

In the main crew lounge aboard the Odyssey-class starship *USS Spock*, commonly called 9-Forward, Captain Setton To'Lock Arbelo was sitting with several of his senior officers, getting to know his new crew.

"Commander Alston," he said to his chief engineer. "What brings you to the *Spock* after so many years serving under Captain Tomkins on the *Triton*?"

"I guess the best answer would be homesickness, Captain," Lt Commander Mallory Alston replied in between sips of her drink. Upon the captain's confused look, she added, "The *Triton*'s new mission is scheduled to last at least five years, perhaps even ten or more. I've spent the last eight years assigned to the *Triton* operating in the Fifth Fleet AOR. I would like to someday be able to get back home to Earth in the coming few years. Perhaps even rotate to a shore duty assignment for a time. Not spend another decade so far away from home that I cannot even reliably send and receive subspace communiques from Mum and Dad."

"Understandable," Captain Arbelo remarked with a slight nod of his head as he turned his attention on the chief science officer. "What about you, Mister Ckathel?"

"Forrr verry similarr reasons as Commanderr Alston," the Caitian Ckathel Brightslay replied with a purring lilt. "I don't know if you have serrved with Caitians in the past, but we arre verry family-orrriented and maintain close rrelations with ourr litterrr-mates. I explained to Captain Tomkins that forrr psychological rreasons I simply could not rremain aboard the *Trrriton* forrr theirrr extended mission. She understood."

"Yes, we had a handful of Caitians among the crew aboard the original *Arcturus*. Many of them died shortly after our time warp into the future as their psychic connection with their family members was torn," Arbelo stated with another nod. He was then about to turn his attention on Commander Peck – another officer who like Arbelo had transferred to the *Spock* from the *USS Dauntless* – when he noticed the Doppler lines outside the lounge windows shrink back to the pinpoint lights of distant stars. Rather than continue the conversation, Arbelo tapped his combadge.

"Bridge, this is the Captain. Why have we dropped out of warp?"

"Long-range sensors are detecting a vessel dead ahead," replied the soft, melodic voice of the starship's Andorian first officer, ch'Vaigyaanik Tohakeet. "Configuration matches nothing we have on record. We may have come across our first new contact since the opening of the new AOR sectors."

"Outstanding!" Arbelo remarked as he put his drink on the nearby table and got out of his chair. "I'm on my way up. Don't ring the doorbell before I get there!" He then excused himself and headed for the nearest turbolift. Meanwhile, Peck, Alston, and Ckathel all turned to look out the forward window, where a spaceship approximately the size of a Federation Intrepid-class starship was just becoming visible.

Space, the Final Frontier...

These are the voyages of the starship *Spock*!

Star Trek: Spock

"First Encounter" By PJK

The turbolift opened onto the bridge and Captain Arbelo stepped out. He found he was still getting used to the large, open design. The bridge of the 23rd century *USS Arcturus* was positively claustrophobic by comparison, while the bridges of the *Arcturus-A*, *Sarek*, *Proxima*, and *Dauntless* seemed almost intimate and lounge-like. The bridge of the Odyssey-class, in contrast, was a large open space consisting of three ovals. The innermost oval was the raised command arena where the three seats for the first officer, captain, and VIP or ship's counselor were located. Surrounding that was a second oval dominated by an angled viewscreen at the front and six seated consoles around the inner perimeter including the conn and ops positions, sciences, security/tactical, engineering, and mission

ops. The third and outermost oval consisted mainly of walkways surrounding the bridge. A turbolift alcove was located on the starboard side, directly across from the captain's ready room entry on the port side. Forward of both doors on each side were stairs leading down to deck two where the formal briefing lounge and the captain's quarters were located. Forward of these stairs was a break area with chairs directly in front of the viewscreen – acting as a de facto briefing room. Directly behind the command arena was a set of stairs leading up to a standard transporter platform, and on each side of the stairs and transporter were additional steps curving up to the transporter platform and two additional forward-facing consoles which could be configured for operating the transporter or to act as backup for any other bridge station. Additionally, the raised aft area of the bridge was surrounded by windows looking out on the saucer section of the immense starship.

Commander Ch'Vaigyaanik Tohakeet began to get out of the captain's center seat until Arbelo gestured with his hand for her to stay where she was. The captain instead approached the science console, where his daughter Lieutenant Annika Omnia Arbelo-Eeta was sitting.

"Lieutenant, what can you tell me about the ship we've detected?" he asked.

"Not a whole lot," Arbelo-Eeta replied. "Sensors are not detecting any life-signs or energy readings."

"So it's derelict? Adrift in space?" Arbelo asked, turning to look at the strange ship displayed on the main viewscreen. The vessel reminded him of the wedge-shaped early warp ships common during the first half of Earth's 22nd century, except there was no sign of light or life aboard the ship.

"I cannot confirm that either," the young science officer replied. "I cannot determine with certainty that my scans are not being blocked somehow."

Arbelo walked up the three steps to the command arena, joining his Andorian first officer. "What do you think, Exec?" he asked, again looking at the image on the viewer. "Is an away team warranted to investigate?"

Commander Tohakeet stood and joined Arbelo near the center of the platform. "I would not recommend it, sir. Without detailed internal scans, we cannot determine if it is safe to beam an away team aboard the vessel. They could beam directly inside a solid bulkhead or piece of equipment, or into a toxic environment incapable of supporting humanoid life or with the ability to eat through any EVA suit we have. Without answers, it would be much too dangerous."

"Agreed," Arbelo said, sounding slightly disappointed, as if an opportunity for an historic first contact were being lost. "What do you recommend?"

"Further study," Tohakeet replied. "And continuing attempts to contact the ship."

"Very well," Arbelo remarked. "Carry on, Exec. I'll be in 9-Forward again should you need me." Tohakeet nodded in the manner common among Andorians as Arbelo stepped back over to the turbolift and disappeared inside.

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A few hours later, Arbelo was still in 9-Forward, now joined by his daughter and Commander Tohakeet, who had updated the captain on the alien vessel. Nothing new had been learned other than the fact the ship was not adrift but had remained completely motionless since first detected. When asked what that meant, Arbelo-Eeta merely shrugged.

"I don't understand," Commander Peck remarked, glancing out the forward window at the still immobile alien ship. "Why don't we simply navigate around the ship? It's not like it's so large it would be putting us out of our way to do so."

"It's not simply a matter of going around the ship, Mister Peck," Captain Arbelo replied, accepting another drink from one of the passing waiters. "Our mission is to contact never-before-encountered civilizations. We are attempting to open a dialogue with whoever is aboard that ship, not only to make contact but to also make sure they do not require assistance."

"Aside from not moving a meter since we first encountered it, how can we be certain the ship is not merely abandoned?" Commander Ckathel asked.

“We don’t,” Arbelo admitted. “But I want to make sure we have used every method at our disposal to make sure no one is in distress aboard that ship before we abandon it.”

“What are the odds?” another voice asked. Captain Arbelo looked over at the man who had spoken, who was standing near the forward window and looking out at the alien vessel.

“Odds of what?” the captain asked.

“What’s the likelihood that a ship such as the one we have encountered would just happen to be in this precise spot to ‘block’ the *Spock*’s progress?” Lt Commander Jesse Ceballos turned and looked at the captain as he added, “I wonder if it was put there purposely to keep us from continuing on?”

“Flypaper?” Arbelo asks.

“What is... flypaper?” Commander Tohakeet asked.

“A simple device invented on Earth in the mid-1800’s,” Commander Alston replied. “A sheet of paper with an extremely sticky and poisonous substance on one side, used for the purpose of catching and killing small flying insects.”

The first officer looked at Ceballos and asked, “You are suggesting we are being held here purposely?”

“We need to consider we may be about to trigger some sort of trap,” the officer replied.

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Captain’s log, stardate 71370.7:

I have informed Starfleet of our encounter with the unidentified alien spaceship via a communique with Starbase 726. I am currently awaiting further instructions. In the meantime, my crew continues to study the alien vessel and offer suggestions on how to proceed.

Arbelo, commanding Spock, out.

Captain Arbelo and his senior officers were gathered in the area forward of the main viewscreen, where a small table and several chairs were set up. While the *Spock*’s regular briefing lounge was located one deck below, Arbelo felt more comfortable remaining closer to the bridge, especially when no one knew what to expect from the alien vessel they were still attempting to study.

“While we cannot beam aboard the other ship safely at present, I recommend we send an away team over in a shuttle,” Commander Tohakeet was suggesting. “By obtaining closer sensor readings, we may be able to determine if our scans are being blocked more reliably. We may also be able to detect if any life-signs are actually aboard the vessel from the closer distance. And if warranted, the away team can beam directly from the shuttle.”

“I agree,” the captain replied. “Request volunteers for the mission. We’ve been sitting here long enough. I would like to figure out what’s going on as soon as possible.”

“I’ve already taken the liberty,” Commander Tohakeet replied. She nodded at the chief of security as she added, “Lieutenant Paul and I will lead the away team. Lieutenant Hooks, Doctor Lott, and Lieutenant Arbelo-Eeta will also be joining us.”

The last name mentioned caught the captain’s attention. “Annika? On our first away team mission?”

A look of concern appeared on Tohakeet’s face. “Is she not a member of the crew, Captain?”

“Well, of course she is,” Arbelo replied. “It’s just that... Well...”

“Captain,” the Andorian first officer interrupted, drawing him to the side for a semi-private conversation. “Starfleet regulations were bent in order to allow your daughter to serve aboard the *Spock* under your chain of command. She has volunteered to be a part of this away team. If you do not allow her to perform her duties as any other member of this crew are required to do, it could potentially drive a wedge between you and your new crew. They would never be able to trust any of your orders ever again!”

"I see your point, Exec," Arbelo admitted after a moment's thought. Both he and Tohakeet then turned back to the rest of the senior officers as he added, "Ready your away team, Exec. I would like the shuttle to launch within thirty minutes."

"Aye, Captain," the first officer replied. "Lieutenants... Doctor... with me." And as the four crew members started moving toward the turbolift, she tapped her combadge and added, "Lieutenant Arbelo-Eeta, meet the away team in the main shuttlebay in ten minutes."

"On my way," the voice of the young science officer replied.

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Precisely thirty minutes later, a Type-12 shuttle passed through the atmosphere retaining field of the main shuttlebay and maneuvered around the hull of the *Spock* to approach the alien ship.

"Closing to within thirty meters," the shuttle's pilot, operations chief Lieutenant Arnold Hooks reported from the pilot's seat as he slowed the shuttle's forward speed.

"Readings, Lieutenant?" Tohakeet asked Arbelo-Eeta.

"Still inconclusive," the young woman with the Trill symbiont implanted in her abdomen replied. "Sensor readings make it appear the interior of the ship is solid metal! But that's impossible. There are no populated planets anywhere nearby. It has to have been some sort of mechanism in order to have reached this far out into space!"

"Is it possible it was left behind by some larger craft sometime in the past?" Dr. Elva Lott asked, looking out the forward window at the dead-looking spacecraft.

"Anything is possible, Doctor," Tohakeet replied. She then turned her attention on the shuttle's pilot and ordered, "Slowly maneuver us around the back of the ship. Let's see if there is any indications of chemical propulsion or engines of any type."

"Aye, Commander," Hooks acknowledged as his fingers played across the control panel.

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On the bridge of the *Spock*, Arbelo was slouched in his command chair, watching the Type-12 shuttle close on the alien ship and slowly start to maneuver around it.

"Commanderr Tohakeet rreporrrts they arrrre maneuvrrring arround the farr side of the crrraft in orderrr to deterrrmine if it has any rrecoznizable forrrm of prrrpulsion," Lt Commander Ckathel reported from the science console. "So farr they have not been able to deterrrmine if theirr sensorr rreadings arrrre being blocked orrr if that vessel is nothing morrrre than a larrrge hunk of solid metal sitting motionless in..."

Arbelo blinked, then suddenly sat up straight as the shuttle disappeared from the viewscreen.

"What just happened?" the captain asked. "Where did the shuttle go?"

Ckathel had spun back to his console when the shuttle vanished, employing every sensor at his disposal to try and locate it.

"Sensorrrs still indicate the alien vessel is prrrsent, though little else. Exhaust firrr from the shuttle's impulse engines and thrusterrrs indicate the shuttle moved arround the farr side of the alien ship, but then simply stop. No sign of the shuttle."

"They can't have just disappeared!" Arbelo remarked, quickly stepping down to the console with the Caitian chief science officer. "Scan again!"

Ckathel returned his attention to his readouts, activating both the short-range and long-range scans and confirming his earlier readings.

"Impulse trail currrves arround the rrearr of the alien ship and simply stops," Ckathel reported. "No indication of any maneuvrrrs. No warrrp eddies that might indicate they warrrped away forrr some rreason. The shuttle is just... gone."

"How can that be?" Arbelo asked, looking over the science officer's shoulder to look at the readouts himself.

“Technically, by all the indications we have, the shuttle should be therre. It’s just not,” Ckathel remarked.

* * * *

Several hours later, there was still no sign of the missing shuttle. Without Commander Tohakeet on board, Arbelo remained on the bridge for a second straight shift. He was slightly annoyed when Lt Commander Ckathel had requested a relief at watch turnover, normally the time his daughter – the Beta Shift science officer – would relieve her department head, and left the bridge. Now there was little for Arbelo to do besides hope the shuttle would somehow reappear, await direction from Starfleet, and stare silently at the alien vessel on the viewscreen.

“Flypaper,” he mumbled to himself.

“Excuse me, Captain?” the helmsman asked, half-turning to look back at Arbelo.

“Nothing, Lieutenant,” Arbelo replied in a normal voice. “Just talking to myself.”

As the helmsman returned his attention to his console, the ship’s intercom beeped and the voice of Ckathel Brightslay said, “Science Officer to Captain Arrrbelo.”

Arbelo pressed the activation control on the arm of his chair and, trying not to sound too cross, answered, “This is the Captain.”

“Captain, would you please come to stellar cartography. I have discovered something you will wish to see.”

Intrigued in spite of his mood, Arbelo responded, “I’ll be right there, Commander.” He then deactivated the intercom and, after turning the conn over to the operations officer, entered the nearby turbolift. “Deck seventeen.”

A couple of minutes later, Arbelo entered the large multi-deck spherical space at the very forward end of the secondary hull that contained stellar cartography. He walked out on what the crew called the ‘pier’ to the control console at the center of the room, where Ckathel Brightslay was manipulating the controls. The captain immediately recognized the area of space that was being displayed on the holographic projections directly in front of him, as it matched exactly the image he had been staring at on the bridge viewscreen for hours, right down to the mysterious alien vessel that appeared to be adrift directly in front of the console.

“What have you discovered, Commander?”

“As you can see, Captain, I am currrrrrently displaying the local arrea of space,” Ckathel said. Arbelo nodded as the Caitian continued, “Accorrdding to standarrd sensorr rreadings, the closest starr to our currrrrrent position is located 7.2 light yearrrs distant.” A targeting cue appeared around one of the stars on the display, flashing three times before solidifying and remaining around the star in question. Again, Arbelo nodded. “However, in my searrch forr the missing shuttle, I noted a cirrrcle of debrrris similarr in many ways to an Oorrnt cloud surrrrrrounding ourr vicinity.”

“An Oort cloud? In the middle of open space?” Arbelo asked, confirming he had heard the science officer correctly. Arbelo recalled from the astronomy classes he had taken at the Academy that Oort clouds consisted predominantly of icy planetesimals that surrounded stars somewhere between 50,000 and 200,000 Astronomical Units in distance.

“I found that highly unusual,” Ckathel agreed. “So I conducted some verry detailed scans of this rregion of space.”

“And what did you find?” Arbelo asked, hoping the answer would lead to the discovery and recovery of the missing shuttle.

“The cloud is centerred arrround coorrdrinates rroughly one hundrrred and fifty million kilometerrrs almost dirrrectly in firrront of us.”

Again, Arbelo’s eye scanned the starfield displayed around the pair. “There’s nothing there,” he remarked.

“Nothing therre that we can see,” Ckathel agreed. “Howevrrr, grrravimetrrric rreadings indicate therre SHOULD be at least two massive objects therre – one of which should be as big as a starr! Orrr at least as massive.”

“I’m not seeing a star. Could we be dealing with a singularity of some sort?” the captain asked.

“A singularrity would be easily detectable by the x-rrrays and gamma rrradiation it expels,” Ckathel replied. “No, we’rrre dealing with something else. Something we have nevrrr beforrrr encounterrrd.”

“And could this... unknown thing... be responsible for the loss of our shuttle?”

“I am willing to assume the two are rrrelated,” Ckathel replied.

The Caitian began tapping a new series of commands into the console, and two opaque black spheres appeared on the display. One was almost directly ahead and represented whatever was causing the gravity readings at the center of the Oort cloud. The other sphere was more to the right of the display, and based on its gravimetric indications was close to where the *Spock* was currently located.

“According to those readings, that thing is the size of a planet!” Arbelo remarked with awe.

“Just a little smallerr than Earrrrth, in fact,” Ckathel said. “And so close, we’rrre almost in orrrbit of it.”

“Any idea why we can’t see either of them?”

“I cannot offeeer a rrrrealistic explanation without morrrr data,” Ckathel explained.

“How about an unrealistic one?” Arbelo asked.

“If it werrrr possible,” Ckathel said, looking at the two mysterious objects on the cartography display. “I would suggest an entirrrr starr system has somehow been cloaked.”

“You mean, like with a cloaking device?”

“Such an underrrtaking would rrrrequire morrrr powerr than could be prrrduced by evrrry warrrrp corrrr in Starfleet, Captain. And the distorrtrion field prrrduced by any cloak we’rrre familiarr with would rrrrender the cloak almost moot,” Ckathel remarked. “No. Something much morrrr advanced than a crrrude cloaking device. Something we have nevrrr seen beforrrr.”

“Thank you, Commander,” Arbelo said, his earlier irritation with the science officer evaporated. “I think we need more information before we go prodding and poking any further.” He then turned and walked back off the pier and back out through the heavy doors.

* * * *

Not long after, Arbelo was in his quarters, transmitting a subspace compic to the closest allied Morain outpost.

“So you have encountered ships of this design in the past, Commander?” the captain was asking the squirrel-like Morain officer who appeared on his monitor screen. On the lower right corner of the screen, an image of the alien vessel the *Spock* had encountered was displayed.

“Vessels similar in design have been encountered in open space from time to time over the centuries,” the Morain commander replied in his typical high-pitched voice. “Most often, they are simply left alone and ignored. Occasionally, if determined they might be considered a hazard to navigation, they are towed away to be dumped into a convenient gravity well. But we have never found one that appeared functional or with a crew aboard.”

“So you have no idea where they come from or what their purpose could be?” Arbelo asked for clarification.

“It has been hypothesized that they may be acting as marker buoys of some kind, but who placed them and what they are marking has never been determined,” the Morain commander answered.

“We’re not too far from Kairn space in this sector,” Arbelo remarked. “Could these ships be Kairn in origin?”

“We have only encountered these vessels in the sector of space your Starfleet has now designated as 50119, but do not have any evidence of where they originate. We have heard stories of Kairn encounters with ships of unknown origin similar in description, but according to those stories – little more than rumors, actually – the Kairn ships in question have disappeared immediately after the encounter. Lost without any trace.”

What the Morain commander had said sent a shock down Arbelo’s spine, and he regretted even more approving the away mission that had disappeared.

“Captain Arbelo,” the Morain commander continued. “I would strongly recommend your starship leave the area where you encountered that alien vessel as soon as possible.”

“Normally I would agree with you, Commander,” Arbelo remarked. “But we’re currently in a search and rescue operation. A shuttle with several members of my crew has gone missing and we’re trying to locate them.”

“I understand,” the Morain replied, his expression giving away that he felt Arbelo was making a mistake with such a decision. “Of course, the choice is yours.”

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When Captain Arbelo returned to the bridge, he noted Lt Commander Ckathel was back at the science console and gave the Caitian a nod of appreciation before stepping up to the command arena and relieved the operations officer of the conn.

“Here’s the plan,” he announced to his crew. “Mister Puroti, prepare a series of probes. I want to use them as a secondary means of locating our missing shuttle, as well as figuring out what is causing the gravimetric readings Mister Ckathel has detected. Let me know when you’re ready to launch.”

“Aye, sir,” the officer at ops replied. Several minutes later, he stated, “Four class-4 probes loaded and standing by in the forward torpedo launcher. One is programmed to follow the shuttle’s course. Two others are aimed at the two mass objects detected by the science officer. The fourth and final probe is programmed to head up the Z-axis and away and give us an overview of this spacial quad.”

“Mister Ckathel, are you ready?” Arbelo asked his chief science officer.

“Rrready and standing by, sirrr,” Ckathel replied.

“Mister Puroti, you may launch when ready,” the captain ordered.

“Launching probes,” Lieutenant (JG) Jese Puroti confirmed. A shudder could be felt through the deck as each of the four probes was expelled from the forward launcher beneath the primary saucer hull, and a second after each shudder, the probe could be seen heading away from the *Spock* on the main viewer. As the last probe appeared on the screen, it took a sudden turn up and out of the view of the screen.

“Prrrobe one apprrroaching the last known coorrordinates of the shuttle,” Ckathel reported. “Rrreceiving data on the alien vessel as it passes...”

Even Arbelo noticed the glow of the probe’s propulsion suddenly disappear. “It’s gone!” the captain said.

“No longerrr rreceiving telemerrry from prrrrobe one,” Ckathel reported. “Prrrobes two, thrree, and fourr arre still trrransmitting.”

“Can they detect either the first probe or the missing shuttle?” Arbelo asked.

“Negative,” Ckathel replied. “Prrrobe two... Sirrr! Prrrobe two has stopped trrransmitting! Now so has prrrrobe thrree!”

Arbelo stared at the viewscreen, where the thrusters for the second and third probes disappeared as abruptly as the first.

“What in hell is going on?” Arbelo began to ask, his voice betraying his annoyance.

“Captain!” the helmsman exclaimed. “The ship! Something is happening!”

Arbelo glanced first at the helmsman, who was pointing at the viewscreen with alarm, before looking at the alien ship on the viewer. What looked like navigation lights at each point of the wedge-shaped craft had suddenly started to blink in an increasingly faster pattern.

“What’s happening?” Arbelo asked with concern.

“Undeterrrmined,” Ckathel replied. “Still not detecting any enerrrgy rreadings frrrom the vessel.”

As the flashing grew faster and faster, it eventually became steady unblinking lights. A split-second later, the craft erupted in an explosion that engulfed the entire hull. As the fireball subsided, the alien ship had been reduced to small shards of spreading debris. Captain Arbelo stared at the viewscreen, his mouth agape.

* * * *

That evening, after nearly a full eighteen hours on the bridge, Captain Arbelo was back in his quarters, sleeping fitfully. In his dreams, he kept hearing his daughter's voice. Sometimes he heard her telling him she was alright and uninjured. Other times, her voice sounded fearful and anxious. Arbelo tried calling out to her, asking her where she was, what had happened to her and the away team? All he received in response was a cut off scream.

Arbelo woke with a start, sitting up in bed, sweat pouring down his body. His bedsheets were likewise soaked with his sweat. Glancing at the nearby chronometer, he realized he had only been asleep for less than an hour!

Putting a robe on over his nightclothes, Arbelo left his quarters and headed to sickbay.

"What can I do for you, Captain?" the doctor on duty asked, coming out of the medical officer's office and directing the captain to the exam table.

"I'm having nightmares," Arbelo admitted.

"Considering what has happened to Lieutenant Arbelo-Eeta, I'm not surprised," the doctor remarked, pulling out a medical tricorder and removing the hand scanner. "It's probably stress-related. But let's see if there's a physical cause that may explain it." The doctor started waving the scanner around the area of Arbelo's head. His expression turned into a frown as he started getting readings on the tricorder screen. The doctor waved the scanner around Arbelo's head again, frowning once again as he obtained the same readings.

"Excuse me, Captain," the doctor said as he headed toward the office.

"What is it?" Arbelo wanted to know. "What's wrong?"

"Sickbay to Doctor Elbaz," the duty doctor said after activating the intercom. It took almost forty-five seconds to receive a reply.

"It's two in the bloody morning," the voice of Doctor Joshua Elbaz finally responded. "Someone better be dying."

"Doctor, Captain Arbelo is here in sickbay. He reported he was having vivid dreams that were preventing him from sleeping. I think you need to see these test results," the duty doctor explained.

Again, there was a prolonged pause before the grumpy voice asked, "Captain Arbelo, you say?"

"Yes, Doctor."

A briefer pause, then, "I'll be right there."

A few minutes later, the doors to sickbay swished open and an older middle-aged man with thinning hair just starting to turn grey and wearing a blue lab coat over his hastily-donned uniform entered. He glanced irritably at the captain sitting on the exam bed before walking over to the doctor on duty. "Okay, what have you got?"

"Unusual activity coming from the paracortex region of the Captain's brain," the junior doctor replied, showing Elbaz the readings on the tricorder screen. Elbaz grunted, taking the tricorder from the other doctor and stepping over to Arbelo.

"Good morning, Captain," he said, finally acknowledging the CO's presence. "I had hoped to meet with you at some point in the near future. Introduce myself properly. Nice of you to come down and visit my sickbay. Wish it had been under better circumstances." Before Arbelo could respond, the chief medical officer started waving the medical scanner around the captain – first near his head as if confirming the earlier readings – then around his torso, finally stopping over the spot where Arbelo knew his secondary heart to be located.

"If I remember correctly from reading your medical records, you're part Efrosian, aren't you, Captain?" the doctor asked.

"That's correct. Roughly one-third," Arbelo confirmed.

"There's your explanation, Doctor," the CMO said, turning to look at his subordinate. At Arbelo's confused look, Elbaz said to him, "Efrosians are known to have latent psionic ability, similar in some ways to Vulcan's touch-telepathy."

"I'm also one-third Vulcan," Arbelo remarked.

Dr. Elbaz gave the captain a look that indicated he was not exactly impressed before saying, "Boy, you're just a mess, aren't you?" He turned his attention back to the junior doctor and said, "Based on the activity I'm seeing in his paracortex, whatever he was experiencing was not a dream."

"You mean I was actually hearing my daughter in my mind?!" Arbelo asked with excitement.

“I can’t say with certainty if it was your daughter you were sensing,” Elbaz replied. “But you’re definitely picking up on some form of psionic communication. And based on your physical brain structure, the source has to be close by.” He looked at the other doctor and asked, “We have any Betazoids aboard the ship?”

“Yes. At least half a dozen,” the younger doctor replied.

“That’s probably your answer, Captain. Some Betazoid or another telepathic species on the ship has their mental shields lowered – likely in a moment of high emotion or passion – and you’re picking up on it,” he said to Arbelo.

“But, it sounded like my daughter!” Arbelo protested.

“Maybe. Maybe not,” Elbaz remarked noncommittally. “Either way, my job here is done. I’m going back to bed.”

Before Arbelo could say anything else, the chief medical officer was headed out the door of sickbay, disappearing as the doors swished back shut. Instead he looked at the duty doctor and asked, “But it could be my daughter? Couldn’t it? She’s still alive!”

“Family members tend to have closer bonds when it comes to all this psionic mumbo-jumbo,” the doctor replied. “I suppose it’s possible?”

Without another word, Arbelo was back on his feet and heading out the door himself, the doctor calling out uselessly after him. A few moments later, he emerged on the bridge, still dressed in his robe and night clothes.

“Captain?” Lt Commander Nagata Akira asked as she noticed Arbelo step up on the command arena.

“The away team is still alive!” Arbelo said. “And we’re going to go get them!”

“Alive? How do you know?” Akira asked as Arbelo sat in the center seat.

“I just do,” he replied. “Helm, where is the position of the closer gravity source Commander Ckathel detected?”

The helmsman consulted his instruments, accessing the data the science officer had compiled in stellar cartography, and replied, “Bearing 030 mark 0, approximately three hundred thousand kilometers.”

“Set course 030 mark 0,” Arbelo ordered. “Ahead one-quarter impulse power. And let me know our position relative to where that alien vessel had been located.”

“Course 030 mark 0 laid in. Activating impulse engines, ahead one-quarter,” the helmsman acknowledged. Slowly, the *Spock* began to move forward.

“Seven hundred meters from the coordinates where the alien vessel was located,” the officer at ops reported. “On current course, closest point will be one hundred and fifty meters. Now five hundred meters...”

“I want to know if anyone sees ANYTHING out of the ordinary on sensors!” Arbelo remarked.

“Two hundred and fifty meters...,” the ops officer updated. Several more seconds passed before he added, “At closest point of approach, one hundred and fifty meters.”

The *Spock* slowly continued moving forward... until it suddenly was not. With a thump that could be heard throughout the hull, the starship came upon some unseen physical barrier.

“Forward moment had ceased!” the helmsman reported excitedly. “Impulse engines still ahead one-quarter.”

“Can you tell what we’re up against?” Arbelo asked. “Is it physical or energy-based?” On the viewscreen, the starship’s forward shield glowed slightly as it pushed up against whatever was in front of the starship.

“Negative,” the operations officer replied.

“Sensors are not registering whatever is holding us in place,” the science officer added.

“Should I arm phasers, sir?” the tactical officer asked.

“No,” Arbelo replied before pressing the intercom on the arm of the command chair. “Bridge to Commander Ckathel.”

“Ckathel herrre,” came a sleepy-sounding reply a few moments later.

“Report to the bridge, Commander,” Arbelo ordered. “Things just got more interesting.” Then, as he deactivated the intercom, he looked at the faint glow on the viewer and muttered the word, “Flypaper.”

* * * *

Captain's log, stardate 71372.8:

We have been attempting to study the force that is preventing the Spock from moving forward past the coordinates where we encountered the alien vessel that has since destroyed itself and where our shuttle disappeared.

I am considering transmitting a request for assistance from any Fifth Fleet starships in the sector. I believe the Dauntless and Sun Tzu are still relatively close-by, but not sure how long a response would take. In the meantime, we're continuing to try and figure out what is holding us here. Nothing useful can be determined on sensors.

Arbelo, commanding Spock, out.

Arbelo – now dressed in his regular duty uniform – and his senior officers still aboard the *Spock* were once again gathered around the table in front of the viewscreen on the bridge.

“Okay, let’s look at this from another perspective,” Captain Arbelo was saying. “We’ve been stuck here for two hours, and we cannot tell what it is blocking our path. Can we at least determine what it is NOT?”

“The phenomenon is not a forcefield of any type we are familiar with,” Lt Commander Ckathel replied. “Neither is it a physical object covered in a cloaking field.”

“What does that leave us?” Arbelo asked.

“There could be innumerable technologies we are unfamiliar with,” Ckathel started to say when a voice called out from the main bridge.

“Captain! You need to see this!”

The senior officers all rushed around the walkway, Arbelo joining the officer of the deck on the command arena platform. On the viewscreen another ship very similar in design to the one that had first drawn their attention was visible, its bow facing directly at the *Spock*.

“Where did THAT come from?” Arbelo asked.

“It simply appeared off our starboard bow,” the officer of the deck replied. “There’s a second one directly behind us as well.”

“Sirr!” Ckathel, who had returned to the science console exclaimed. “A third ship of the same design has appeared off our port bow. I believe each has weapons charged and locked on us.”

“Where did they come from? Why didn’t sensors detect their approach?” Arbelo demanded to know.

“Unknown. They simply appeared in place. No evidence of a cloaking device or other known means of remaining hidden,” Ckathel replied. “Sensors are able to determine these ships are roughly the same size as our embarked Aquarius-class escort ship and are manned by small crews of about a dozen each. However, each of those ships carries half the firepower of an Odyssey-class starship.”

“Then they’re definitely warships,” Arbelo remarked, still looking at the one displayed on the viewscreen. “I know we can’t move forward, but what are the chances we could get away if we warp away in the reverse direction?”

“Unlikely,” the tactical officer replied. “The way the three ships are positioned, they’re covering every possible escape route. There is no way we could maneuver around and escape unscathed. Our only chance would be if we could move forward. And we all know that’s not possible at present.”

“Very well. Hail the first ship that appeared.”

“Hailing frequency open,” the operations officer confirmed.

“Unidentified warship, this is Captain Setton To’Lock Arbelo of the Federation starship *USS Spock*. We request you respond,” Arbelo stated, then waited for a response of some kind. After nearly thirty seconds, he looked over at the operations console to the left of the viewscreen and asked, “Any response?”

“None I can detect,” the officer replied.

“Unidentified warships, this is the *USS Spock*. Please state your intentions,” the captain then added. Again he waited several seconds for a response of some kind, even if it were weapons fire. “What are they doing?” he asked in frustration.

“It appears they are trying to hold us in place,” the tactical officer responded. “For what purpose is currently unknown.”

“I don’t like being trapped here and at the mercy of an unknown adversary,” Arbelo remarked. “What options do we have?”

“They have weapons armed and locked on us. Perhaps we should return the favor?” suggested the tactical officer.

“They haven’t shot at us so-far,” the captain replied. “That suggests they only want to hold us for some reason. I would rather not escalate this if it can be avoided.”

“What about contacting the *Dauntless* and *Sun Tzu*, like you were considering earlier?” Lieutenant Hooks inquired. “Even our odds a bit.”

“This could be over long before either starship arrived,” the tactical officer remarked.

A thought suddenly occurred to Arbelo. In the weeks since attaining command of the *Spock*, he had been studying the starship’s technical specifications, the better to know his ship’s abilities and capabilities when called upon. “What about the slipstream drive?” he asked.

“Sirrr?” Lt Commander Ckathel asked.

“It’s my understanding that quantum slipstream drive opens a corridor in subspace that the ship then travels through, but at a rate much faster than normal warp drive. You know, like the Borg do with their transwarp drive. Perhaps it can get us around whatever is blocking our forward progress?”

“Theoretically I suppose it’s possible,” Lt Commander Mallory Alston replied, exchanging a look with Ckathel. “However, the system is still considered experimental, and has yet to be tested aboard the *Spock*.”

“Not to mention we do not know if whatever is blocking our movement extends into subspace as well,” Ckathel added.

“We were informed by the Corps of Engineering to activate the quantum slipstream drive only in extreme circumstances,” Alston stated. “In order to maintain the slipstream, the phase variance of the quantum field has to be adjusted constantly, or the slipstream will collapse and endanger the ship.”

“Commander, it appears to me like our circumstances could not be any more extreme,” Arbelo remarked. “And we don’t need to do it for very long. At slipstream velocities, we could probably be through whatever this is within seconds! Ready the slipstream drive.”

The various officers gathered on the bridge exchanged looks before returning to their respective consoles and preparing the ship to enter a quantum slipstream. Arbelo then turned to his helmsman and said, “Lieutenant, you said we’re within three hundred thousand kilometers of the closer gravity mass according to the sensor readings?”

“Yes, sir. And roughly one hundred and fifty million kilometers from the larger gravity mass.”

“As I said, no reason to push things too far. Compute a short duration slipstream,” Arbelo ordered. “No more than two million kilometers. That shouldn’t require too much adjustment of the quantum phase variance.”

“Aye, sir,” the helmsman said, entering his computations into his navigation computer. Meanwhile, the rest of the crew was preparing the ship for its transit into quantum slipstream. Alston was calibrating the starship’s structural integrity field while having her crew lock down all extraneous equipment and sealing all major bulkheads throughout the ship.

“Captain,” Alston said. “Quantum slipstream drive is energized and standing by. All ship systems in readiness condition.”

“Very well,” Arbelo said, unconsciously gripping the arms of his chair tightly. “Activate quantum slipstream drive.”

Arbelo imagined he could feel the vibrations through the hull as the quantum slipstream drive routed energy through the starship’s main deflector, which focused a quantum field in front of the *USS Spock*. Within moments, the opening formed and the vessel penetrated the quantum barrier.

Almost every eye on the bridge was focused on the dull green glow of the quantum slipstream displayed on the main viewscreen. The only crewmember not staring at the image was the helmsman, who was trying not to overshoot the desired target coordinates. It took less than two seconds for the *Spock* to emerge back in normal space, and everyone who had been staring at the viewer suddenly put their arms or hands up in front of their eyes as a bright yellow star appeared at the center of the image.

“Where did that star come from?” Alston asked, cursing under her breath.

“I surrmise the starr has always been therrre,” Lt Commander Ckathel replied. “Though something was prrventing us firrom seeing it. Likely the same phenomenon that was rrestrricting ourrr movement.”

“Come about,” Arbelo ordered as his eyes adjusted to the light. “I want to be ready in case those warships followed us.”

The *Spock* turned around, and the bridge crew were again surprised to see a blue-green M-class planet in the distance.

“Our second gravity mass?” Arbelo asked his science officer.

“Yes, sirrr,” Ckathel replied. “And sensorrrs are detecting numerrrous spacecrrraft and orrrbital platforrrms at varrrious altitudes and inclinations orrrbiting the planet. Most of the spacecrrraft arrr verrry similarr in design to the warrships and the orrriginal alien vessel we encounterrrred outside of the phenomenon hiding this starr system.”

As the *Spock* slowly approached the newfound planet, the bridge crew could already see numerous spacecraft breaking orbit and moving to intercept them. Captain Arbelo decided to be caution yet not provocative, assuring the shields and defense screens were raised while keeping all weapons systems on stand-by.

“Captain, long-rrrange sensors arrr detecting evidence of an advanced civilization on the planet comparrable in technology to ourrr own,” Ckathel reported. “We currrently have eleven spacecrrraft on courrrse to interrcept us. All arrr similarr in design to the warrships we encounterrrred on the outside of the phenomenon.” The Caitian studied his readouts for a moment more before a smile spread on his furry face and he said, “Corrrrection, Captain. Only ten of the apprroaching crrraft match the configurration of the warrships.”

“Only ten?” Arbelo asked, looking back at the science officer. “What does the eleventh ship look like?”

“Exactly like a Starrfleet Type-12 shuttlecrrraft,” the Caitian replied. Immediately Arbelo’s eyes returned to the main viewer.

“Annika!” he whispered.

“Captain, we’re being hailed,” the operations officer reported. “Audio only.”

“On speakers,” Arbelo ordered.

There was a brief burst of static before a soft voice with an Andorian accent could be heard saying, “Away team to *USS Spock*. Please stop the ship where you are and do not take any defensive actions. We will explain all that has occurred once we are back aboard.”

“Is everything okay, Commander?” Arbelo asked. “Is Annika with you?”

“The away team is all present aboard the shuttle,” Commander Tohakeet confirmed. “For now I can only say the situation is tense. But all will be explained once we’re back aboard.”

“I understand... I think,” Arbelo replied. “Helm. All stop. Maintain station keeping.”

“Coming to all stop, station keeping,” the helmsman responded, and the *Spock* slowed to a stop. Several minutes later, the small fleet of alien warships surrounded the Federation starship as the Type-12 shuttle that had been in the midst of them maneuvered around and headed into the starship’s main shuttlebay, where Arbelo and a sizable security team awaited its arrival.

* * * *

Captain's log, supplemental:

With the away team back aboard, we have learned the civilization we have discovered calls themselves the Deselians, and they call their world Araimisia. A humanoid species, DNA scans of the Deselian envoys have determined they are distantly related to the reptilian Kairn. They are also a race that apparently wishes only to be left alone. I have promised their emissary that I will pass their wishes on to both Starfleet and the Morain Alliance.

Captain Setton To'Lock Arbelo was sitting at a table in 9-Forward with his first officer Commander Ch'Vaigyaanik Tohakeet, chief science officer Lt Commander Ckathel Brightslay, science officer Lieutenant Annika Arbelo-Eeta, and several other members of his bridge crew or that had participated in the away mission, in an informal debrief.

"So in spite of being related to the Kairn, the Deselians want nothing to do with their cousins?" Arbelo asked.

"Or any other race or species," Tohakeet added.

"According to the scientists that interviewed us, many centuries ago the Deselians used to engage in exploration of this area of the galaxy," Arbelo-Eeta explained. "In more recent times, they encountered other races that were aggressive and hostile, including both the Kairn and the Morain."

"Probably right in the middle of their war with one another," security chief Lieutenant Roosevelt Paul added.

"During those encounters, several of those alien species tried to invade and conquer the Deselians' homeworld, so they dedicated all of their technological advances for nearly a century to literally hiding their star system from the galaxy at large," Arbelo-Eeta continued to explain.

"They evidently made the break-through they were seeking," Captain Arbelo remarked, glancing out the forward lounge window at the depths of seemingly empty space where he knew a star with a single orbiting planet was actually located. "What was it exactly we encountered there?"

"The system consists of a single G-type yellow starr and a class-M planet orrrbiting the starr at a distance of rrroughly one hundrrred and fifty million kilometerrrs with an orrrbital perrriod of 361.2 standarrd days and a daily rrrotation of 22.8 standarrd hourrrs," Lt Commander Ckathel explained. "The planet has a diameterrr of 12,500 kilometerrrs, meaning it is slightly smaller than Earrth, with a brrreathable atmosphere consisting of 78 perrrcent nitrrrogen, 21 perrrcent oxygen, 0.1 perrrcent arrrgon, and the rrremainderrr a combination of carrrbon dioxide, waterrr vaporrr, and other trrrace gasses. Again, verry much like Earrth. And ourrr studies while we werre within the phenomenon deterrrmined the Deselians' have hidden theirr system by enclosing it within a fold in space."

"The system is in another reality?" Arbelo asked.

"No, Captain. The starr system exists entirrrely within ourrr own univerrrse. It is just hidden within an arrrtificially crrrreated pocket of subspace."

"Almost like a static warp bubble," Lt Commander Alston clarified.

"What would have happened if we had not encountered their derelict ship outside the bubble?" Arbelo asked. "This... fold... was like a physical barrier, preventing us from going past it."

"That is the most interrresting parrt about theirr technology," Ckathel remarked with a smile. "Had we encounterrrred the subspace fold while in warrrrp, it would have interracted with ourrr warrrrp field in such a way that we would have litterrrally skimmed arrround the edge of it without everrr knowing it was therrre. All sensorrrs and navigation equipment would have indicated we had neverrr deviated frrom ourrr courrrse unless we came to a stop prriorrr to clearrring the edge of the fold. We would have passed rrright arrround the Deselians and neverrr knew they werre therrre. It was ourrr use of the quantum slipstrrream drrrive that allowed us to tunnel thrrough the fold and enterrr theirr starr system."

“Ironically, it was their method of monitoring the outside galaxy, in the form of their derelict marker ship, that attracted the attention they didn’t want right to them,” Commander Tohakeet remarked.

“Which then brings me back to the ship we encountered that caused us to stop and investigate. If the Deselians don’t want to be found, why put the ship out there to begin with?”

The Deselians periodically place what they called ‘test ships’ along the edge of the fold to see if new species they encountered might be a threat to them,” Commander Tohakeet explained. “Those they deemed as non-threatening – races that either ignored the ships or only gave them a cursory exam – are allowed to continue on their way unmolested. Those that attempt to capture, attack, or destroy the test ships are deemed threats and are themselves destroyed and all evidence of the encounter eliminated so it appears the ship in question simply disappeared without a trace.”

“So, we were deemed a threat?” Arbelo asked.

“Honestly, Dad, the Deselians didn’t know what to make of us,” Arbelo-Eeta replied. “They couldn’t figure out our intent. That’s why they drew our shuttle into the fold when they had the opportunity. No other race they encountered ever investigated their decoy ship so intently. Most either ignored it or destroyed it pretty quickly.”

“When we tried to explain that we were trying to ascertain if there was a crew aboard in need of assistance, their representatives admitted no other race they encountered in the past ever expressed any concern for a species they did not know or was willing to help like we tried to do,” Tohakeet explained.

“They decided they needed to speak to us directly in order to ascertain our intentions – hostile or not,” Arbelo-Eeta added.

“They brought us back to their planet and interviewed each of us, including medical exams. Once they decided we were not hostile and we explained what our mission was, they in turn allowed us to examine them briefly. That’s when we determined they are distantly related to the Kairn,” Doctor Lott, the assistant chief medical officer who had been a part of the away team remarked.

“I could somehow sense you hadn’t left, and that our disappearance was worrying you, so I tried to project good thoughts to reassure you,” Arbelo-Eeta said to her father. “I guess those thoughts weren’t so good when their doctors discovered the Eeta symbiont in my abdomen.”

“The Deselians have never encountered a symbiotic species before. The fact that the Lieutenant’s symbiont could pass on its memories and experience to her fascinated the Deselians scientists,” Dr Lott explained. “We had to convince them at one point not to try and remove it for further study, as it would have killed them both.”

“So what is the outcome?” Arbelo finally asked. “I know their emissary presented me with a recording device during our brief meeting, but I could get no sense on whether they were interested in opening any sort of diplomatic dialogue.”

“After some effort, I was able to decrypt the data stored on the recording device,” Ckathel stated. “It consists of fragments of data regarding this region of space for almost five whole sectors. Probably their sum total of knowledge of this region,” the Caitian added. “Federation astronomers will be studying the data for years!”

“But they made it pretty clear to our away team that, while they do not consider the Federation or Starfleet to be an immediate threat, they prefer to be left alone,” Tohakeet explained.

“In that case, I recommend we accept their gift gratefully and move along,” Captain Arbelo commented. “Opinions?”

“I concur, Captain,” Tohakeet replied. There was a consensus amongst the other crew members.

“Very well,” Arbelo said with a smile and a nod. “Let’s head toward our next mission. Now, who’s buying the next round?”

The End