack in crew lounge six, and so far we have had a similar attack – one each Delta shift – both nights; two dead in an assault in holodeck five, including the attacker – Lt Commander Glon: and Ensign Lincoln Caldera killed when he tried to attack several other crew members in crew lounge three, none other hurt too badly – thankfully – because the crew is now on full alert in regards to these incidents...

The *Sarek*’s senior staff was gathered in the observation lounge behind the bridge, discussing the most recent act of violence to occur aboard the ship.

“Could it be some form of mind control?” proposed Commander Jo Ann Tredworth, the starship’s chief science officer. “After all, all three members of the crew involved in these attacks have had no prior incidents of violence on their records. These incidents are completely out of character.”

“Hard to tell,” said Dr. Tim Malin, the chief medical officer. “I’ve run scans on the brain tissue of those committing these attacks after they occur, and I am not detecting anything out of the ordinary that might suggest some form of chemically-induced or telepathic mind control. The only thing they all had in common were similar injuries and contusions to their bodies, but those could easily have been caused during the melee. Oddly enough, all three seem to have been injured on the back of their necks, like someone had hit them with a blunt object there, but I could not determine with any confidence what caused them.”

“What other common factors have we seen in these attacks?” Captain Parker asked, her frustration growing with each incident that occurred.

“There are a lot more differences than commonalities” stated Major Mendez. “None of those involved knew each other, at least not more than a passing acquaintance. All worked for different divisions – engineering, security, medical – in different areas of the ship. One was Tellarite and two were human but from different planets of origin. The only thing in common I can determine is that all the attacks have occurred during Delta watch, between 0100 and 0400 hours.”

“Which is when the least number of crew members are up and about,” Parker remarked. “Usually the only ones up are those on watch and those from Gamma shift who have just been relieved of their watch.”

“There is one other commonality shared by all three incidents,” A-ZuRQuIL remarked from his seat directly to Parker’s right near the head of the briefing table.

“And that is...?” Parker asked.

“All three attackers are dead,” the Capellan stated. “All three were killed when they attacked or somehow simply died before they were captured.”

“Are you suggesting they had... What? A self destruct mechanism?” Parker asked, unsure.

“All I’m saying is that something is making perfectly rational members of the crew turn into violent berserkers and then killing them,” A-ZuRQuIL explained. “I don’t know if its brain washing, some sort of space disease, or a Rihannsu plot to destroy the *Sarek*. All I do know is we have to find the cause of this so we can bring it to an end, and quickly!”

“Agreed,” said Parker. “What do you suggest?”

* * * *

“You don’t have to do this, Commander,” Major Mendez remarked as A-ZuRQuIL retrieved two hot beverages high in caffeine from the replicator, handing one of them to the Marine officer before sitting down across from her in crew lounge two. “After all, you’re the ship’s first officer now. Not the chief of security. I can handle this.”

“Please do not look upon me volunteering to stay up tonight and hunt down the cause of these attacks as a personal criticism of you, Major,” A-ZuRQuIL stated, sipping the soft drink from his glass. “The fact that these attacks have always occurred during Delta watch indicates there is some kind of intelligence behind this to me. If it were random – caused by a disease or something similar – it would just as likely happen during Alpha or Beta watches, when so many more of the crew are up and about.”

“I’m trying not to take it personally, Commander,” Mendez said. “However, I know you haven’t been as pleased with my performance as security chief as you were when Commander Kyler held the position.”

“Again, I have nothing against you, Major,” A-ZuRQuIL assured.

“Just my performance,” Mendez added. “I have to admit, I was used to the discipline and military bearing of the Marines that were assigned under me aboard the *Dauntless*. Working with fleet security has taken a little getting used to. And I have heard the grumblings coming from our security officers when my methods get a little... How is it they have described me?”

“‘High-handed’ was among the more polite remarks reported to me,” A-ZuRQuIL replied. “More often I would hear you described as more of a ‘Stick up the...’”

A-ZuRQuIL’s comment was interrupted by the doors of the otherwise empty lounge opening. Mendez immediately started to grab for her phaser when Captain Parker stepped in. To both A-ZuRQuIL and Mendez’s relief, the expression on her face could not be described as wild or insane.

“How goes the waiting, Commander?” she asked as she walked over to the two officers.

“0300 hours and all is quiet, Captain,” A-ZuRQuIL replied, quickly adding, “...So far! Perhaps with the whole crew on such high alert, there won’t be any incidents tonight?”

“We can only hope,” Parker confirmed, retrieving a cup of coffee of her own and joining the two officers where they sat. “I just realized something.”

“What’s that, Captain?” Mendez asked.

Parker looked more at her first officer as she replied, “Major Mendez has been a part of the *Sarek* crew for over a year now, and I think this is the first time the two of you have actually worked closely together. When Commander Kyler was here, it seemed like the two of you spent a great deal of time – both on duty and off – together. You made a good team.”

A-ZuRQuIL noticed Mendez looking at him out of the corner of his eye as he said, “Well, technically I was still chief of security when Kyler was here. It was pretty much required we would work together closely as I mentored her.”

“Just because you’re now strictly the first officer doesn’t mean mentoring our officers has to stop,” Parker said before leaning closer to A-ZuRQuIL, a puzzled expression on her face. “It appears you lost something, Quil.”

The Capellan followed Parker’s gaze down to his traditional sash of blue feathers, noticing only a single wire remaining where the token from his latest ritual hunt had been secured.

“Yes, I noticed it missing yesterday,” he remarked. “I probably didn’t secure it as tightly to my sash as I thought I did. I looked around my quarters in case it fell off when I was changing but...”

“Security alert!” a voice suddenly cut the Capellan off. “Security report to cybernetics lab one! Major Mendez, report to cybernetics lab one immediately!”

“This is it!” Mendez exclaimed as she drew her phaser and rushed for the lounge door, A-ZuRQuIL and Parker close behind her.

The main cybernetics lab was only one deck away from crew lounge two, and it took less than a minute for the three officers to arrive at the open lab door. Mendez rushed inside, while A-ZuRQuIL and Parker remained by the door, watching what was unfolding inside. To everyone’s shock, the Romulan-defector scientist Karondar, a civilian mission specialist who normally worked closely with Commander Tredworth, was attacking his twin sister Tehanu. He appeared to be attempting to choke his sibling, but those knowledgeable in martial arts would recognize what Karondar was attempting as an ancient Romulan offensive technique similar to Vulcan tal-shaya.

Mendez immediately raised her weapon, firing a beam of phased energy at the attacker. Karondar reacted immediately, tossing his unconscious sister aside and turning to face Mendez directly. It was as Karondar turned that A-ZuRQuIL – still standing by the lab door – noticed something unusual.

Perhaps it was the common wound found on all the previous attackers that made him look at the back of Karondar’s neck. There, perched like it was glued to his spine just beneath the back of his skull, was what looked like A-ZuRQuIL’s missing ritual token.

Karondar started moving menacingly toward Mendez, who was backing away as she attempted to raise the power level on her phaser before firing it at the oncoming aggressor. Karondar’s attention completely on Mendez, A-ZuRQuIL stepped up behind the Romulan man – surprisingly silent for a being his size – and on a whim reached for the stone. It took some effort to pull it away from Karondar’s skin, but almost the instant it separated, Karondar’s eyes rolled upward and he collapsed into the arms of a shocked Major Mendez. As the major carefully lowered Karondar to the deck, A-ZuRQuIL looked down at the rock in his hand, wondering what it was and how it had become attached to the Romulan scientist. He let out a little scream when it suddenly unfolded, a set of six legs and two pincer-like appendages emerging from it like a Terran crab. Taken by surprise, A-ZuRQuIL dropped the alien creature to the deck, where it began scuttling away out the door and into the corridor beyond.

Having seen the creature drop from A-ZuRQuIL’s hand, her phaser still at the ready and set to kill, Mendez quickly pursued her quarry. The creature was surprisingly fast, and Mendez’s first two phaser beams missed by wide margins. She rushed after it, knowing there were turbolift and Jefferies tube accesses in the corridor the creature had turned down, and if she did not catch up she would likely lose track of it. She rushed headlong around the corner and immediately lined up her weapon, firing a third burst. The phaser beam hit its mark, and the crab-like creature blew apart less than a meter from an open turbolift door, sections of its carapace bouncing off the corridor bulkheads. Mendez smiled with satisfaction.

“Good work, Major,” a voice from behind her said, and Mendez turned to find A-ZuRQuIL standing there, an expression of bemusement mixed with embarrassment on his face.

“How is Karondar?” Mendez asked.

“Still alive,” A-ZuRQuIL replied. “Captain Parker is having both he and Tehanu rushed to sickbay as we speak.” A-ZuRQuIL looked at the remains of the crab-like creature sitting in pieces on the deck and shuddered at the thought that he had been wearing it as an adornment on his uniform only a few days prior. “Let’s get Commander Tredworth and Doctor Malin up here to collect what’s left of the alien creature for analysis. I have a feeling we’ve found the cause of these violent incidents.”

* * * *

Captain's log, supplemental:

To Doctor Malin's surprise, upon re-examination of the bodies of the crew that had committed the attacks, he discovered what we thought were blunt-force injuries near their brain stems turned out to be new alien creatures gestating. One has already emerged from the corpse of Lieutenant Markson, while the remains of Commander Glon and Lieutenant Caldera have been placed into stasis until we can figure out what to do about these crab-like creatures...

The *Sarek's* senior staff was again gathered in the main observation lounge, this time with Karondar, whose neck was still bandaged and face showing evidence of two black eyes. On the middle of the table, a transparent sample case contained the newly grown crab creature, which scuttled around inside the case as if looking for an avenue of escape. Fortunately, the case was hermetically sealed to prevent just such an occurrence.

"This creature in particular was grown from the seed – for lack of a better word – that the original parent creature implanted in Lieutenant Markson's spine," Dr. Malin explained. "It looked like nothing more than a small pebble at first. I overlooked it in the original scan because it registered as a mass of calcium and blended with the Lieutenant's vertebrae, but after several days of growth, the mass became too large to miss."

"Is this how the creature reproduces?" Captain Parker asked as she unconsciously rubbed the back of her own neck.

"I believe your hypothesis is correct, Captain," Malin affirmed with a nod. "Upon discovering this creature in the remains of Lieutenant Markson, I re-examined Glon and Caldera and found similarly developing creatures attached to their spines too. The life-form is mineral-based, and doesn't automatically register on our instruments unless we know what we're looking for, since our medical scanners are normally attuned to organic life-forms."

"Why did the original creature attach itself to various members of the crew and make them attack other members of the crew?" Ship's Counselor John Llewellyn asked. "And why only during the night shift?"

"Our analysis of the original creature's remains show these creatures share many traits similar to crabs found on Earth," Malin replied. "And many Terran crab species are often more active at night than during the day. And I think Mister Karondar may have some theories as to why the creature attacked us."

All eyes in the room looked toward the battered Romulan scientist. Karondar was unused to so much attention, and his skin blushed slightly green.

"I cannot be sure what it means, but while the creature was in control of me, I was overcome by an urge, one that was almost uncontrollable."

"To kill?" asked Lt. T'Reth, the Andorian chief operations officer.

"No," Karondar replied, looking at the blue-skinned officer. "I felt the urge... to go... go home."

"Home?" Commander Tredworth questioned. "To where you were raised on Vulcan? Or all the way back to Romulus, even though it no longer exists?"

"Neither, Commander," Karondar replied. "In my mind, I could see a planet with kilometers of grassy plains and skies the color of sapphires."

"The planet where my ceremonial hunt took place," A-ZuRQuIL whispered to himself.

"It was a planet I am unfamiliar with," Karondar continued to explain. "All I know was, in my mind, it was... home."

Tredworth's glance shifted to the crab-like creature in the sample case in the middle of the table.

"I suppose – maybe – these creatures somehow know they don't belong out here and just want to go back to their planet of origin," she surmised.

"If that is true, then all of this... The attacks here aboard the ship... The deaths of five of our crew... It's all my fault," said A-ZuRQuIL, a look of shock on the Capellan's face.

"No one is blaming you, Quil," Captain Parker assured. "You didn't... You couldn't know."

"That doesn't mean I can't do the right thing," A-ZuRQuIL remarked.

"What do you mean?" Parker asked.

“These creatures didn’t ask to be brought out here. They should be back on their own planet. I need to do that.” Parker nodded subtly, then looked at Tredworth.

“Commander, if I remember correctly, you mentioned you had hoped we might have time for a survey of Brani V before we departed the system, did you not?”

“It was on my wish-list, but I thought we needed to rendezvous with the Morain patrol ship in sector 50101 before stardate 68446.7?” Tredworth questioned.

“I think we can delay the rendezvous for a few days if necessary,” Parker remarked. She then looked at her Capellan first officer and said, “You have permission to depart the *Sarek* at your convenience, Commander.”

“Thank you, Captain,” A-ZuRQuIL said gratefully.

* * * *

April Mendez was in the middle of spit-shining her boots, applying a new coating of black polish onto the right-foot, when the door chime to her quarters sounded.

“Who could that be?” she asked herself as she put the boot and cloth down and stepped toward the door. “Come.”

The doors swished open to reveal A-ZuRQuIL. Surprised, she took a step back and invited her superior officer inside. “Come in, Commander.”

A-ZuRQuIL stepped in only far enough to allow the doors to close behind him.

“The *Cat* is almost prepped,” the Capellan said. “I’m departing in less than fifteen minutes.”

“Don’t worry, Commander,” Mendez assured. “Now that we cured our case of the crabs, I think things will be quiet and back to normal in your absence.”

“I’m sure of that,” A-ZuRQuIL remarked. “That’s why I asked Lieutenant Sakkon to cover your shift for the next few days.” When Mendez gave him a questioning look, A-ZuRQuIL added, “I have come to realize I judged you too harshly, Major. I got used to my relationship with Commander Kyler after she reported aboard. As I was still technically the ship’s security chief, I worked very closely with her and got to know her much better than I have allowed myself to know you. I realize you are a Marine officer, and used to operating in a very different fashion than fleet security, but as the Vulcans say, we should embrace those differences. I’m hoping to rectify my stubbornness. Since I no longer have my ritual token, I must repeat the ritual hunt once more. But considering what happened, I must conduct the hunt on a different planet. I am allowed to have a fellow warrior accompany me on this ritual. I would like you to come with me.”

Mendez was flabbergasted. “Uh... Commander. Wow. I don’t know what to say...”

“Say you will join me.”

“I’ll join you, Commander,” Mendez said with a smile.

“Please, when we’re off-duty, feel free to call me Quil,” A-ZuRQuIL stated. “Commander sounds awfully formal.

“Thank you, Quil. And please call me April. Now, what do I need to bring with me for this ritual hunt? Hand phaser? Compression rifle?”

“The traditions allow us to bring food packs, enough for two days, and a supply of water. Beyond that, we may only hunt with that which the land bestows. We will create weapons with whatever the Great Teers of the Past are gracious enough to provide to us, and track down the beast most worthy of our honor.”

Mendez’s smile slipped slightly as she replied, “Sounds great. Um... When did you say we were leaving?”

“I expect to see you in the main shuttlebay in ten minutes. The *Cat* departs promptly, and if you are not aboard you will be left behind.” And with that remark, A-ZuRQuIL turned and left.

Mendez watched the doors swish shut, then started to say to herself, “I wonder if Commander Gomez has been maintaining the turbolift network properly, or if they might be running slow today? It would be a shame if I arrived in the shuttlebay a minute late.” Mendez seemed to consider the situation for a moment before finally saying to herself, “What the heck! It could be fun, I suppose.” She then grabbed her combat boots and a set of battle dress jungle camouflage as she added, “I don’t suppose I could smuggle a small hand phaser aboard with my gear. You know, just in case.” Then, bundling her clothes under her arm, she rushed out of the stateroom and down the corridor toward the nearest turbolift.

The End