

*Fleet log, stardate 70036.6; Vice Admiral Penji Fil, recording:  
Today marks the six-month anniversary of the day Starbase 719 was lost. In the intervening months, the Fifth Fleet has generally returned to its normal mission parameters.*

*Work on the tachyon detection nets on all approaches to the Romulan colony of Vorte – Project Code-Name: SOSUS – are complete, and with a handful of new ships assigned by Starfleet to patrol the Trade Route, the Dauntless, Sarek, and Sun-Tzu have been relieved of their patrol duties and – after making brief stops at Starbase Typhon-Bravo for R&R – will resume their normal missions of exploration.*

*In the meantime, my flag remains here aboard the USS Bellerophon, until such time as I and my staff can return to the Dauntless. Captain K’danz has recently informed me of a fascinating discovery that she hopes to investigate further, a nebula within Sector 50104 that contains a proto-star on the verge of igniting.*

The turbolift opened onto the bridge and Vice Admiral Penji Fil, the commander of the Federation Fifth Fleet, stepped out. On the main viewscreen at the front of the bridge was displayed a dark-blue colored nebula. Flashes of energy occasionally flittered along the edges of the gaseous anomaly.

“Mister Li, slow us to one-half impulse,” Captain (Carrie) K’danz, the commanding officer of the Intrepid-class starship ordered. “Let’s hold off about five hundred thousand kilometers away from the nebula’s edge and complete our preliminary survey before we decide if it’s worth going inside.”

Fil stepped down off the upper deck to where the captain’s seat was located and asked, “Find something of interest, Carrie?”

The human woman with the Klingon name – due to having married a member of a noble Klingon house – looked at the Catullan admiral and replied, “According to the sensor readings Lieutenant Koester reported, the proto-star at the center of this nebula is on the verge of attaining sustained fusion and becoming a real star. I urge caution if we choose to enter the nebula to explore it further.”

“When you say ‘on the verge,’ how soon do you mean?” Fil asked. K’danz looked over toward the young officer sitting at the science console and nodded.

“According to current sensor readings, the proto-star at the center of the nebula is within two hundred degrees Kelvin of reaching its fusion ignition point,” reported Lieutenant (Junior Grade) Gem Koester. “When that occurs, the gaseous elements of the nebula will briefly ignite as well before the new star’s gravity pulls it all in. Based on current temperature and gravity curves, that ignition could occur anywhere from twelve to forty-eight hours from now.”

“So we still have a little time to take scientific readings of the nebula prior to its collapse into the new star being born?” Fil asked.

“And still be a safe distance to witness a sight rarely seen by human eyes,” K’danz said with a slight grin. “The birth of a brand new star!”

“Excellent!” Fil remarked. “Carry on, Carrie! If you need me, I’ll...”

Fil’s sentence was cut off by Commander Xin Zhadesh at ops, who interrupted the admiral by saying, “Excuse me, Captain, but we are being hailed by the *USS Triton*.”

The smile quickly slipped away from K’danz’s lips as she asked, “Is there a problem?”

“Negative, Captain,” the Efrosian replied. “Captain Tomkins is merely hailing us.”

K’danz exchanged a look with Fil before ordering, “On screen, Commander.”

A second later, the visage of Captain Amanda Tomkins, commander of the Luna-class starship *USS Triton*, appeared on the main viewer.

“Amanda, what can the crew of the *Belle* do for you?” K’danz asked.

“Good morning, Carrie,” Tomkins replied. “I was passing through the sector on my way toward the Persephone colony when we detected both you and the nebula you are apparently studying. Sensor readings indicate the proto-star within the nebula is ripe to ignite. I offer my crew’s assistance in what little time is left.”

“Considering we may have as little as twelve hours before this nebula ceases to exist, perhaps it would be beneficial to have two starship conducting this survey?” Fil remarked.

“In that case, if you have nothing better to do at present, you’re welcome to join us,” K’danz said to her counterpart. “The more the merrier.”

*Space, the Final Frontier...*

## Star Trek: Fifth Fleet

### “J’onzztown” By PJK

#### A Typhon Sector Crisis Story

Less than two hours later, the *Triton* had rendezvoused with the *Bellerophon*, and the two ships began taking detailed sensor readings of both the nebula and the proto-star contained within. Both ships had moved to within just a few kilometers of the gaseous anomaly’s outer edge when the *Triton* again hailed the *Belle*.

“Carrie, my science officer has detected an unexpected reading from within the nebula,” Tomkins reported.

“What kind of reading?” K’danz asked.

“According to Lieutenant Ckathel, there’s a rogue planet in there somewhere, and our long-range scanners are indicating it is likely Class-M and registering life-forms.”

“A Class-M rogue planet within a dark nebula?” K’danz asked with confusion. She looked over at Koester at the science console for verification, but the young woman simply re-checked her own sensor readings and then looked at her captain with a shrug. “We’re not detecting the same readings,” K’danz added.

“The *Triton*’s a newer starship. Our sensors are improved compared to the sensor suite aboard your starship,” Tomkins remarked.

“Improved sensors or not, I find it hard to believe life could have developed on a rogue planet in the middle of a dark nebula,” Zhadesh remarked.

“I can assure you, Commander,” said Ckathel Brightsley over the viewer, “our long range sensors are detecting indications of life of some kind on that planet!”

“You realize what this means, don’t you?” K’danz asked.

“That we have a major scientific discovery on our hands?” Tomkin remarked.

“More than that,” K’danz said. “In less than two days – perhaps even less than the next twelve hours – that proto-star will ignite, and when it does, it’s going to take this nebula and everything inside with it!”

“What are you suggesting, Carrie?” Fil asked. “That we head to this planet we have detected and try to rescue every life-form we find there?”

“No, of course not, but...”

“Based on the readings we’re receiving, it’s probably no more than plant-life we’re detecting,” Tomkins added over the viewer. “But even if there were higher life-forms in existence on that planet, would they not fall under the protection of the Prime Directive?”

“Protection?! The Prime Directive wasn’t put in place to allow for an entire biosphere to be wiped out by our inactions!” K’danz countered. “And that’s what will happen if we do nothing!”

“Does the Prime Directive really apply in this situation?” Fil inquired.

"I look at it this way," Tomkins continued. "What would have happened had the *Bellerophon* or *Triton* not happened across this nebula today? In less than two days, the star will still ignite. In less than two days, this planet will no longer exist regardless."

"But now that we DO know about this planet, are we not obligated to do something to save the undoubtedly unique life-forms that have evolved there?" K'danz countered. "Think about it! Life developing on a planet located within a dark nebula, far from any normal sun! Only the heat from a nearby proto-star and the background radiation of the nebula providing the conditions necessary for life to not only exist, but to have evolved in the first place! I'm not saying we can save EVERYTHING, but shouldn't we at least see for ourselves what is there, how it survived this long, and perhaps collect some small sample to help us understand how life evolved someplace where – according to our own current understanding – it should not be able to exist! We cannot simply stand by and let it all simply be destroyed!"

Fil looked pensive for a moment before finally saying, "Okay, you've convinced me. I suppose it wouldn't hurt to make a quick survey of the planet. Perhaps even a quick investigation might provide us with a vastly better understanding of the universe around us."

"Fine. I agree," Tomkins remarked after a moment's thought.

"In that case, plot a course toward this planet you've discovered," Fil ordered.

"The planet is located at bearing 032 mark 9, range two-hundred and seventy million kilometers," stated Tomkins on the screen.

"Helm," said K'danz. "Compute course 032 mark 9. Ahead one-half impulse."

"Course 032 mark 9 plotted and laid in, Captain," confirmed Li. "Accelerating to one-half impulse power."

As the *Bellerophon* moved closer to the edge of the nebula, the *Triton* moved into position behind the Intrepid-class starship. Within a short time, both vessels had disappeared within the murky gaseous mass.

\* \* \* \*

It took nearly two hours for the pair of starships to reach the planet. The faint glow of the proto-star in the distance silhouetted the planet's disc as they approached, making the rogue planet a darker circle against the darkness of the nebula.

"Standard orbit, helm," K'danz ordered. As the helmsman acknowledged, the captain looked over at Lieutenant Koester and said, "Beginning scanning the surface, Gem. Catalogue everything you find down there."

"Yes, Captain," the science officer confirmed, activating the starship's short-range sensing capability. "Sensor readings confirm plant-based life on the planet's surface," Koester stated. "The surface is mostly barren. Isolated pockets of vegetation dispersed across the land masses. The limited plant life appears similar to Earth's Devonian period of 400 million years ago. Not detecting any signs of animal life, though small animals like insects, fish, or rodents – unless massed in large numbers – would probably not register. I'm also..." Koester's voice trailed off, causing looks of confusion on the faces of Fil, K'danz, and Zhadesh. A moment later she cried out, "I don't believe this!"

"What is it, Lieutenant?" Admiral Fil, who had been sitting in the first officer's seat to the left of K'danz, asked.

"I'm detecting a faint signal on the thirty kilohertz frequency originating from the planet's surface," Koester replied. "I do not believe it is of natural origin."

"Xin, hail the *Triton*," K'danz ordered. "See if they're detecting the same signal we are."

A moment later, Captain Tomkins was back on the main viewer. "I assume you're receiving the same signal we are?" she asked.

"We are," K'danz confirmed. "We're trying to locate its source. You don't suppose there may be some advanced civilization located on this planet, do you?"

"Unlikely," Tomkins replied. "Keep scanning. We'll do likewise. One of us is bound to find the source. And once we do, we can determine what is broadcasting it."

\* \* \* \*

*Captain's log, stardate 70037.3:*

*It took a couple of hours, but the Belle's sensors finally located the source of the radio signal we detected shortly after entering orbit. The Triton reported they are detecting a spacecraft of some kind almost completely hidden by overgrowth of trees and other plant-life, and Captain Tomkin's crew surmised it may have crashed on the planet decades – if not centuries – ago, and that the signal we have detected is some sort of distress call that is running low on power. Captain Tomkins, Admiral Fil, and I are debating whether it is worth sending down an away team to check out the crash site and see if we can determine what caused the ship to crash in the short time we have left inside the nebula.*

*K'danz, out.*

“How about we send a team of six from each starship?” Fil was suggesting. He was sitting across from K'danz in the captain's ready room aboard the *Bellerophon*. Captain Tomkins' face was displayed on the monitor screen atop the desk, angled so both K'danz and Fil could see her. “If we can determine what happened here, perhaps we can solve a mystery we don't even know about before the evidence is erased forever.”

“If we do dispatch away teams,” Tomkins said, “we must be sure to maintain transporter lock on them at all times. We may have to beam them back up and warp away from here at a moment's notice.”

“Agreed,” K'danz said. She then looked at Fil and added, “With your permission, Admiral.”

“Of course,” Fil replied.

K'danz activated the intercom on her desk and said, “K'danz to Commander Paris.”

“Yes, Captain?” came the quick reply from the *Belle's* first officer.

“Tom, form an away team and coordinate with a second team from the *Triton*. We're going to try and find out what happened to the spacecraft we've discovered on the surface.”

“Yes, ma'am,” Tom Paris replied.

\* \* \* \*

Fifteen minutes later, six members of the *Bellerophon* crew: Paris, Chief Science Officer T'Var, a second science officer named Donovan Graydon, assistant chief engineer Kent Sawyer, the starship's Marine security chief Major Michael Drake, and the chief medical officer Doctor Bob Cuomo were gathered in the transporter room. Each member was equipped with a palm beacon and their regular away equipment, whether it was tricorders, phasers, or in Doctor Cuomo's case, a medikit.

Paris was holding a large padd, on which was displayed a topographical map of the planet's surface in the vicinity of the downed spaceship that had been located, explaining what he had planned for the mission.

“I've coordinated with Commander Peehs aboard the *Triton*,” Paris explained. “Our team will beam down to the west of the area where we believe this spacecraft is located, beneath this large copse of trees.” He pointed at an area of the map that looked like several trees had fallen and intertwined. “At the same time, the *Triton* away team will beam down to the east, in the hopes we can rendezvous in this clearing in the middle near where we believe the ship is located.”

“What is our mission goal?” Lieutenant Commander T'Var asked.

“We don't have much time,” Paris reiterated. “Anywhere from nine to forty hours before the proto-star is expected to ignite, so we cannot dilly-dally. We want to try and determine who the ship belongs to – Kairn, Morain, or Sagion being the most likely origin – when it crashed here, and recover anything that might be of cultural or historical significance. The Captain hopes we might be able to let someone know what happened to their ship, however long it's been missing.”

Paris deactivated the padd and handed it to the transporter chief before stepping up onto the transport platform, where he was surrounded by his fellow away team members.

“Are you ready, Chief?” he asked the man behind the transparent partition.

“I have orders from the Captain to maintain transporter lock on all of you, so I recommend you not enter any deep caverns or fall from great heights. Otherwise, I have the coordinates to beam you down. Standing by, Commander,” the Chief replied.

“Energize, Chief,” Paris ordered. The transporter operator nodded and ran his fingers down the controls. The system hummed to life, and the six member away team dematerialized. As the chief finished the transport process, an indicator on his console started flashing.

“What in blazes?” he remarked until he saw what the indicator was signaling. He then slammed his hand against the intercom and practically shouted, “Transporter room one to bridge!”

“Bridge. This is the Captain. What is it, Chief?”

“Captain, I lost transporter lock on all the away team members the instant they materialized on the surface!”

\* \* \* \*

The *Bellerophon*'s away team materialized in a small clearing among some tall grass. Like much of the rest of the landscape, the plants surrounding the away team all had blueish hues, ranging from what could be described as sky-blue on Earth to almost black in shade. The planet's surface was bathed in a perpetual twilight, due to the subdued glow of the nebula that surrounded the rogue planet combined with the faint illumination of the proto-star.

Once the team had completed materialization, they tested their palm beacons and Paris activated his combadge. “Paris to *Bellerophon*.” He waited several seconds for a response before repeating the call. When there was still no response, he looked at T'Var with concern. The Vulcan, in turn, consulted her tricorder.

“I am detecting an ionization field that could account for our inability to contact the *Bellerophon*,” she said. “Possibly a byproduct of the nebula's radiation as it interacts with this planet's atmosphere.”

“Why didn't we detect this field before we beamed down?” Paris asked.

“I can only surmise the level of ionization is too small for ship's sensors to detect,” T'Var replied.

“What about short-range communications, Commander?” Lieutenant Sawyer asked.

Paris tapped his combadge again and said, “Paris to *Triton* away team.”

“Com..nder Paris, this is C...ander Peehs,” responded the static-filled voice of the *Triton*'s first officer. “We are in po...ion to the east of where we bel..ve the crashed ship is located. Ho..ver, we ca..ot co...ct our ship.”

“Acknowledged,” Paris replied, looking toward the east and seeing what looked like large fallen tree trunks under which they believed the ship was located approximately eight hundred meters away. Paris knew from the plan that had been agreed upon that the *Triton* away team was another eight hundred or so meters beyond the copse of trees. It would take each away team approximately ten minutes to rendezvous at the crash-site – if everything went right. “We cannot contact the Belle either. Recommend we continue with our mission as planned until we can find some way to contact one of our ships. We'll meet you at the rendezvous. Paris out.” Then, as he deactivated his combadge, he addressed his team. “Whatever is causing the ionization field hasn't cut off all communications. Maybe the Belle can punch through the interference once they realize we can't contact them. In the meantime, is everyone's gear working?”

The five other away team members all answered positively as they checked the functionality of their equipment, then Lt Commander T'Var approached the first officer.

“Commander,” the Vulcan woman said. “I find this curious. I started scanning the area just after we beamed down, and I am detecting life-form readings corresponding to humanoids.”

“Could you be detecting the *Triton*'s away team?” Paris asked, glancing at the small screen on the science officer's tricorder.

“I do not believe so,” the science officer replied. “The tricorder indicates the readings are only about seven to eight hundred meters distant.” She consulted her tricorder again and added, “And I am registering five human and one Caitian humanoid life-signs at a distance of sixteen hundred meters and slowly decreasing.”

“THAT would be the *Triton* away team,” Paris agreed. He then asked Dr. Cuomo, “Is it possible there were survivors of the crash and they had offspring that could still be alive here?”

“I wouldn’t think so,” the doctor replied. “This planet is constantly bathed with thermionic radiation from the nebula cloud. Due to this planet’s atmosphere we’re safe for the short time we’re going to be here,” Cuomo assured. “But anything more than a few months would probably cause gene mutation. It is unlikely any life-form we’re familiar with would be able to survive more than a year or two here, no less reproduce under these circumstances.”

“Then I think it’s time we go and introduce ourselves to the natives,” Paris said, taking the lead as Major Drake covered the rear. As the away team started moving toward where they believed the spaceship was located, Paris activated his combadge again. “Paris to Commander Peehs. Be advised, we have detected humanoid life-signs in the vicinity of the ship we’re seeking.”

“We confirm your readings, Commander,” Peehs responded back, his voice hard to understand through the static. “Also having some difficulty understanding your voice transmissions. There is something in the vicinity that is interfering with communications. We have been unable to contact either of our starships.”

“We noticed that too,” Paris agreed. “We believe it could be due to the atmosphere’s interaction with the nebula’s natural radiation. Hopefully either the *Belle* or the *Triton* realize what is going on and can break through the interference before we have to get off the surface.”

As the away team continued to move toward the ship and mysterious life-form readings, Drake moved up beside Paris and asked, “How can you be sure the *Belle* is even going to be able to beam us back up, even if they can’t communicate with us, Commander? The same thing interfering with our communications could possibly prevent transport as well.”

Paris looked at the Marine officer, his expression neutral, as he quietly replied, “That’s an issue we’ll have to deal with once we know what is going on, Major. We may as well collect all the facts before we start worrying about whether we can beam back to the ship or not.”

“Sir, yes, sir,” Drake replied, almost sarcastically, as he dropped back to take up the rear once again.

Several minutes later, the away team emerged through the saplings that surrounded a clearing, in the center of which was the toppled trees.

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” Sawyer said, staring in wonder at what he was seeing. “But does that look like a hanger to you?”

The away team members gaped in wonder at what they were seeing. The tree trunks they had believed had fallen were in actuality curved support beams covering an obviously artificial – or at least intelligently designed – structure. Inside, the hanger was lit up, though not much brighter than the normal twilight daylight of the unnamed planet, shining down on an intact and – from all appearances – fully functional spacecraft.

“That ship parked inside the hanger. It looks like some of the Morain ships we’ve worked with in the past,” Graydon remarked.

“How did a Morain base get here, inside the nebula, and for what purpose?” Paris started to ask when he noticed the members of the *Triton*’s away team moving into the clearing on the other side of the hanger, several human-sized squirrel-like rodents with grey fur and brightly-colored shirts accompanying them. Commander Peehs noticed the *Bellerophon* away team opposite them and waved for Paris and his team to join them.

“What’s going on here?” Paris asked when his team had finally reached their counterparts.

“Commander Paris,” Peehs said. “This is Sciurus Lis, one of the crash survivors. He and his gathering party came across us just before we reached the clearing and invited us to join them back at their ship. It seems they have been trapped here for almost a standard year.”

“Oh, you misunderstand! We are not survivors,” Sciurus Lis said in its high-pitched voice, sounding much like a twentieth century cartoon character. “We are followers of J’onzz, the wise and powerful.”

A short time later, both away teams had gathered with the Morain around a table set up to one side of the hanger near the entrance to the Morain spaceship. As the handful of Morain that had come across the *Triton* away team moved on to other chores, the one that Peehs had introduced as Sciurus Lis offered to tell the Starfleet crews what the Morain were doing on the planet.

“We have many questions for you,” Paris started to say, turning down offers for refreshments and nut-like snack cakes. “Why are you here? What made you land on this planet? And how did you make these trees – trees that must be at least several centuries old – bend and entwine like they are now to form a hanger over your vessel?”

“Starfleet and the Morain Defense Force have been allied for several years,” Sciurus Lis remarked, looking at Paris. “Surely you already know of our ability to create elaborate structures from the plants and trees of our homeworld?” The Morain looked at Peehs and added, “The Commander mentioned his ship, *USS Triton*, spent several months in a Morain orbiting drydock.”

“But I thought...,” Paris started to say, then caught himself. “I assumed it took many years to fully cultivate a structure such as this.” He gestured around at the hanger around them, noting there were several ancillary rooms, including a room big enough to act as shuttlecraft maintenance aboard a starship at the rear of the hanger. “You told us you had only been here on the surface of this planet for a year?”

“Some more elaborate structures can take years to cultivate, true,” Sciurus Lis replied in its high-pitched voice. “Simpler structures, like this hanger, only take a few weeks using the methods we have perfected over thousands of years.”

As other members of the combined away team looked around in awe – or in T’Var’s case, appreciative examination – Peehs said, “You mentioned outside that you were not survivors. And it’s pretty obvious looking at your ship that you didn’t crash here and that the ship at least appears to be fully operational. You do realize that you and your people cannot stay here, right?”

“They stay here as long as I tell them it is required,” said a second high-pitched yet older sounding voice from behind. Both Paris and Peehs turned to see another Morain, this one wearing subdued brown clothing over its very light grey fur, slowly walking down the entry ramp of the ship with the aid of a cane fashioned from twisted wood.

“Commander Peehs, Commander Paris,” said Sciurus Lis, gesturing with one claw-fingered hand in the direction of the new arrival. “This is J’onzz, our guide and leader.”

The squirrel-like humanoid placed both hands together and nodded his head at the Starfleet crews, a gesture of greeting in Morain culture. “What brings our allies to this place of peace and enlightenment.”

Paris assumed the elder Morain was making a joke of some kind, considering how dark the planet was that the Morain had landed upon. “Our ships were investigating the nebula when we unexpectedly discovered this planet – capable of supporting life – here in the middle of nowhere. As we explored closer, we detected your signal and thought someone had crashed here on the surface, perhaps awaiting rescue.”

J’onzz appeared slightly agitated, his tail twitching spasmodically. “That signal was not meant for human ears,” J’onzz remarked, a tone of annoyance in his high-pitched voice as he glared at Sciurus Lis.

“What do you mean?” Peehs asked. “We thought it was an unusual distress signal when we detected it. We didn’t even recognize it as of Morain origin.”

“It is a frequency and signal used exclusively by my sect,” J’onzz replied. “Its purpose is to show the path so more of our people can travel here to be with us. It is easily detected from great distances by Morain technology.”

“Your sect?” Lieutenant George W. Gallagher asked.

Sciurus Lis cut in, as if attempting to keep J’onzz from saying something the Starfleet crews might find strange or offensive, and said, “J’onzz is the leader of our religious sect. He led us here, into the nebula, which was proclaimed in prophesy to be a place of peace and enlightenment.” He looked out the large opening of the hanger at the perpetual twilight-lit landscape, filled with nothing but blue-colored grass, plants, and trees. “At the very least you must admit this place is peaceful. No wars. No conflict.”

“Unfortunately your enlightenment is about to get much brighter,” Paris interjected.

“What do you mean?” Sciurus Lis asked.

Paris pointed at the dim outline of the proto-star in the sky and said, “According to all our instruments, that proto-star is going to ignite into a full-fledged ball of fusing hydrogen atoms sometime in the next ten to forty hours. When that happens, this nebula – and everything within it – is going to be consumed by the fusion ignition.”

“You really must prepare to leave this planet,” Peehs added. “The *Triton* and *Bellerophon* can escort you back to Morain space. And if your ship is having issues that aren’t evident to us...?”

“NO!”

Everyone paused and turned to look at J’onzz, who stared defiantly at the Starfleet crews.

“What do you mean, no, J’onzz?” Paris asked.

“My people will not leave this world,” J’onzz replied. “In fact, I am sure more will join us in peace and enlightenment.” The squirrel-like alien then turned and limped back aboard his ship, his wooden cane clomping on the ramp with each step.

Sciurus Lis blinked in confusion, his gaze darting between the now-departed J’onzz and the Starfleet away members several times before he finally excused himself and scampered into the ship.

“What the hell is going on here?” Peehs asked.

“It seems to me like a cult,” Paris replied. “Like a religious sect of Morain followed their leader here and he has placed them in a situation from which they will not survive unless they abandon their faith... and this place.”

“That J’onzz seems pretty adamant about staying here, even though this planet is going to literally evaporate within hours,” Major Drake remarked. “Where does that leave us?”

“Logically, we must evacuate this planet,” Lt Commander T’Var replied.

“But can we?” Peehs asked.

“Their ship looks space-worthy,” Sawyer remarked, looking at the Morain vessel. “But even if it’s not, we should have no trouble beaming this small population of Morain up to one or both ships in orbit. Looking around, there can’t be more than a couple dozen of them.”

“According to tricorder readings, aside from our two away teams, there are forty-six Morain life forms present in the immediate vicinity,” T’Var offered.

“You misunderstand me,” Peehs said. “I’m not asking if we are capable of evacuating the Morain. I’m asking if we can morally force them to leave if they choose to stay here?”

“But why would they voluntarily choose to stay?” Graydon asked.

“You heard their leader, Lieutenant,” Peehs remarked. “He refuses to consider the possibility of leaving.”

“Are these... colonists, for lack of a better word... covered by the protection of the Prime Directive? Is that what you’re asking?” Paris clarified.

“Exactly! Does this count as a ‘new civilization’? Can we morally force these people off this planet?” Peehs asked.

“Even though not leaving means certain death?” Drake added. “Do we honestly have a choice?”

“They’ve been informed of the facts,” T’Var stated. “If they choose to ignore those facts, it would not be upon us to force them to do what they have no wish to do.”

“I wish we could consult with Amanda and your captain,” Peehs remarked. “Get a little more advice about what direction we should be going here...”

“Ad...l Fil to ...ander Paris. Do ... copy th...ansmis...n?”

“Commander!” Drake exclaimed. “That came from your communicator.”

Excitement now covering the first officer’s face, Paris slapped his hand against the combadge on his chest.

“Admiral! This is Paris! We can hear you, but only barely. How copy us?”

“St...d by. We’re ad...sting our sub...ace tran...eiver. How are you re...ing us now?”

“Much better, Admiral,” Paris replied. “What is the situation? Have you figured out what is interfering with our communications?”

“Yes,” Fil replied. “Th...e is an artifi...al field being gen...ated in your vicini...y. It is in...rfering with comm...ications and prev...ting us from being able to b...m you all back ab...rd. What is your sit...tion?”

Paris and Peehs exchanged concerned looks regarding the inability to beam back to their ships before Paris explained, “We have located a group of Morain on the planet’s surface.”

“Morain? Are they alive? How did they survive the crash?” Fil asked.

“They didn’t crash, Admiral,” Paris replied. “They landed here on purpose. Some sort of religious organization...”

“More like a cult,” interjected Drake.

Paris shot the Marine major a look before continuing, “...Who view this planet as some sort of religious retreat where they hope to attain peace and enlightenment.”

“They’re going to get more light than they will know what to do with if they don’t get off that planet soon!” Fil remarked. “And you too!”

“We were just debating that issue ourselves,” Paris admitted. “These Morain do not want to leave. Can we force them off the planet, or do they fall under the protection of the Prime Directive, preventing us from interfering?”

There was a prolonged pause from the Admiral for several seconds before the Catullan’s voice replied, “That’s not something I have ever had to consider before. We may need to consult with Starfleet – perhaps even the Federation Council – before making a decision. However, subspace transmission out of the nebula are extremely garbled at present.”

“Is there any hope that you have managed to overcome whatever was keeping you from beaming us back aboard the same way you punched through the subspace interference?” Commander Peehs asked hopefully.

“Unfortunately, no. But we have both Commander Dar and Lieutenant Alston both working diligently on the problem. We are hopeful we can get all of you back aboard before the proto-star ignites. In the meantime, investigate what you can down there. Maybe you can find the source of this field and eliminate it?”

“We’ll do our best, Admiral. Paris, out.”

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Several hours later, the away team members had started moving around the Morain encampment, searching for a source of the field Admiral Fil had stated was artificial in nature and preventing them from beaming back aboard their ships without looking like they were actually looking for anything specific in order to allay any concerns the Morain might have about their Starfleet allies ‘snooping.’ One thing they all had learned were the Morain were very open and friendly – as the Morain tended to be ever since first contact almost a decade earlier – yet most seemed completely unconcerned by their impending fate, seemingly not believing the planet would soon be destroyed, or that if it were, that they would discover the strength to escape doom, a phrase that puzzled the away team members.

Meanwhile, aboard the *Bellerophon*, Captain K’danz and Admiral Fil were sitting at the table in the briefing lounge just off the bridge, Captain Amanda Tomkins displayed on the bulkhead monitor from her own ready room aboard the *Triton*.

“If I am understanding the message we received from Admiral Janeway correctly, Starfleet Command agrees with our assessment that if this group of Morain do not wish to leave this planet before the proto-star ignites, we can leave them to their fate,” Fil was explaining.

“Are you sure, Admiral?” Tomkins asked over the monitor screen. “It seems cruel to me to just leave them to be incinerated by the star.”

“Would you rather drag them away, figuratively kicking and screaming and acting against their better interests?” Fil asked in response. “The situation has been explained to them in full. We have done all we can do.” Fil then looked directly at K’danz and asked, “Any progress on piercing the field trapping our away teams on the surface, Carrie?”

“Negative,” K’danz replied. “Neither Dar nor Alston have been able to figure out what is generating the field or where it is originating. But in the meantime, Dar has volunteered to take a shuttle down and rescue our teams. All I need is your permission to make the attempt.”

“Consider it granted,” Fil replied. “Wish your husband good luck. Now tell him to go get our people.”

“Yes, Admiral,” K’danz said before activating the nearby intercom. “K’danz to main shuttlebay.”

“Shuttle bay. Dar,” came the quick reply.

“Dar, you have permission to attempt a rescue mission to the planet’s surface. How soon can you...?”

“Deck officer, this is *Shuttle One*,” Dar’s voice stated over the intercom. “Request permission to launch.”

K’danz looked at Admiral Fil with an amused look as the officer manning the shuttle bay’s control booth responded, “*Shuttle One*, shuttle bay door is opening. You are cleared for launch at your discretion.”

“Copy, deck officer. *Shuttle One* launching.” Several seconds later Dar added, “Clear of shuttle bay. On decent to planet’s surface. I will contact you when we’re loaded up and ready to depart the surface. Dar, out.”

K’danz wished there was a window in the briefing lounge looking over the aft section of her starship, as there had been when she served aboard the *Dauntless*, so she could watch the Type-8 shuttlecraft as it left the shuttle bay and entered the planet’s atmosphere. She had to be content with the thought that her husband’s mission was fairly routine and he would soon return with her first officer and the rest of the away team members.

“I guess we now just sit here and wait?” Fil remarked.

“Perhaps not, Admiral,” Captain Tomkins remarked over the monitor. Fil had almost forgotten the *Triton*’s commanding officer was still there.

“What do you mean, Amanda?” K’danz asked with concern.

“My science officer is getting intermittent readings from just outside the nebula,” Tomkins reported. “He think there is a small fleet of several ships approaching our position.”

“Any idea who?” Fil asked.

“I have some suspicions, but we won’t know for sure until either they arrive, or...”

“Or...?” Fil prompted.

“Admiral, since the *Bellerophon* is currently engaged in recovery efforts on the planet’s surface, request permission for the *Triton* to break orbit and intercept the approaching vessels and determine their intentions.”

“Very well,” Fil replied. “But make sure you keep an eye on the status of the proto-star. We may still need the *Triton*’s help before it ignites.”

“Aye, Admiral. *Triton*, out.”

The monitor screen blanked out and K’danz looked at Admiral Fil, remarking, “This situation just gets weirder and weirder.”

“Just part of the job,” Fil remarked with a half-smile.

\* \* \* \*

Aboard *Bellerophon Shuttle One*, Dar was programming his approach to the Morain encampment into the helm console before looking at his companion, a small maintenance robot he had recovered from a Cybot vessel several years earlier that he called Wally because in spite of its mechanical origin, the little maintenance bot often seemed nervous like Dar’s human uncle Walter. The small bot was monitoring sensor readings at a console beside the co-pilot’s seat.

“Wally, let me know as soon as sensors detect any readings that might be the dampening field blocking the transporters,” Dar remarked. “If we can determine where the field begins, we might have a better chance of figuring out where it’s coming from.”

The robot turned its photo-receptors, the iris’ contracting and expanding again as it made an unintelligible electronic sound that Dar had learned over time meant acknowledgement. Wally then turned his ‘eyes’ back to the sensor readouts. Meanwhile, the half-Klingon engineer activated the shuttles tranceiver.

“*Belle Shuttle One* to away team. I’m on approach to your location. Acknowledge.”

“Com..nder Dar, this is Comma..er Paris,” came the response from the surface. “We can hear you, but the lig..ing conditions aren’t good en..gh for us to have a visual on you yet.”

“Understood. I’m about ten clicks out from your location, approaching from the west. I’m going to turn on the shuttle’s spotlight in just a...”

Dar's sentence was cut off as the shuttle suddenly dropped several hundred meters, as if hitting severe turbulence. Alert klaxons sounded throughout the shuttle's cabin, and Wally looked around in alarm before his photoreceptors focused on the sensor readings again and he started making several electronic sounds.

"If you're saying you detected the dampening field and we're already in it, I have to concur," Dar shouted over the sound of the alarms as he struggled to regain control of the shuttle. "I just lost main power. Trying to stabilize with maneuvering thrusters. Hold on, Wally, this could be a rough landing!" As the small robot abandoned his post and rolled on track-like wheels toward the back of the shuttle, where he folded up into his cube-like inactive configuration, Dar again activated the shuttle's communications, trying to hail the *Bellerophon*. "This is *Shuttle One*! I lost main power as soon as the shuttle crossed into the dampening field covering the surface! Attempting to make an emergency landing!"

\* \* \* \*

"Captain!" Commander Xin Zhadesh called out. K'danz and Fil had returned to the bridge as soon as the *Triton* had broken orbit of the rogue planet and were awaiting word that Dar had reached the away teams on the surface. "I am receiving garbled communications from Commander Dar's shuttle. I believe he is reporting the shuttle has lost power once it entered the dampening field."

K'danz muttered an expletive before getting out of her seat and crossing the bridge up to Zhadesh's ops console. "Is he able to land safely at least?"

"I'm unsure," Zhadesh admitted. "I have lost the Commander's signal."

\* \* \* \*

In the Morain encampment, the Starfleet away teams were gathered at the main opening of the hanger with several of the Morain they had been talking to when the sound of the approaching shuttle started to be heard. Each of them was searching in the dusk-like sky for signs of the approaching ship, when the sounds they were hearing suddenly got quieter.

"What happened?" Petty Officer Kelsey Jackson asked.

"I'm not surrrrrr," remarked Lieutenant Ckathel. "It almost sounded like the shuttle lost prrrropulsive powerrrr."

Paris and Peehs exchanged alarmed looks as the *Triton*'s first officer asked, "You don't think he crashed, do you?"

"I hope not, or there's no way we're getting off this planet before it's destroyed unless we find what's causing the dampening field!" Paris replied.

"Look!" Major Drake suddenly shouted out. The Marine was pointing at something moving slowly just over the tree line. At first it seemed to be just another sparkle in the twilight sky, similar to the ionization discharges visible in the nebula cloud, but slowly it resolved itself into two lights, one red, the other green, slowly moving toward the Morain encampment.

"It's the shuttle!" Doctor Cuomo remarked with relief.

"Yes, it is, but something's wrong," Paris remarked, staring intently at the approaching lights. "It's not moving like a shuttle normally would on approach."

As the shuttle neared, the away team members could see small flashes along the edges of the craft, quickly realizing they were seeing the discharges of the reaction control system thrusters.

"He's not on main power!" Sawyer remarked. "And he's coming in too fast!"

The group watched with disappointment as the shuttle appeared to drop beneath the trees. This was followed by a roar as the thrusters fired at maximum and the shuttle slowly lifted back into view, still approaching the Morain encampment too fast. Ideally, Dar should have circled above the camp to dissipate most of his speed, but such a maneuver would likely cause the shuttle to stall and crash – probably into the Morain tree-hanger. Instead, Dar brought the shuttle down into the clearing – sending half a dozen Morain scrambling for cover – before

hitting the thrusters at maximum once again. Dust was kicked up, obscuring the already difficult view, until a grinding bang could be heard. As the dust cleared, the away team was amazed to see the shuttle – mainly intact – had performed a hard landing and skidded to a stop mere meters from where they stood, its aft end now facing toward them after having spun almost a hundred and eighty degrees. The away teams could hear the thrusters powering down, and almost thirty seconds later the rear hatch started lowering to the ground. The hatch was half-open when the hydraulics failed and it dropped the rest of the way to the ground with a loud clang.

Paris started taking a tentative step toward the opening when a small brown and yellow robot moving on treads rolled down the ramp and looked at Paris before unexpectedly grabbing the first officer around his legs. The *Bellerophon*'s first officer could not hold back a smile because – in spite of the fact the little maintenance bot was nothing more than an automaton – he could swear he saw fear in its expression. Wally made noises at Paris like it was complaining and/or telling an amazing tale of survival and defying death.

“Come on, Wally!” Dar remarked as he finally emerged from the shuttle. “I had it under control the whole time. And you know what they say, any landing you can walk away from... Well, in your case, roll away from...”

Wally turned his attention on Dar for a moment, making dismissive-sounding noises like he did not exactly agree with the engineer's assessment, then rolled away behind the rest of the away team and started vibrating as if he was shaking in fear.

“Welcome to the surface, Commander,” Paris finally said to Dar. “I take it by your method of arrival that we're not headed back home right away?”

“Sorry, Commander,” Dar replied. “I was just over eight kilometers out when Wally detected us passing into the dampening field that allowed all of you to beam down here but not beam back. I immediately lost main power and had to jury-rig the thruster system to provide enough lift to keep me in the air instead of crashing into some of the thickest trees I have ever seen and still be able to land in one piece in this clearing.” Dar looked back at the shuttle, which was emitting smoke from all the reaction control system thruster ports before adding, “I'll give the shuttle the once-over, but I really don't think we'll be able to get it off the ground again without killing that field surrounding the area.”

“Any idea where the center of the field is located?” Commander Peehs asked. “If we knew that, we might have a better idea of where to look for the source of the field.”

“No luck,” Dar remarked, glancing over at Wally, who was only starting to calm down slightly, enjoying being the center of attention as he was examined and coo-ed over by several of the Morain, who had never seen a cute little robot like himself anywhere before. “We didn't detect the field on sensors until we entered it. We were barely able to confirm its existence on sensors from orbit! Almost like someone wants to keep its existence a secret!”

Paris glanced toward the boarding ramp of the Morain spaceship with an angry expression and remarked, “Perhaps someone is trying to do just that.”

\* \* \* \*

K'danz was in her ready room, reviewing reports and proposals for retrieving her own crew and that of the *USS Triton* from the surface of the rogue planet when the door chime sounded. Slightly annoyed by the distraction, she looked up at the door as she said, “Come.”

The double door swished open and Commander Zhadesh stepped inside, followed by one of her husband's more-senior engineers. “Excuse the interruption, Captain,” Zhadesh said. “But Lieutenant Hutchinson believes he may have found a method of boosting the transporter signal to allow transport back up from the surface through the dampening field.”

K'danz's annoyance immediately disappeared as she asked, “What have you figured out, Lieutenant?”

“I have been analyzing the energy patterns of the field in the vicinity of the Morain encampment and believe we can tune the transporter beam to avoid several transmission frequencies the field interferes with,” Hutchinson explained. “This will allow us to – in effect – bypass the dampening field and transport the away team

members back up to our ship. Unfortunately, the power and frequency requirements mean we can only transport one person at a time, and we're not going to be able to retrieve the shuttle."

"I couldn't care less about the shuttle if it means getting all our people back safely," K'danz said as she got out of her chair and moved toward the door to the bridge. As all three crew members emerged from the ready room, K'danz asked, "When can you have the transporter system ready to do this?"

"It should only take me a few minutes to program the changes into the system," Hutchinson replied. "However, my one concern is the transporter generally uses a wide spectrum of frequencies during transport in order to provide back-up to the signal. This acts in the manner of a check-number, assuring the system that all the data is present and correct. With the modifications I have designed, if anything goes wrong during transport, we could accidentally kill someone."

"Acknowledged," K'danz said. "Go make your modifications. I'll contact the away team and explain the situation. I'm sure someone will be willing to volunteer if it means getting back to the ship safely." Then as Hutchinson stepped up and into the nearby turbolift, the captain said to Zhadesh, "Commander, hail the away team. I want to speak to Mister Paris."

"Yes, Captain," Zhadesh replied, having returned to his ops console. "Hailing frequency is open."

"*Bellerophon* to away team," K'danz stated.

"Aw.. team. Paris."

"Tom, Mister Hutchinson believes he has found a way to transport you all back up through the dampening field," the captain informed.

"That's g..d news, Cap..in. We're sta..ing by down here with Dar and W..ly."

K'danz was happy to hear her husband had safely reached the surface, even if he was now trapped there with the away team, and she felt a slight weight she had not even realized was there lift from her shoulders. She then added, "I'm afraid there's a small catch. We're only going to be able to beam each of you up one at a time, and the safety back-ups will not be in place. I need someone to volunteer to be first."

On the surface, Paris looked at all the away team member, which now included his starship's half-Klingon chief engineer and his pet robot. Part of him wanted to be the one to volunteer – to face the potential danger head-on – but another part of him knew that as the leader of the away team, he needed to be the last to beam back to the *Bellerophon*.

"I'll do it, sir," Lieutenant Graydon said as he stepped forward. "I'm interested in seeing how Mister Hutchinson managed to punch through the field interference."

"Captain, we have a volunteer," Paris said. "Mister Graydon is willing to give it a try."

"Great. It's just go..g to be a few min..es before we're ready up here. St..d by," K'danz ordered.

A few minutes later, Lieutenant Hutchinson and the *Bellerophon*'s transporter chief were in the *Belle*'s transporter room one, the engineer having just completed the modifications to the system's programming.

"I'm still not entirely sure about this, Lieutenant," the chief remarked, looking dubious at the readouts on the console. "The reason the transporter uses the entire frequency spectrum is to provide a reasonable measure of extra safety. You're completely negating that safety feature."

"It's the only way, Chief," Hutchinson replied before tapping his combadge.

"I just want to go on record as objecting to this modification," the chief remarked. "People are going to be hurt."

"Noted and logged," Hutchinson stated before activating the intercom. "Transporter room to bridge. We're all set down here."

"Very well," K'danz's voice replied. "Lock onto Mister Graydon's signal. He will be the first to beam aboard."

"Aye, Captain," the engineer responded. He then looked at the transporter chief and added, "You heard the Captain. Let's lock onto Lieutenant Graydon's signal."

As the chief manipulated the transporter controls, Hutchinson switched the communications and said, "*Bellerophon* to Lieutenant Graydon. We're all ready up here." He looked at the chief, who nodded – though his frown never wavered from his expression. "Locked onto your signal. Stand by."

“Standing by, *Bellerophon*,” Graydon’s voice responded.

“Energize, Chief,” Hutchinson ordered.

The transporter chief ran his fingertips up the console controls and the transporter came to life. The chamber hummed, but the sound was unusual – a dissonant harmonic quite unlike the normal operation of the system. After several seconds, the familiar sparkle started forming over one of the transport pads.

As the system began to power down, the faces of both men in the control booth took on looks of horror. Hutchinson’s jaw dropped open and he stood motionless with indecision as the transporter chief slammed his hand on the intercom and shouted, “Medical emergency in transporter room one!”

K’danz heard the report over the intercom and immediately rushed toward the turbolift, shouting as she went, “Zhadesh, you have the bridge!” By the time she arrived outside the transporter room, one of the ship’s doctors and a medic pushing an anti-grav gurney had likewise arrived, and all three entered the room together. What they saw shocked and disgusted them.

On the transporter platform was a pulsating mass of bloody flesh, bone, and hair. Bits and pieces of uniform cloth could be seen covering some areas and melding into the flesh in others. It looked like a human who had been run through a blender and poured back out onto the transporter. “My God!” K’danz whispered. “What went wrong?!”

Doctor McDowell pulled out her medical tricorder and started scanning the fleshy mass. After several seconds, a look of shock and outrage appeared on the doctor’s face. “Captain,” she said. “This... man... is still alive. And in agonizing pain!”

Unable to bear the sight any longer, K’danz crossed the room and opened a weapons locker, pulling out a hand phaser and changing the setting on it. “Stand aside, Doctor,” the captain said. The doctor quickly moved away in surprise as K’danz aimed her weapon and depressed the trigger. The room was filled with a sound that could have been the whine of the phaser mixed with a scream of anguish before the mass of flesh and bone disintegrated completely, leaving a bloody imprint on the platform. The captain then closed her eyes and took several deep breaths before opening them once again, sharing a look with the doctor. She then returned the phaser to the locker and headed toward the door, stopping to glare at Hutchinson for a moment before wordlessly departing the transporter room.

“Paris to *Bel.rop.n*,” said the first officer’s voice over the intercom just as the doors swished closed. “What’s go.g on? We’re all still w..ting down here.”

“Sorry, Commander,” the transporter chief finally replied. “We had... a problem. We cannot attempt to beam any more of you up at present,” he explained.

There was a prolonged pause from Paris before he finally said, “Un..rst..d. Keep us inf..med. Paris, out.”

As the doctor and medical assistant gathered their equipment back onto the gurney and left, Hutchinson continued to stare at the blood-stained empty space on the platform where a monstrosity had earlier materialized.

\* \* \* \*

The *Triton* emerged from the gaseous wisps at the edge of the nebula. In the moderate distance, six small yet familiar vessels were slowly approaching at impulse speeds.

“Just as you thought, Captain,” the on-duty science officer remarked. “Six Morain patrol ships. They must have somehow picked up on the signal we detected once we entered orbit of that rogue planet.”

“Mister Weston,” Tomkins said from her command seat. “Hail the approaching Morain.”

“Hailing frequencies open, Captain,” the operations officer stated.

The main viewer immediately blinked to the image of a tall, grey-furred and squirrel-like Morain patrol ship commander. Its solid-black eyes seemed to stare through the viewer at Tomkins.

“Morain Commander, I am Captain Amanda Tomkins of the Federation starship *Triton*. What brings you to this nebula?”

“Captain Tomkins,” the Morain in the viewscreen responded in his own high-pitched voice. “I am Commander Genka of the Morain Defense Force. My patrol and I have been drawn here after detecting a signal we have been seeking for a long time. That signal has led us here to join with the followers of J’onzz.”

“During our exploration of this nebula we discovered an encampment that has been set up on a very rare class-M rogue planet within the nebula,” Tomkins explained. “Unfortunately, the proto-star at the center of this nebula is on the verge of igniting into a G-type star, which will result in the complete destruction of the nebula and everything within it. We and another Federation starship are currently attempting to retrieve our away team members that transported to the surface of that planet and your fellow Morain that are among those who established that encampment.”

“You will let us pass, Captain Tomkins,” Genka stated.

“I highly recommend you do not enter the nebula with your ships,” Tomkins reiterated. “The star could ignite at any time in the next day or so. We will have very little...”

“You will let us pass!” Genka repeated.

Tomkins took a deep breath and was about to explain the situation with the proto-star again in language she hoped the rodent-like Morain commander might better understand when the lead Morain ship opened fire on the *Triton* without warning. The weapon’s energy beam struck the starship’s main deflector and caused a cascade effect and arc-like discharges to erupt across the entire hull of the ship. On the bridge, several of the consoles sparked and flashed. Several went dark.

“Shields!” Tomkins ordered. “Get those shields up now!”

“I’m trying, Captain,” Lieutenant Dave Kelly, the tactical officer responded. “The Morain weapon has overloaded the EPS distribution network! I’ve got no control over anything!”

“Helm is non-responsive, Captain!” Josh Fields the helmsman reported.

“Engineering to bridge!” Mallory Alston said over the intercom. “The mains are off-line! Warp and impulse drive are both inoperative for the moment! It’s going to take some time for the engineering systems to re-set.”

Tomkins looked once more at the main viewer, where through the static the six Morain ships could just barely be seen, and wondered why the Federation’s allies in the AOR would attack her ship without provocation and if they intended to finish the *Triton* off. Instead, the Morain vessels simply activated their own impulse engines and – as the *Triton* drifted out of their path – set course into the nebula and toward the rogue planet within.

\* \* \* \*

In orbit over the rogue planet, Captain K’danz was back on the bridge, her mood even darker than before if possible, as she explained to Admiral Fil what had occurred in the transporter room.

“You did everything you could, Carrie,” Fil assured. “And Lieutenant Graydon understood the risks when he volunteered. You did what you had to do!”

“That doesn’t make me feel any better about it,” K’danz remarked as she slumped down into her command seat. “And it doesn’t get us any closer to getting our crew back. Any report from Tom? Have they figured out what is generating that field keeping them trapped on the surface?”

“Captain!” Commander Zhadesh interrupted. “I am detecting six ships about to enter orbit of this planet.”

K’danz turned to face her ops officer as she asked, “Is the *Triton* one of those ships?”

“Negative, Captain,” the Efrosian replied.

“Any idea who they are?”

“Configuration matches Morain patrol ships,” Zhadesh answered.

“More Morain?! What in hell is going on in this nebula? And where is Amanda’s ship?!”

Before Zhadesh could answer, the six Morain ships entered orbit over the rogue planet and immediately started launching small auxiliary craft toward the surface, each the size of a Federation runabout. The dozen shuttles converged on one another and started descending into the planet’s atmosphere in formation.

“Xin, open a hailing frequency to the Morain ships!” K’danz ordered. “Find out what their purpose here is!”

Zhadesh manipulated the controls on his console for a moment before looking at the captain with his pale blue eyes and stating, “The Morain are not responding.”

“Great!” K’danz complained. “Now we not only have to rescue our own away team, but however many more Morain those ships are all carrying!”

“Captain!” interrupted Lieutenant Gem Koester, a look of grave concern on her face. “I’m detecting new sensor readings coming from the proto-star.”

\* \* \* \*

On the planet’s surface, the combined away team was still dealing with the news of Lieutenant Graydon’s apparent death and the implications it meant to their own survival.

“We need to re-double our efforts to find the source of the dampening field,” Commander Peehs was saying. “We don’t have a lot of time left. We cannot be subtle about this anymore!”

Commander Paris was about to repeat that the entire Morain encampment – with the exception of the Morain ship itself – had already been searched and the away team still had no clue where the field was originating from when Lieutenant T’Var raised her hand up in a gesture to make everyone else stop talking. She then looked at Paris and said, “Do you hear that?”

Paris – along with everyone else in the away team – strained to hear whatever the Vulcan woman was hearing. The *Triton*’s Caitian science officer Ckathel Brightslay was the next to pick up the sound with his sensitive feline ears.

“Yes!” Ckathel remarked. “The sound of ships – several ships – approaching our location.”

“The *Triton* or *Bellerophon* have launched other shuttlecraft?” Commander Peehs questioned. “Seems pointless if we haven’t disabled the disabling field!”

“Maybe they figured a way to allow the shuttles to function even with the dampening field still in place?” Dar questioned.

“I do not think so,” T’Var remarked, her eyes looking skyward to the south. “The engines do not sound like Starfleet shuttlecraft. If I had to guess, I would suggest...”

At that moment, twelve vessels appeared over the tree-line, their spotlights shining down and illuminating the hanger, the Morain ship contained within, the Starfleet away team members, and all the other Morain milling about the encampment.

“Those look like Morain shuttles!” Paris remarked.

“And they are operating within the dampening field, Commander!” T’Var pointed out, beginning to shout over the noise the dozen ships were creating.

The arrival of the new vessels did not go unnoticed. All the Morain within the hanger gathered near the opening, chattering excitedly among themselves. Then, moments later, J’onzz emerged from inside the ship within the hanger, aided by one of his fellow Morain. It was hard to tell, as emotion did not translate easily on the faces of the rodent-like aliens, but J’onzz appeared pleased at the arrival of his fellow Morain.

As everyone watched, the dozen ships landed around the entire clearing, the piloting skills impressing even Paris, as there was less than a meter separating each of the ships. Hatches opened on the sides of each ship, and six Morain – each wearing bright day-glow yellow uniform shirts over their furry torsos – emerged.

“Welcome, Brothers!” J’onzz said, his arms wide in greeting. “We are glad to see so many more of you willing to travel all this way to learn the ways of peace and enlightenment through struggle.”

One of the first Morain to emerge from the shuttles stepped forward, standing about halfway between his ship and J’onzz. He looked around at everyone gathered around the new arrivals, his eyes settling on the Starfleet crews for several silent second before addressing the gathered Morain, saying, “I am Sub-Commander Esquilo of the Morain Defense Force. We tracked the signal your leader J’onzz broadcast toward our home space, and are aware of your situation here. We offer any of you who desire it passage off this doomed planet and back home again.”

“No!” J’onzz suddenly shouted. “No, that is not how this is supposed to work! We need to be strong again! We need to face adversity again! You cannot rescue your brother Morain because they do not need rescue! They will struggle through this dilemma and be stronger for the struggle in the end! And besides, you will find that you cannot leave this place any easier than these visitors from Starfleet! They too are trapped here with us, to join in our struggle and grow stronger.”

“You are mistaken,” Esquilo responded. “We are aware of your power frequency dampening devices. We can – and have – counteracted them.”

J’onzz seemed disbelieving about what Esquilo was saying, but Paris had heard the Morain officer’s remark and immediately activated his communicator.

“Paris to *Bellerophon*!”

“This is Captain K’danz,” came the quick reply. “We’re reading you with no interference. Has something down there changed?”

“Yes, ma’am!” Paris replied with a grin. “Several Morain shuttles have arrived, and the Morain officer in charge has stated they have something with them that counteracts the dampening field. They claim they are here to rescue the residents of the encampment before the proto-star ignites.”

It took several seconds for K’danz to respond, but when she did, Paris could hear the elation in her voice. “We have confirmation that transporter lock has been restored on all of you! And not a minute too soon! Lieutenant Koester reports the proto-star is beginning to experience fusion reactions at an incremental rate. We need to get everyone off the surface in the next twenty minutes!”

“Attention, everyone!” Paris said, turning to address everyone gathered around the Morain hanger. “We’ve just been informed the proto-star at the center of this nebula is going to attain fusion within minutes. We need to get off this planet NOW!” He then turned toward Dar and ordered, “Commander, see if you can get your shuttle airborne again. If you can, take as many willing Morain as you can fit and head straight back to the *Bellerophon*. Everyone else willing to leave, start loading into the Morain shuttles! Away team, prepare to beam back up to the *Belle*!”

“No! No, you must not!” J’onzz protested as almost everyone else present began rushing to one of the many shuttles parked in the clearing. “This method is too easy! There will be no growth from this escape!”

Dar and Wally boarded *Shuttle One*, the half-Klingon engineer pausing to look with pity at the elder Morain religious leader before taking a seat at the front of the shuttle and, with a little difficulty and some coaxing from Wally, managed to get the engines and thrusters activated.

“All aboard!” Dar called out through the open back hatch, and half a dozen squirrel-like Morain rushed up the ramp. A moment later, the rear hatch closed and the Starfleet shuttlecraft began lifting off the ground, followed closely by several of the Morain shuttles.

Paris continued to smile as he watched each shuttle lift off. He then noticed J’onzz grasp on to any Morain passing close to him, attempting to keep them from entering one of the shuttles, pleading, “No! This is not the way! This is a cheat! A dodge! You gain no strength in this manner!”

The Morain J’onzz was clutching at swatted the elder Morain’s hands away, then rushed through the hatch of the closest shuttle. As the last few shuttles sealed their hatches, Paris noted ten Morain still remaining, gathered around their leader, J’onzz.

“Last chance!” Paris called out to the last few remaining Morain.

“Our place is here with J’onzz,” one of the stragglers replied. “He will teach us what we need to know about strength through adversity.”

Paris looked at J’onzz, noting the expression on the elder Morain’s face. He could not tell if the leader was saddened by the sudden loss of so many of his followers, who were willing to depart when the situation they were in was made clear to them, or by the knowledge of his own closely impending demise. Either way, it was of little concern to Paris.

“Away team to *Bellerophon*,” the first officer finally said into his communicator. “Eleven to beam aboard, pronto!”

“We’re locked onto you all, Commander,” the voice of the *Belle*’s transporter chief – sounding much happier than earlier – replied. “Energizing.”

A moment later Paris could feel the annular confinement field surround him as his dematerialization began. Seconds later, he and five others materialized on the platform of the transporter aboard the *Bellerophon*. All six away team members quickly stepped off the platform, and as Paris headed out of the room and toward the nearest turbolift, the chief energized the system again to materialize the remaining five crew members.

Less than a minute later, Paris emerged on the bridge. On the main viewscreen, he could see several of the Morain shuttles docking with their mother ships. In the distance, two of the Morain patrol ships that had already recovered their shuttles activated their impulse engines and were rushing to leave the nebula. Paris noted the nebula already looked brighter as the proto-star moved closer to self-sustained fusion.

“Captain,” Commander Zhadesh said from ops. “Transporter room reports all away team members, including five from the *Triton*, have been safely beamed aboard. Also, Commander Dar reports *Shuttle One* is stowed in the shuttlebay and he is escorting several Morain guests to temporary quarters before reporting to the bridge.”

“Great!” K’danz responded. “Helm, break orbit! Get us out of here!” Then, as Li turned the ship away from the planet, K’danz turned to her first officer and asked, “Was everyone recovered from the surface?”

“There were a lot of second thoughts about why they were there to begin with,” Paris admitted. “But there were a few hard-core believers as well. When you beamed us up, there was still almost a dozen Morain refusing to leave the planet, including their religious leader, J’onzz.”

“For some, their faith is unshakable,” K’danz admitted as the *Belle* neared the outer edge of the nebula. As the Intrepid-class starship emerged from the gas cloud, the bridge crew could now see two Morain patrol ships locking tractor beams on the still-drifting *USS Triton*. “What in the galaxy happened to Amanda’s ship?” K’danz wondered out loud.

“Captain!” interjected Lieutenant Koester. “Recommend we find out in a few minutes. We need to get out of here now! The star has just attained sustained fusion.”

K’danz slammed her fist onto the communications panel between her own chair and where Admiral Fil was sitting in the first officer’s seat and announced, “*Bellerophon* to all ships in the vicinity. The star just ignited. Warp out of here now!”

Before K’danz had even finished giving her order, several of the Morain ships had entered warp. The two ships towing the *Triton* did likewise directly in front of the *Belle* just prior to Ensign Li activating the warp drive. The starship’s nacelles shifted upward, and within seconds the *Bellerophon* had likewise entered warp. All eight ships dropped out of warp two light-minutes – or almost thirty-six million kilometers – from where they had started. The *Belle* and a few of the Morain ships each turned around to face the now-distant nebula.

“All vessels that were in the vicinity, including the *Triton*, accounted for,” Zhadesh reported after assuring himself each of the ships that had left the rogue planet was present.

“Thank you, Commander,” K’danz acknowledged. “How long until...?”

“Any second now, based on our current distance,” Lieutenant (JG) Koester replied, anticipating the question. A moment later, the main viewer lit up as the entire blue-colored nebula began to glow. Within seconds, it appeared the gas cloud had suddenly evaporated, in its place now a bright yellow star very similar in appearance to Sol.

“According to sensors, the new star is stable and fusing hydrogen into helium at exactly the rate we predicted upon initial study of the proto-star,” Koester reported.

“What about the rogue planet? Did it survive the ignition?” K’danz asked, standing up and taking a step closer to the screen as she studied the polarized image of the new star.

“Scanning,” Koester replied. A moment later she added, “There is a planetary body that is settling into a stable orbit of the new star, almost precisely in the center of the forming habitable zone.”

K’danz smiled slightly as she said, “Then it may be possible those we left behind have survived?”

“No, Captain,” Koester replied. “The planet was scorched completely when the nebula collapsed into the igniting star. What’s left is little more than a cosmic cinder about the diameter of Earth’s moon. As far as I can tell, nothing survived.”

K’danz’s smile shifted to a slight frown, but any further remarks were cut off by her chief of operations.

“Captain, we’re being hailed by the *Triton*. Audio only.”

“On speakers, Commander.”

“*Bellerophon*, this is Captain Tomkins,” a voice said over the bridge speakers. “First, please tell me you managed to rescue our crews?”

“Yes, Amanda,” K’danz replied. “With the help of the Morain defense force, we managed to rescue everyone who was willing to leave the planet. We can beam your away team back to you as soon as your ship is back up and running. Which leads me to ask; what happened?”

“That’s my second issue!” Tomkins remarked. “We were attacked and disabled by the Morain when they arrived at the nebula! My Chief Engineer just about has the mains back on-line, but I want to know what gives the Morain Defense Force the right to disable my ship!”

“Captain,” Zhadesh interrupted. “The commander of the Morain ships wishes to meet with you and Captain Tomkins for a debriefing.”

“Amanda, the Morain commander wants to meet with us. Maybe you’ll get the answer you’re looking for?”

\* \* \* \*

A few minutes later, Captain Amanda Tomkins had beamed aboard the *Bellerophon* and joined Captain K’danz, Commander Paris, and her own first officer Commander Shaun T. Peehs in the deck one briefing lounge. Tomkins was still pissed-off about what the Morain had done to her starship and looked forward to confronting the Morain fleet commander. A short time later, the briefing lounge door opened again and Major Michael Drake escorted Commander Genka into the room, introducing him to all present. Captain Tomkins practically jumped out of her chair as soon as the door swished shut to confront Genka, but was cut off as the Morain started to speak in his typical high-pitched voice.

“Before we begin, I wish to offer my sincerest apologies to Captain Tomkins and her crew. We were aware that the proto-star within the nebula was on the verge of igniting and that we could waste no time explaining our mission to you. The weapon I employed is designed to temporarily disable, not destroy. However, I still regret I was forced to use my ion projector against your starship, Captain.”

The Morain’s apology, coupled with the obvious sincerity in his voice, caught Tomkins by surprise. She stood there, mouth agape, arm half-raised as she was about to point a finger in the squirrel-like alien’s face. After a moment, her face blushed red and she said, “Apology accepted, Commander. But next time, simply ask for our aid instead of disabling one of our starships right off the bat.”

“I will keep that in mind should we find ourselves in a similar circumstance in the future,” Genka replied.

With the apology now out of the way, K’danz offered Genka a seat and began the debriefing. “What can you tell us about what happened here today, Commander?”

“The encampment you discovered was established by J’onzz, a prominent religious leader among my people whose religion is based on a concept you humans call Darwinism – that only the strongest truly deserve to survive. As you are aware, the Morain Alliance spent centuries in conflict with the Kairn Empire. That conflict recently came to an end when the Kairn retreated to within their own borders and cut off all contact with outside races.”

“Following the incident with the Phantoms attacking their Throne World and trying to incite the Kairn to blame and attack the Federation,” Paris said with a nod.

“Correct, Commander,” Genka agreed. “J’onzz and his followers believed that without continued conflict with the Kairn, the Morain would not continue to evolve, improve, and grow stronger. They departed our home world and spent the better part of one of your years searching for a place that could provide conflict in order to make

our race stronger. In essence, J'onzz was overseeing a suicide pact. We feared that whatever J'onzz and his followers found would cause more death and destruction for our people, so I was assigned to hunt for them and return as many as I could to our home world. J'onzz had hoped other Morain would hear his signal – attuned to the frequencies used by our civilian broadcasters – and arrive at his encampment either to investigate the signal's origin or by those knowing it originated with J'onzz and his followers and who wished to join with them. It would only be after they landed that they would realize their ships – or in your case, your matter teleportation device – would not work to leave the planet's surface, giving those unfortunate few who found J'onzz and his followers no choice but to join in their 'struggle.' My fleet and I detected J'onzz's signal beacon a few days ago and immediately followed it to the nebula, where we found the *Triton*. Captain Tomkins..." Genka glanced at the human woman. "...confirmed we had at last located our quarry. However, my science officer determined we had very little time before the proto-star at the center of the nebula would go critical and destroy everything within the gas cloud, including J'onzz' encampment and followers."

"Sounds more like a cult than a religion to me," Commander Peehs remarked.

"Admittedly, even Earth has had its share of insane suicide cults," Paris remarked. "Heaven's Gate arose shortly after the end of the Eugenics War and their followers believed suicide would allow their souls to board an alien flying saucer traveling with a comet passing close by Earth at the time. And one of the most famous suicide cults – ironically – was called Jonestown, where all the followers of a charismatic preacher named Jim Jones killed themselves by voluntarily drinking poisoned fruit punch."

"One thing I would like to know," stated Captain K'danz. "How did you overcome the dampening field? We couldn't figure out what was generating it or where it originated, nor could our sensors even determine how large the field was, and as a result we had two away teams and a shuttlecraft trapped on the planet's surface. And nothing we tried was able to break through the field."

"Several of J'onzz most devoted followers were engineers who developed their dampeners based on technology captured from the Kairn," Genka replied. "J'onzz believed it would aid in creating struggle and allow his followers to gain strength by forcing them to fight in order to escape the planet before the star ignited. But much like the shield technology we shared with your Starfleet, we have countermeasures against the Kairn power dampeners which were active aboard all the shuttles we sent to the surface. With the two forces acting against one another, your technology worked within the area the field covered."

"How would fighting amongst themselves prevent anyone from dying when a star ignites?" Paris asked. "Besides, it didn't look like there was any fighting going on when we arrived! In fact, of those we talked with in the encampment, only the Morain closest to J'onzz seemed aware that the proto-star was eventually going to destroy the nebula, and even they didn't seem to be aware it was going to happen so soon."

"Perhaps J'onzz had not told his followers what was to happen?" Genka suggested. "Perhaps he was keeping it secret in order to see for himself what would happen? Perhaps in his old age, he simply wished to pass on to the next life and cared not how many others he took with him? Without him here, we will probably never fully comprehend his true motives."

"In that case, what happens now?" Paris asked.

"I will take my people you have aboard this ship with me and we will return home," Genka replied. "They will be integrated back into our society with the hopes that what they have experienced here will prevent them from acting in such irrational ways in the future."

"Meanwhile, Captain Tomkins and the *Triton* will remain here to study and monitor the new star for a few days," K'danz added. "It isn't often that we get to witness the birth of a brand new star."

"Why aren't we sticking around to study the star, Captain?" Paris asked.

"Because I have received word that the *Dauntless* will be traversing the adjacent sector en route toward Sector 50109, and we need to rendezvous with them so we can transfer Admiral Fil and his staff back aboard the flagship." She then tapped her combadge and said, "K'danz to Major Drake. Please report to the briefing lounge and escort Commander Genka back to the transporter room. And have one of your Marines do likewise for our six visitors in the guest quarters."

"Aye, ma'am," Drake quickly replied.

All four Starfleet officers gathered their isolinear chips and padds and started moving toward the bridge, passing Drake as he entered the lounge. As K'danz stepped toward her command seat, she was approached by one of her science officers, Lieutenant (JG) Gem Koester.

"Excuse me, Captain," the young officer said, presenting a padd to K'danz. "I've completed the preliminary survey of the new star."

"Anything unusual to report?" K'danz asked, glancing at the data displayed on the screen.

"One thing," Koester replied with a nod. "Sensors detected a warp eddy on the opposite side of where the nebula existed. The signature indicates it was created by a Morain warp drive."

K'danz's eyebrows knit in puzzlement. "All six Morain patrol ships departed the nebula in the same direction we did. Where could it have...?" K'danz then suddenly remembered what Paris had told her about the Morain ship J'onzz and his followers had used to reach the rogue planet. "Could J'onzz cult have escaped the planet's destruction?"

"I cannot tell from the sensor readings whether the eddy was heading into or away from where the nebula used to exist," Koester explained. "I guess only time will tell."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," K'danz said, dismissing the young officer who returned to the science console on the port side of the bridge as the captain sat down in her own seat. She briefly glanced once again at the data on the padd screen before wondering if this little adventure was truly over? Or could J'onzz one day be responsible for more future deaths.

**The End**