

Book of the Future: Future Histories

an *Outpost Hope One* short novel
written by Austin, Devon, Doug, Kevin, Rich and Tim

Devon, Editor-in-Chief

Star Trek: Borderlands

<http://www.startrekborderlands.com>

Star Trek: Borderlands is a play-by-email roleplaying community started in 1993. For more than 20 years, fans of Star Trek have come together to write their own stories of exploration, conflict, friendship, victory and defeat. Outpost Hope One welcomes anyone looking to explore the edge of human understanding in the fields of engineering, physical sciences and humanities.

This short novel is a compilation of posts from the [Outpost Hope One Posting Group](#)¹.

¹ <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/SentinelStation/info>

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Editor's Note

No words were put into character's mouths during this edit.

Slight modifications may have been made to ease the flow of the story, fill in background information, or fill missing tags.

Special thanks to the talented writers of *Star Trek: Borderlands*, Axel (Albatross), and *Outpost Hope One Duty Station*.

Devon – Editor-in-Chief and occasional filler of gaps

Characters and Authors

Albatross Crew

<https://sites.google.com/site/seiklonaxelhome/microverse/ss-albatross>

Noluk

CO (Vulcan Male) played by Kevin

Icmod Smith

XO (Human Male) played by Kevin

Roquel Atrell

Pilot (Risian Female) played by Rich

Zoss

Chief Tactical Officer (Jem'Hadar Male) played by Tim

Zal

Son of Zoss (Jem'Hadar Male) played by Tim

Karbo

Doctor (Klingon Male) played by Doug

Blueberry

Alien Frog

Mike Atlas

Engineer/Paramedic (Human Male) played by Austin

Shenara

Pilot (Human/Klingon Female) played by Kevin

Theodore

An electronic sentient bear in Starfleet (Electronic Bear) played by Doug

Captain Josh Carpenter

DFA Ghost (Human Male) played by Devon

Captain Kraxus Gret'ak

Captain of DFA Cromwell Prime (3316) (Kharian Male) played by Tim

Prologue

3316.08.29.01 FUTURE "History of the Mother Entity Invasion"

Stardate: 3316.08.29.01

The following is a round table discussion with Jamie Farid-Huntington of Earth, Commodore (retired) Tavin of Andor, and Professor Sarkot of Vulcan. Jamie is a renowned journalist and is the host of “Fractal Galaxy” which utilizes quantum technology to have Jamie interview thousands of noted individuals around the galaxy every week and posts the video feeds onto the Federation News Feed. Commodore Tavin was a frontline combatant commander in the war against the Mother Entity. Sarkot is a professor of Contemporary Delta Quadrant History and advises the Federation Council on events occurring in the Delta Quadrant.

Jamie: Good evening and welcome to a special edition of “Fractal Galaxy.” I am Jamie Farid-Huntington, your host. Tonight my quantum iterations and I will be interviewing a series of individuals from all over the galaxy to give you the viewers an update on the state of the Mother Entity Invasion now entering its twelfth year. With me are two experts on the history and progress of the war: Commodore (retired) Tavin fought in some of the very first battles against the Mother Entity, was decorated for valor multiple times, and is one of the fewer than 1% of patients who survive being infected by the Entity. Professor Sarkot studies Delta Quadrant Contemporary History and is a distinguished researcher and writer. He has taught in the T’Pol Institute for over 200 years. Welcome both of you to the program.

Tavin: Thank you.

Sarkot: Greetings.

Jamie: Professor Sarkot, why don’t we start with you? You’ve followed Delta Quadrant events far more closely than most. How did this invasion begin and what did the existing Delta Quadrant powers do about it at the time?

Sarkot: The official start date that the Federation recognizes is Stardate 3304.08.22.01 with the loss of contact with the Federation colony Amity. There is speculation that the invaders entered our galaxy decades, if not centuries, earlier but we have never been able to substantiate these theories. The USS Valorbound was sent to investigate and never reported back, only managing to transmit a barely-

intelligible and corrupted data compression stream with Captain's logs, sensor logs, and ship telemetry. A marine battlefleet was mobilized to investigate and they begin one of the first large-scale engagements with the subordinate organisms of the Mother Entity. They take heavy losses and are forced to retreat to Starbase Phoenix.

Jamie: Which is where we discovered the organism's infectious properties...

Sarkot: The crew of Starbase Phoenix quickly discovered that the wounded marines were infected with airborne fungal spores. Any and all anti-mycotic medications failed to clear the infection. They rapidly initiated quarantine, but it was too late. Such large amounts of infected also served to draw the Entity's attention and allowed it to pinpoint the Starbase's location in order to open portals from which its Warrior forms could attack. Before the end of the solar week, the entire station had been taken over by the Mother Entity. I... I believe Commodore Tavin can enlighten us more about the situation.

Tavin: We were entirely focused on helping the marines for weeks. I was a bridge officer aboard the station and managed the casualty relief efforts myself. We didn't know about the infection's psychosomatic properties until the first late-stage infected began attacking station personnel and trying to lower our shields. A couple days later, portals began opening up all over the station with increasing frequency. We were fighting running gun battles just to get to other parts of the station. Each attack involved hundreds of warrior forms pouring into the hallways, shooting weaponized spores that punched through shielding and armor. We fought them off every time, but every time more and more of us would be infected or killed. By the end, the station commander made a decision. Being infected as well, he ordered all personnel to go through a comprehensive screen before boarding ships en route to destinations that he did not know. Once all were aboard he tried to self-destruct the station, but... well, last I heard, he was overwhelmed by the infected and prevented from completing the self-destruct directive. When the liberation fleet arrived, Phoenix was nothing more than a mass of mycotic tissue. We had to blow her to pieces.

Jamie: Commodore, many have criticized Starfleet's strategies when fighting the invaders. What do you have to say to those who claim that Starfleet should have been more proactive about launching counterattacks and being more aggressive fighting these invaders?

Tarvin: You have to realize how truly desperate we were in those early days. The moment you found a SINGLE late-stage infected wandering around your station or ship, you had Warrior forms popping out of the walls. We didn't even know this

thing was sentient until our most powerful telepaths began... hearing things. We even did this experiment once where we got a bunch of Cairn and Betazed in a room observing a late-stage infected in a containment unit, then they all went nuts like they'd been infected too. Last I heard, they're still in the therapy colony chasing after mushrooms...

Jamie: That's until one year into the conflict on Stardate 3305.02.04.02. When the Takamori-Bashir fields were discovered.

Sarkot: Yes, the enemy by then had consumed a quarter of all territory in the Delta Quadrant. With the advent and rapid dissemination of these disruption fields, Starfleet and our allies were able to prevent portals from opening-

Tarvin: By sucking up more power than ten thousand cloaking devices...

Sarkot: -they effectively ended the Mother Entity's advance for a year.

Tarvin: But then the first Ship forms hatched and began swarming into DFA space. The Gatrubbians held our side well enough with what they had, but the DFA and Kharians were the ones who really made the difference.

Jamie: And what did the DFA do against the invaders?

Tarvin: <chuckles> What didn't they do? For a bunch of dirty rebel bastards, they're actually a pretty cohesive fighting force. They had a much more powerful fleet than the Federation did in the quadrant... largely due to us fighting that stupid fourth war against the Dominion while all this was going on...

Sarkot: Ill-advised, but ended quickly after the disruption fields were deployed.

Tarvin: The main advantage they had was that their supply lines were all local and that they were inventive bastards. They used quantum fractal technology to predict attacks before they occurred simply by looking at multiverse media broadcasts! Can you believe it??

Jamie: So, another universe for example, where I'm reporting the loss of a system...

Tarvin: Yes, if it occurs enough times in a local area, the statistical probability of an attack increased, so they were able to predict which systems were at risk. They ran an effective mobile defense for seven years-

Sarkot: Until the Devu incident.

Jamie: Yes professor, please inform us about what happened at Devu?

Sarkot: Due to poor screening techniques and suspected corruption, a ship full of refugees from New Halcyon, a wealthy DFA member world, was admitted through the Devu system's defense grid. It wasn't until they landed that they were discovered to be almost entirely filled with late-stage infected from the family of the planet's political leaders. There was an argument, and after a series of missteps, the Devu Mounted Police fired on the ship and destroyed it, killing all three hundred souls aboard. The DFA government then suffered a series of clandestine leaks which exposed how it chose systems to sacrifice or to keep in the fight against the Mother Entity.

Tarvin: Strategically necessary decisions to stave off the inevitable effects of attrition...

Sarkot: But politically unpopular decisions which, given the DFA's primitive status and the relative weakness of its central government, spelled its doom.

Jamie: Professor, are you referring to the "Sinking Ship" declaration by the DFA client states and minor members?

Sarkot: Yes, in 3314.05.23.04 the DFA clients and minor members, who have little to no say in council decisions, jointly declared that unless they were given equal representation on the council, they would no longer contribute to the alliance's resource pool and would withdraw from the alliance. There was some serious political squabbling and even a nascent civil war. Within a year, the DFA had ceased functioning as an effective military force.

Tarvin: Only the DFA Cromwell and her escort fleet remain today. All their other military assets were wiped out within the year after the declaration. The Kharians packed up and left their planets and now spend their days floating around with the Cromwell and the remains of the DFA council skulking around Crossroads station.

Jamie: Yes, which brings me to today. What is the situation for the Delta Quadrant at this point?

Sarkot: All major powers who had a presence in the quadrant are gathered at a planet called Carroll. They have fortified a space station known as Crossroads Station and several settlements on the planet itself. They have held out for over a year, but

they are cut off from all major supply lines and scavenge what they need to survive. They have formed a so-called “Emergency Commission” Headed by DFA and Federation officers who oversee daily operations. We are unable to contact them at this time.

Jamie: Which brings me finally to you, Commodore Tarvin, now that the Delta Quadrant is lost, and it will only be a matter of time before the threat figures out how to traverse the Gerosh wormhole, what do you think we should do to address this? What will our lives be like fighting this new war?

Tarvin: <pause> Well obviously life’s gonna change drastically. The Mother Entity is utterly alien to us. Any other species in our galaxy can’t even compare to its alien nature, how it doesn’t even register us as separate life-forms. It only grows and consumes and we are one of potentially hundreds of galaxies it has consumed over its lifetime. We must put aside all politics at once. Klingons, Romulans, Cardassians, hell, I’ve even fought alongside the Borg until they were wiped out. Every able-bodied citizen must be prepared to get onboard a warship and serve. We need to start abandoning worlds which hold no strategic value or worlds who we cannot defend. Worlds who choose to be pacifist and choose not to fight must be abandoned. Every citizen not of fighting age yet needs to be doing activity to support the war effort. Mobilization unlike anything we’ve seen before, that’s what we need to be doing.

Jamie: But that’s not happening...

Tarvin: You’re damned right it’s not. All this BS about “sinking more funding into research” and “building on alliances of trust” needs to go away right now. We don’t have time for that. But it may already be too late...

Jamie: Meaning?

Tarvin: *Turns to Sarkot* you’re hearing it right?

Sarkot: *no answer*

Tarvin: Your mother... you hear her voice don’t you? It’s a small whisper... you’re a telepath so I KNOW you hear it now....

Sarkot: <pause> how...?

Tarvin: I'm no telepath. I've never heard the voice until I was infected. I no longer carry the microbes, but I can still hear her when she's close. Our telepaths would only pick up the voice when the Ship forms begin portaling into the system. That means she's interested in your area. She's coming.

Sarkot: But we are on Earth... that would mean.

Tarvin: <getting up> Yeah, she's coming. You've got about a day, tops, before the first Ship forms arrive. An hour if they're really pissed off. I'm headed to my ship...

Sirens begin blaring. Transmission abruptly ends

Starfleet was able to repel the attack on Earth with massive losses. The attack galvanized the Federation and an unprecedented mobilization began. The war rages to this day with Earth on the front lines of a brutal attrition battle between the Mother Entity and the races of the Alpha Quadrant.

Commodore Tarvin and his crew of mercenary veterans of the invasion are missing and presumed destroyed.

Chapter 1

Stardate: Present Day 2416.09

Location: Aboard Setlin Commerce Vessel Albatross

Noluk entered Albatross' engineering compartment. He hadn't taken much time to check out the compartment since acquiring Albatross. The Vulcan had noticed a change in the noise of the reactor. The frequency had changed slightly, probably not noticeable to most ears, but it was to the Vulcan's. "Mr. Atlas how are you liking your new accommodations?"

Mike turned to look up from the exposed panel he was elbow deep in. "Captain!" Mike said with a start as he instinctively pulled his arm from the panel, nearly dropping the coil spanner he was holding in the process. Mike took a deep breath and smiled. "Please, sit down." He said, gesturing at the chair nearby. Mike pulled the rag from his pocket and began to wipe his hands off. "They're big enough for me. That's all that really matters."

"I know that the compartment may not be the most organized, I hope that will not be a problem." Noluk took a seat in a chair that sat nearby.

"I'll get it squared away soon enough." Mike looked around the engineering compartment. Hundreds of modifications ran through his mind. "It'll all get squared away."

Noluk noticed Zeno across the compartment. "How has he been working? I have not had a chance to check his system."

Mike glanced over at the android. "He seems to enjoy helping me to implement some changes to the ship...at least...I think he does. He hasn't said much to me."

"I can see him located elsewhere if he doesn't seem to be cooperating." Noluk hadn't given much thought to Zeno since they picked him up. He had spent his time aboard wandering around the ship inquiring about various topics.

Mike shook his head. "Maybe we just have to get to know each other a little better." Mike never thought he'd say that about an android.

"That could be. Will all our systems be functional before tomorrow?" The Vulcan asked. He had planned to depart as soon as possible and Icmo's last message put him somewhere in the vicinity of Setlin.

"Functional? Yes." The engineer said looking over the captain at the core. "But it'll be a little bit before she's firing on all cylinders. She's actually not in too bad of shape. I'd like to see if I can get more out of the sensors. More importantly, I'd like to go about replacing a few EPS parts." Mike sighed. "She's an old ship. She'll fly without the upgrade, but if we don't do it soon, we could have some serious power distribution problems down the road."

"Is it an upgrade you could perform en route?" Nuluk's past told him that most non vital systems could be modified on the fly.

"Oh sure!" Mike said waving an errant hand. "It's just a matter of not pulling the plug on the whole thing at once. This ship was designed with hot swapping in mind, so as long as we're careful, I don't foresee any complications."

"Is it something that could be completed in a week?" Nuluk asked gauging the scale of the overhaul.

"Well, with just Zeno and I, it might take a little bit longer than that." Mike said, glancing over at Zeno, who was still at work.

"If the task is too difficult is it possible to postpone it until we return from our assignment." The captain offered the best he could. He felt the ship was ready to fly and didn't want any more delays.

The engineer stuffed the rag back into his pocket. "Well what I mean to say, sir..." Mike paused for a moment, trying to rephrase his words in his head. "These kind of modifications are going to require a fair amount of work. It's not necessarily difficult work, but it's a lot of work."

Nuluk nodded, "So will it be doable?"

"We can do it, that's no problem. It just may take a more time than I estimated with just the two of us." Mike tried to get to the point. "I wanted to ask if I could steal a crew member or two who don't have anything else going on while we're en route?"

"Zoss and his son Zal may be able to lend a hand." Nolut suggested. There wasn't much need for a tactical officer during flight unless they encountered a less than friendly vessel. "Also the doctor may be able to assist you."

"Are they good with their hands?" Mike asked. "I'd hope the doctor would be." He joked.

"All three are competent in their skills as long as you inform them of what you need you should not have any problems." The captain didn't hesitate to boast about his crew, they had done good work in the past and Nolut was proud of it. "If you need further assistance, Icmo or I could lend a hand as well."

"That'd be great. With enough people, we could probably get it down to only a few days work." Mike pondered another question he'd had in his mind, but he was afraid to step on anyone's toes. "One other thing, sir."

"Yes Mr. Atlas?" Nolut asked. He had already volunteered a chunk of his crew to the engineering department. The captain hadn't expected any more requests.

Mike thought for a second to try and make it not sound like he was trying to boast about himself. He played himself off as a confident individual, but when it came down to it, he took humility to a whole new extreme. "I don't know if it showed on my records, but my mother was the doctor on the Calgary. I learned a lot from her and I became the Calgary's medic. I just wanted to offer my services if the good doctor needs any help, sir."

Nolut appreciated the engineer's offer, "I remember seeing that on your record and Roquel also said that you made a comment about being the ship's paramedic."

"Yes, sir." Mike said as he fidgeted with his hands, struggling to find a place to put them.

"The decision is not mine to make." The captain stood up. "For decisions regarding the medical bay you will need to speak to Dr. Karbo. But you have my support. An extra set of hands could go a long way if we encounter problems."

Mike nodded his head, feeling a little foolish for asking the Captain about something, deep down, he knew he couldn't help him with. "I appreciate that, sir. I'll have to speak with the good doctor as soon as he's available."

Noluk took another look around once more. "Any other problems we need to address?"

"Other than that, sir?" Mike looked back over to the ever busy android before looking back at the captain. Mike flashed a grin. "We're all good here, captain."

"Then I expect you to be ready to depart first thing tomorrow." The captain gave a farewell nod. "Until then."

#

Stardate: 2416.09.09.03

Location: Albatross Bridge

The sun lit morning brought memories to the old Vulcan's mind. He hoped that the Albatross and her crew would be able to see it the planet again soon. Noluk looked around the bridge. Roquel sat at the front taking the day's first shift at the helm. Shenara had expressed her doubts about flying a brick in the atmosphere. Instead she sat at the communications console; informing the control center that Albatross would be departing. Zoss sat at the tactical station as Noluk had grown accustomed to him doing.

The Vulcan was a bit annoyed to see that Icmold wasn't on the bridge, but Icmold had informed the captain that he wouldn't be able to perform his duties with Roquel at the helm. The Vulcan tried what he could to understand Icmold's issue but in the end gave up.

"Ms. Shenara do we have permission to depart?" Noluk asked as the half Klingon negotiated the channels the best she could.

"Yes sir. We've been put at the top of the departure queue. It seems someone in the Guild vouched that our ship is engaging in a vital mission." Shenara wasn't used to the complexities of civilian communication chatter. There didn't seem to be many straight answers. "We've been asked to depart straight out, air patrol will be standing by if we need them."

Noluk nodded, "Mr. Atlas how are the engines looking?" The Vulcan turned towards where his engineer sat.

"We are running at 95% efficiency. Power draw is still a little sluggish, but she's looking good, Captain." Mike said without looking up from his panel. He was manually controlling power draw until he could get the new EPS system in place. He found that he could react quicker to the fluctuations than the ship could.

"That is more than acceptable." Noluk's chair swiveled even more as he now faced the front of the ship. "Ms. Roquel take us out."

Roquel nodded. Slowly she engaged all thrusters driving the vessel upward and forward some 75 feet, before initiating full forward thrust for a departure from the airspace over the spaceport. "This damn thing." She cursed. "Shenara, you see what you've got to look forward too?"

The Risian seemed to channel her frustration through her maneuvering. The ship lurched unexpectedly into the planet's atmosphere. Noluk held onto his armrests in the hopes that they might hold some use if the ship decided to fall back to the ground. "Ms. Atrell! Please try to soften our ascent."

"I am, sir." She retorted. "It's very hard to cast an aerodynamic shield bubble around an irregularly shaped vessel. We might want to think about that, when we lose this one to metal munching nanites and have to find the next derelict floating in space."

"Ms. Atrell!" Noluk rarely raised his voice but his last dose of Trellium had finally made itself apparent with the Risian's banter. "Are you aware that while you critique this ship, you are putting all of us at risk?"

"Am, I?" She shrugged. "I'll do better, sir. I will. Sorry. Mike, I'm going to need you to increase the shield distance on the star forward - starboard quarter. I'm also going to need full vector control and impulse power in about 45 seconds. First things, first, please."

Mike's fingers flew across the LCARS on his control panel. He wasn't used to sitting at a bridge station. It was definitely something he would have to get used to. He began angling the shields into a more aerodynamic state. "She should be starting to feel smoother on the controls. As for impulse and vector control, they're both stable and..." Mike pressed a few more keys. "...free. You are cleared to throttle up at your leisure."

The ship's ascent smoothed out at the shield configuration took on a more regular form. "Thank you, Mr. Atlas. Better Captain?"

Noluk sighed in relief, no longer did he feel the centuries of his life flashing before his eyes. "Much."

"Breaking atmosphere in 15... In 10... 9.. 8.. 7.. 6.. 5.. 4.. 3.. 2.. Hold your pants. 1." Roquel punched the throttle up to 1/2 impulse and rode the upper limits of the thermosphere for just a moment, then she veered up and away slicing through the exosphere and finally into the blissful vacuum of space. "Atmospheric exit achieved."

"Set course for our previous point of departure." Noluk stood up to get blood flowing again. "I know it may be boring but we are being compensated well enough."

#

Location: Albatross Bridge

Albatross was nearing the last leg of her journey. Icmo had refused to speak with Roquel for the duration of transit and had managed to avoid her without problems. Unfortunately Noluk had become agitated at having to rework the crew's shifts around the former couple. In the end he had forced the two to both work on the bridge for at least one shift.

It was now that Icmo dragged himself to the bridge muttering under his breath how he would find some way to get back at that pointy eared bastard. The doors opened and Icmo walked in. He sat in the command chair and watched the starfield go by.

"Welcome back to the bridge." Roquel said calmly. She hadn't expected Icmo to become so cold to her as a result of her decision to put a stop to their exclusive relationship. However, he had certainly done that. Humans. Did they not have any other reaction to disappointment than hostility? She had hoped that they could remain friends, but he'd completely blocked her out. "Have a nice day?"

"I wasn't aware we were on speaking terms." Icmo continued looking out the starfield straight past Roquel. "I thought you wanted a break from all of that."

"Hey. I needed a break from the relationship, because it was tearing me apart. Once I make a decision like that, I can shut it off, but I thought that there was a chance that we could still be cordial towards one another." Her wording might not have been perfect, but she was trying not to antagonize him, while still pointing out that this deep rift was HIS doing.

"So how much longer do we have?" The XO asked.

"I'm not sure." Roquel replied. "How long does a crash and burn usually take?"

"I meant until we arrive at the system?" IcmoD corrected the pilot. "I prefer to focus on my ship's duties rather than my personal relationships on the bridge. Don't you think that's acceptable?"

Touch'e. He was still as cold and immovable as an iceberg. Well, she could be too, if she had to be. She steeled her nerve and straightened her posture, focusing completely on her helm console. "Yes, sir. That's the way it should be. We've got 2 hours remaining to destination if we remain at this speed and heading." In the course of two sentences, she realized that she was angry, REALLY ANGRY, that IcmoD wanted their relationship this way if it wasn't going to be the other. "...Commander Asshole, Sir."

"If Nolak knew you were insulting a superior officer." IcmoD got up and headed for the door. Just then the ship rocked violently. IcmoD looked first at Roquel to see if she was alright and then toward the viewscreen where the starfield had become a plethora of different fields scattered across the screen. IcmoD's eye noticed one view containing what looked like the old DS9 station and another had a station similar to what IcmoD had passed on his way through the Geroch wormhole all those years ago. Each seemed to be showing the entrance to a wormhole and giving a bug's eye view of the universe.

The Risian seemed to be struggling with the controls as multiple gravitational forces tugged simultaneously at the floundering Albatross. "What the hell?!" She tried in vain to set a smooth course, but no matter what she tried the ship refused to respond. It was almost as if the ship were caught in a whirlpool and was quickly going down...but down what...down where? An unexpected lurch drove her head into the console. She rebounded almost as quickly, the back of her hand had come to her forehead and she checked it instinctively to see if there was any blood. No....but it hurt terribly. Almost immediately she felt faint. Her head lolled as her shoulder and neck muscles seemed to have lost their ability to hold her up. And she was tired. So, tired.

"Roquel!" IcmoD tried to get to the front of the bridge and ended up sliding forwards as the ship's inertial dampeners failed to fully compensate for the sudden pitching down of the ship. Sparks flew from several of the panels and the comm station burst into flames. Suddenly the turbulence stopped. The XO had been thrown into the back of Roquel's chair and was on his back trying to get his bearings again. Seconds later the doors to the bridge opened.

Karbo ran in as soon as he could with his medical tricorder, healing gel and a bunch of experimental drugs he found on planet Carroll "I'm here, what do you need?"

"We're over here doc." Icmo managed to seat himself upright. The XO looked down at his right arm which stung with pain. The arm had been lacerated during the event and was now staining his torn sleeve with dark red. "Check Roquel first."

Karbo ran over to Rouquel and examined her with his Tricoder.

"I'm....I'm fine." Roquel responded, trying to wave Karbo away ineffectually with a listless arm. But still feeling woozy, she grabbed hold of the console in hopes of stopping the ship from spinning.

"How is she?" Icmo attempted to stand. With some support of the chair he was able to balance and look out the viewscreen. The ship was rotating about. Icmo opened a comm line to engineering. "Report?"

Mike frantically dashed from one engineering panel to another. "The warp field has been destabilized." He jumped as a small short sent a ray of sparks from the panel behind him. "And I'd say rather violently."

"Any idea what caused the field to collapse?" Icmo asked. He head began to ache.

"Hard to say right now." Mike bolted to the previous panel he was at. The engineering spaces were clearly meant for more than one man to handle. "I can promise you that my work had nothing to do with it. The system I was working on isn't even directly connected to the core!" He shouted in frustration. "But it looks like the destabilization created a feedback that's trying to force itself into the core. I'm trying to reroute it into other systems until it dies off."

"Can we get impulse engines online?" The XO asked trying to ascertain the severity of the damage.

"I can try, sir." More sparks flew from other conduits. "But as of now, as long as the core itself doesn't destabilize, we should consider ourselves lucky."

"Understood. Keep Noluk and I apprised." Icmo closed the line. Once more the doors to the bridge opened and there was Zoss. "Zoss I need you to check weapons and shields."

"Yes sir." Zoss was already on the way to the tactical station anyway.

"I don't expect a fight but once can't be too careful." Icmo took a seat at the helm in an effort to use the ship's thrusters to stabilize the ship's spin. The controls for the thrusters were still operational. With a little effort and one arm Icmo was able to slow the ship and point towards their previous heading. "How are they looking?"

"Shields and weapons still functional." Zoss replied. "The fail safes we installed back at Setlin protected them from the worst of the surge." For once, the Jem'Hadar's paranoia had been actually useful.

"See if you can assist with repairs. I'll see if I can't figure out where we are." Icmo turned towards the sensor display and began his attempts at triangulating Albatross' position.

"Not until we do something about that arm" Karbo said. "Now Roquel, take this red pill" Dr Karbo demanded, handing it to her.

Roquel was only slightly less disoriented than she had been a few moments ago, but she was capable of following the simple direction. She gingerly took the pill from Dr. Karbo's hand and inserted it into her mouth, using her own saliva to wash it down. "I...don't think I will be able to operate the ship." She stated. She knew that they needed her and it killed her to say it, but she needed to get the truth out there, so that they could make another plan to deal with the crisis.

"And you, Icmo. Take my pack of healing gel and rub it on your arm. It will hurt like a bear but it's better than amputation." Karbo tossed him a bag.

#

Stardate: 2416.09.11.04

Location: Albatross Bridge

Noluk came onto the bridge. Icmo was still at the helm. Karbo had taken Roquel to sickbay and anyone not severely injured was helping get primary systems operational again. Icmo had created a makeshift tourniquet to stop the bleeding of his right arm. It was only a temporary fix, but he had refused to leave for treatment until he was sure the ship was safe.

"Progress Mr. Smith?" Noluk asked in a calm voice. He appeared unfazed by the massive amounts of damage the ship had just endured.

Icmod turned. "The stars are off. I've managed to find our star system, we're only a few minutes from the edge. From the information sensors are giving me we dropped out in the right spot."

The Vulcan's right eyebrow arched. "But the stars are off?"

"Right, it's like they've drifted." Icmod pulled up the calculations he had run. "About 900 years according to the computer."

Noluk went to one of the operational terminals and checked the data for himself. "Then you suppose we traveled into the future?"

"Yes sir. I don't know how, but here we are." Icmod made some navigational corrections. The XO opened a channel to Zoss, "Zoss if you have a minute I could use another set of eyes on sensors."

There was a sound of coughing from the comm. Zoss could be heard barking at Zal in the background before he replied: =/\= On my way back! Fires... in the cargo bay... Zal can handle it! =/\=

Amidst the static, Zal could be heard in the background saying something along the lines of "NO I CAN'T!!"

As the two command officers waited for Zoss' arrival, Noluk continued the conversation. "Do you see something?"

"Maybe, but at this distance I'm not sure." The sensors had been knocked out of sync when the ship had dropped out of warp. The resulting data contained more noise than the XO was used to.

A billow of smoke followed Zoss as he stepped out of the turbolift. The Jem'Hadar's body was covered head to toe in soot. He casually walked up to the tactical station as if he hadn't been coughing his lungs out just minutes earlier. "Sir, where do you want me to focus the sensors?" He asked.

"Take a look over the planet Carroll. I think I see an object orbiting it but I can't seem to make heads or tails of it." Icmod alter course for the planet in hopes that a better scan could be obtained.

"It's either a large asteroid that's been captured by the planet's gravity..." Zoss began as he squinted into his screen. "...or someone has constructed a space station of quite impressive size."

"A station?" IcmoD was shocked. "Your eyes are better than mine my friend."

"I am running scans on the object's telemetry and trying to determine if it's artificially maintaining its orbit." Zoss replied. "It will take some time for the computer to run the simulations."

Suddenly a notification sounded from the remains of the comms panel. IcmoD routed the incoming signal through his console and emitted it to the bridge's comm system.

=/\=Attention incoming vessel. Your ship's identification tag cannot be located. Please stop your approach. A fighter detail has been dispatched to your location and will escort you to the station. Failure to comply will be viewed as hostile action and will be treated as such.=/\=

Noluk looked at Zoss and IcmoD to gauge their reactions. It appeared that none of the three officers knew what to expect. "This is Noluk of the SS Albatross we are coming to a full stop and will await your escort."

=/\=Thank you for your cooperation Albatross. Please stand by for any further instructions.=/\=

"Sir..." Zoss began. The Jem'Hadar was uncharacteristically shaken. "...the object... it's a station. Showing signs of Federation technology, but... the power outputs are impossible. The amount of energy the station is emitting is radically disproportionate to its size. It is as if there were 20 million warp cores simultaneously operating inside the station."

"That's not possible." Noluk pulled the telemetry up for himself. He diverted any resources available to try to enhance the resolution of the sensors.

"Are you sure your scans are correct?" IcmoD asked. The reality that 900 years had passed was still settling in.

"Yes. Million. Either that station is completely filled with warp cores or the builders have discovered an ultra-efficient reactor design." Zoss replied. "This construct is beyond anything I've ever seen before. Where are we???"

"We should be in SG386. The station would be above the planet Carroll." Icmo d replied. Out the main viewscreen Icmo d saw the approach of a small band of fighter craft. Their design was similar to the older Starfleet blueprints but they had an alien look to them.

The lead pilot sounded female and spoke with a Gatrubbian accent, but not as heavy as the Albatross crew was used to.

=/\= SS Albatross, this is Lieutenant Etar Gita of Mirel Squadron, Federation Marine Corps. Come in, over. =/\=

Icmo d opened a channel to the lead fighter. "This is Albatross go ahead."

=/\= Albatross, maintain heading of 809 mark 2, speed: three terrajoule ion coefficient or your equivalent. =/\=

"I'm afraid I'm not able to comply with that command." Before letting the pilot reply Icmo d added. "Our systems don't use that system for measurement."

There was silence for a moment before the pilot replied: =/\= You're joking, right? You don't use TIC propulsion measurement? The system the entire galaxy has been using for the past five centuries???=/\=

Icmo d thought he could hear Nolut give a soft chuckle. The XO couldn't help but smile. "I'm sorry but our systems come from the..."

The pilot snapped at Icmo d, cutting him off.

=/\= Maintain a speed of 500 terrameters per hour. I don't care what antiquated systems you're using. Exceed that speed and I will blow your relic into the void, how copy? =/\=

"Plotting a course now." The XO put in the waypoints the craft had sent. "We'll be sure to go slow and steady."

=/\= One more thing, we do not offer amnesty or protection for free aboard the station. We've got enough refugees as it is. You either stay onboard that tub of yours and help us fight or you pay your way with doctors, food, and medicine. We're not letting you into the station if you've got nothing to offer us. =/\=

At this point Noluk spoke. He couldn't help but feel like the fighter pilot was belittling his ship. "We have two experienced doctors on board. They would be more than willing to help out. If you need engineers we can provide that as well."

"Sir, maybe we should wait until we can talk to someone who's in charge." Icmold gave the suggestion feeling that now was not the appropriate time for negotiations.

"That is true. I have never been given such a request from a station." The Vulcan awaited to hear from the others before responding further.

"Sir..." Zoss whispered, trying not to let his voice get picked up in the transmission. "...that squadron has sustained battle damage. The entire station is covered in scorch marks. This is a conflict zone."

Icmold looked at the closest fighter and verified the Jem'Hadar's remark, "Wonder who they're fighting."

"What can sensors tell us?" Noluk asked.

"I can't identify the weapons signatures. They're more powerful than any weapon in the known galaxy if they can get through that station's shielding." Zoss's fingers continued to fly across his station as he ran scans of everything around them and archiving the results for later study.

"Etar, we will be expecting to be met by one of your superior officers one we arrive at the dock." The Vulcan had finally decided on a response he liked. "We will negotiate our terms there."

=/\= Your Captain will be allowed transport aboard ALONE and UNARMED to speak with the Emergency Administration. We have no room in our docking rings for a relic. We've got enough proper warships to repair without your piece of junk clogging up the repair queue! Now if you'll excuse me, we're in range of the station's weapons now so my babysitting duties are over. =/\=

"My pilot will contact you if we have any more questions." Noluk nodded to Icmold to close the channel. "I will be assisting with repairs. Inform me when we get closer."

Zoss merely nodded as he gazed at the viewscreen. The station, though beautiful and more streamlined than anything he'd ever seen, was covered in pockmarks and signs of protracted struggle. Ships of all makes and sizes swarmed around the construct

like bees protecting a hive. There were noticeable lines of heavily-damaged ships (all of which looked armed to the teeth like Lieutenant Gita had said) waiting to be hastily put into one of the docking ring slots where armies of repair bots and space-suited engineers labored to patch the holes and blown-out armored plating.

The security officer was struck by the scale of the devastation and the effort in front of him. It was then that he realized that he was witnessing a war. Whatever war or conflict THIS Federation was fighting dwarfed even the Dominion war that his progenitors had fought. The thought of bringing Zal into such a warzone before he was ready sent a shiver down the Jem'Hadar's spine. Despite the momentary weakness, Zoss steeled his nerve and returned to his tasks, hoping that the foolish child hadn't burnt himself to a crisp fighting a measly deck fire.

#

Aboard Crossroads, others had also taken note of Albatross' approach to the station.

MESSAGE TO: SS ALBATROSS
FROM: YOUR FRIEND ZENO
SUBJECT: WELCOME MY GOOD FRIENDS!

Dear Crew of the SS Albatross,

I have longed for the day my photoreceptors would register one of your ship's forged serial numbers in the dock manifests again. I am filled with a slightly elevated jolt of voltage through my CPU in reaction to your arrival. I can deduce from the boarding permissions manifest that you have obtained free passage aboard the station through an equitable trade with the Emergency Commission. This is most agreeable to my profit subroutines for now I do not need to expend my own financial resources to secure your passage aboard the station. Please, come visit my establishment, the Zenophile Cantina aboard Crossroads Station. Based upon transcripts of your interactions with the station's defense forces, I suspect that you are not fully appraised of the situation, and that you have many inquiries to file. I shall gather all relevant information that you require and communicate it to you in a logical order and concise format in exchange for an opportunity to make pleasurable conversation with you, and perhaps vend to you some beverages of dubious nutritional value at a reduced profit margin. I would be greatly pleased if this transaction is acceptable to you, my dear friends, whom I have not spoken to in over 900 Terran solar orbital cycles because of your cessation of functions due to organic failures of various causes.

With Sincere Pleasure,
Zeno
Franchise Owner and Proprietor
Zenophile Cantinas, LLC

Chapter 2

Stardate: 3316.09

Location: Crossroads Station

Noluk had beamed aboard and discussed matters. He sent word back to the ship that the Albatross would be able to dock temporarily at the outer docking ring. The crew was to disembark and the ship was to be moved off until it could be repaired. The Vulcan had agreed to meet IcmoD at the hatch where the crew was to go through.

IcmoD made a final sweep of the Albatross. He didn't feel comfortable leaving Albatross attended by the station's crew. But an agreement was an agreement. IcmoD went through the airlock and turned to get a last glimpse of Albatross' interior.

Once through the station's airlock IcmoD saw Noluk standing by a female Gatrubbian. Her uniform was reminiscent to the Starfleet attire he was used to but once again there were differences to make it seem foreign. The XO approached and greeted the pair of officers. "Hello, not sure if Noluk told you but I'm IcmoD Smith Albatross' second in command."

The woman nodded to acknowledge the introduction. "I've been informed. I am commander Ligshuk Voci. Crossroads Station is under my command. Your captain and I have been negotiating a trade to supply your crew with temporary shelter while your ship is repaired."

"You don't happen to be related to Bresa Voci do you?" IcmoD asked. He may have seen a crowd of Gatrubbians, but Bresa was the only one that IcmoD knew by name.

The commander rolled her eyes. "Another history fanatic? Just because I am directly related doesn't mean that I didn't earn my position here."

"Not exactly a history fanatic per se." IcmoD looked at Noluk, "You didn't tell her yet?"

"Our records indicate that time travel was not used in the early 25th century." The command interrupted before Noluk could respond. "Your captain's story is far fetched to say the least."

"So our antiquated ship and technology doesn't count for anything?" The XO burst out. Why was everyone in the future so prepared to dismiss time travel?

"We will be looking into the case when we have time." The commander seemed to be getting anxious. "But we have far more pressing matters at hand. Another ship full of refugees means very little at this point."

"But we're not refugees!" Icmo figured increasing his volume would get the point across. "Don't you get it we just jumped 900 years down the road."

Noluk put his arm on Icmo's shoulder. "What my officer means to say is that we are a freighter crew. We had no idea that such an influx of refugees was occurring."

The woman snorted. "I find it unlikely that your crew is ignorant of such a threat. Many religious leaders call this the Last Chapter. They say that the Writers have abandoned our story and moved on. Frankly I'm beginning to agree with them. Now unless your crew is willing to volunteer aboard this station during their stay I will have to ask you to get back aboard your ship and leave."

"We will assist you in any way we can." Noluk responded. He maintained his calm demeanor even with his XO wanting to demand more answers. "I do ask that you consider our situation. Our ship is from 2416 and we only wish to return home."

"I will have my scientists look into it. Now if you'll excuse me I have to attend to other matters." Commander Voci turned and walked down the corridor without giving a farewell.

Icmo watched Noluk as the Vulcan looked down the corridor. "What threat is she talking about?"

"I am as clueless as you are friend." Noluk turned his attention back towards Icmo. "I would suggest we inquire at a more suitable location. There are many refugees located in the upper levels of the main structure. Perhaps they would be able to shed some light on the situation."

"I'll have some of the crew look into it." The XO nodded. "Do you mind if I go?"

Noluk shook his head. "No, go make sure the rest of the crew are together. I will find lodging and inform you when I have secured some resources."

Location: Somewhere in Crossroads

The crowd of Albatross crew worked their way through the crowded station. At every turn refugees seemed to be sitting and asking for help. Icmo'd tried to lead the way while the captain was away. They were nearing the core of the station and the number of civilians picked up greatly.

Suddenly Zeno stopped and alerted the crew, "I have information."

Icmo'd turned. He approached the android. The two hadn't talked at all since Icmo'd's return and he hadn't taken the time to fully appreciate the android's composition. "From where?"

"From myself." Zeno replied. "I just received information routed through the Albatross' comm system that came from myself."

Icmo'd ignored the fact that the android was making little sense. "Would you like me to recite the whole message or to tell you that we have been asked by me to take us to the Zenophile Cantina. The cantina should be located less than a kilometer from our current position."

"Fine lead the way." Icmo'd allowed Zeno to take charge. At least if they got lost he would have something to blame.

The crew entered a cantina and, low and behold, behind the bar stood what could easily have passed for what looked like Zeno. Most of the crew could be seen doing double takes to make sure they weren't going crazy.

Future Zeno's entire lower torso had been replaced with a crane arm mounted on a swivel in the ceiling which was in turn, mounted on a circular rail which afforded it access to the entire circumference of the room. Hundreds of appendages protruded from the base of its torso where its old chassis met with the crane arm, each carrying a drink, PADD, or miscellaneous tool. He swiveled to and fro behind the bar, occasionally leaving the bar to serve a table or gliding up over the bar to serve patrons who were more comfortable upside-down on the ceiling. Upon the Albatross crew's approach, Future Zeno turned its head towards them, a single photoreceptor zoomed in and out of focus. Wordlessly, a swarm of drones flew up from behind the bar and took over serving duties as Future Zeno glided towards the crew.

/Greetings my yet-to-be-deceased friends!/ Future Zeno intoned. Its voice had taken on a much more robotic quality than that of Past Zeno. Both of its main arm appendages as well as roughly 70% of its lower appendages opened outward in imitation of an open-armed greeting from an organic. /Please, conduct yourselves up these stairs and speak with me in the VIP suite. I have waived the usual use fees and we can talk privately there./

Icmold led the group up the stairs. He was still trying to work out the logistics of two Zeno's in one place and time. The old Zeno had barely befriended the crew and this new Zeno acted as if he had missed the whole crew dearly.

Dr Karbo did not hang out with Zeno much given he was a doctor, not a mechanic. His main interest is what medical treatment the future held.

Roquel seemed the most lost of anyone. She continually looked around to take everything in. This station was far more advanced than anything she'd been on previously, but the disastrous effects of a long conflict showed everywhere in both large and small ways. It was enough to be disconcerting, if not downright scary. To her surprise she'd seen several unknown races, far more Gatrubbeans, and fewer humans than she'd seen on many.

Once the crew was inside, Zeno used the crane to raise its body up to the balcony in front of the VIP suite and detached itself from the crane. A set of mechanical legs which oddly resembled Past Zeno's legs unfurled from underneath its body and propelled it into the room where the door promptly shut behind it and turned red to indicate that it had been locked.

#

Location: Xenophile Cantina

Captain Carpenter sat with his boots on the stool next to him, drinking his beer, watching the comings and goings of the clientele. He was in a uniform of sorts, patched and painstakingly mended hundreds of times. The Old DFA, as a point of pride, seldom utilized replicators nowadays. Energy was too precious for frivolous use. They wore repaired uniforms until it was impossible to repair them any longer. Their ships followed suit. "Our forefathers had little, and we continued to fight, we keep the old ways." making them unreliant on pure power. It made them instead, dependent on a steady stream of supplies. Buccaneers, Privateers, Rogues. Always on the lookout for a mark. And perfectly willing to fight the enemy, although

Guerrilla tactics and raids were more their forte. Rebels to the end, but working alongside, if not under, the defenders of the station.

Captain Carpenter drank the beer as his head turned, watching the newcomers cross the bar, speak to Zeno, and then disappear upstairs into the VIP room.

Carpenter tapped his comm badge. "Ready the Ghost. Something's come up."

"A mark Captain?"

"No, I don't think so. They wore Setlin badges." said Carpenter.

"Setlin." Clear surprise in the voice of his mate. "Since when do we work with Setlin?"

"Zeno was with them." said Carpenter. "And I mean an old copy of him, probably 400 years or older. If Zeno is willing work with us, an old Zeno unit may as well." said Carpenter turning towards the bar as a drone refilled his beer. Carpenter dropped a coin into the Drones hopper. In the mirror, Zeno, the current owner climbed to the VIP room. "If these guys have a Zeno unit, we may be able to get one too. I have not seen Zeno this excited. Ever." said Carpenter.

"Aye Sir, I'll get Ghost warmed up." said the mate referring to the DFA privateer ship Carpenter led.

Carpenter stayed, waiting, to see what would happen next.

#

Location: Crossroads Station Promenade

As the rest of his crew was off visiting an old friend, Nuluk made his own route through the station. The station felt very crowded everywhere that Nuluk went. Between the hordes of civilian refugees and official personnel, the Vulcan found himself having to shove his way along. He made his way to the main promenade. Several floors of open space revealed themselves. Each level was stuffed full of shops and services for the civilian side of life.

As the Vulcan looked around a Gatrubbian weaseled his way over. He was dressed in casual attire and made sure to get Nuluk's attention. "My friend, have you heard the prophecy?"

"I cannot say I have." Noluk decided that this latest annoyance may hold some information about the station's predicament. "Please tell me the prophecy."

"It has been foretold that two five dozen and 6 gross years ago after the Great Sequel began this station was brought forth to fend off the Ending of Endings." The Gatrubbian's vocal display was impressive and was keeping Noluk entertained. "Now the Ending is near. The Writers have become bored with this universe and wish to conclude what they began. The great hero Bresa, who brought the Gatrubbian people of old and new together warned us of the Ending that we now face. The prophecy also declares that when the end is close, those who were once dead will arise to witness the end."

By this time a crowd of viewers had gathered around Noluk and the proselytizing Gatrubbian. The Gatrubbian now walked around looking among the crowd, then he turned and pointed a finger at the Vulcan. "You wear the symbols of the dead. Your ship was destroyed long ago. So it is written in the Stories, the Albatross and Axel that once shepherded the flock under the gracious hand of Bresa one day were lost to the worst enemy of all. Time. Your arrival foreshadows the end. THE END IS NIGH THE END IS NIGH."

Murmurs spread throughout the crowd. Noluk was uncomfortable with the attention that was being drawn. He attempted to walk into the crowd

"You cannot deny the facts oh great and wise Noluk." The Gatrubbian's words made the Vulcan freeze. "Yes your name is mentioned in the Stories. Advocate of reason, a friend of Bresa, you perished with your ship and now you return to face the Ending of Endings."

"I shall be going now." Noluk spoke knowing his words wouldn't be heard. But the crowd was densely packed now that the Gatrubbian had drawn even more attention. He was prevented from leaving the circle.

The Gatrubbian was now facing the crowd. "Brothers and sisters. Behold a sign of the end times walks upon this station. With him and his people comes death and woe. Make peace brothers and sisters for the time is upon us to accept the end."

A crack formed in the crowd as a squad of security officers came and tried to get the crazed Gatrubbian to calm down. Noluk took this chance to make his escape.

"You cannot walk away from the truth!" The Gatrubbian yelled as the guards attempted to restrain him. "The advocate of reason should know this!"

Noluk blended into a nearby stream of refugees to make his way further down the promenade. He stopped upon seeing a sign for accommodations. The Vulcan entered.

Standing at a reception desk was an Andorian with pointed ears. She saw Noluk enter. "Can I help you?"

"Yes." Noluk approached the desk a bit shaken by the drama he had taken part in. "I need to find lodging for a group of nine plus one android."

The Andorian laughed. "I've not heard such nonsense in weeks. Go to the refugee camp, we're booked for paying customers."

"I am willing to pay whatever price is necessary." Noluk was getting tired of the nonsense he was having to put up with. "Two or three to a room will be adequate enough for my people."

The receptionist took Noluk more seriously now. "We do have a couple rooms available but they are not cheap."

The Vulcan nodded. "I understand and will work out whatever payment is necessary."

The Andorian pulled the proposed pricing up on a screen that Noluk could see. The Vulcan almost refused but realized that this was the only option to avoid spending a night on the streets. "Will four rooms suffice? Each can hold 3 persons comfortably."

"That will be sufficient for my crew. Thank you." Noluk made the proper entries to seal the reservation. Now it was time to find the rest of the crew.

#

Location: Inside the VIP room

/May I offer you a drink from our fine stock of pre-invasion liquors?/ Future Zeno offered as a holographic menu appeared in front of every crew member's face. /I have adjusted the prices for the currency and inflation levels of your timeline. I hope

you find your discounted rate pleasing. I apologize, but I could not waive the drink fee. I must offset the cost of the complimentary VIP suite./

The crew members could see that the drink prices were mere fractions of what they would have cost in their own time. 900 years of inflation had definitely made their latinum more valuable.

IcmoD looked at the menu. A few items caught his eye. "You named some drinks after us I see."

/My time with you has produced a qualitative change in my programming./ Zeno replied, folding its two main limbs together. /I now am more inclined towards... what you would call nostalgia, sentimentality even./

"It may sound a bit odd to order this, but I'm up for an Icky Smith." The XO was amused at the name. "I didn't realize androids got so sentimental."

/Very good, sir. And yes, I am exhibiting many sentimental behaviors at the moment. I hope that you understand that you ceased functioning for many solar orbital cycles.../ in a blink of an eye a drone flew in from one of the ceiling ducts and held a drink in front of IcmoD. It stayed there expectantly while waiting for IcmoD to pay.

IcmoD entered in the proper account information. It came as a surprise to see that the bank hadn't closed his account in the several centuries following his death. The drink that the XO held in his hands swirled with vibrant hues and seemed to ripple and change colours. For a second IcmoD felt bad ruining such a work of art. Then he felt he was thirsty and took a sip. "Well I'll be damned. Haven't had a drink like this in years."

Future Zeno suddenly jerked his head to the side, fixing his photoreceptor at a shimmering presence in the corner of the room.

/Oh, Mister Zoss, I assure you that is quite unnecessary. In fact I highly discourage shrouding aboard this station./ Future Zeno spoke quickly and with concern.

"WHY?" Zoss growled as he shimmered into existence with Zal standing beside him.

/It is illegal for Jem'Hadar to shroud aboard this station./ Future Zeno explained. /For the public good, all Jem'Hadar must move around the station in plain view and under no disguises unless performing duties as a peace officer or fighting off hostile invaders./

"How...?" Zoss looked at the machine, confused.

That was a point that Roquel was very interested in too. The Jem'hadar had always been on the cutting edge of personal cloaking tech. She stepped around to Zoss's side to better hear and see the answer.

/The countermeasures to Jem'Hadar shrouding were discovered three hundred solar orbital cycles ago./ Future Zeno replied sheepishly. /They are a standard fixture of any establishment that caters to intergalactic customers. I picked you up the moment you walked into the Cantina./

"No... there are other Jem'Hadar aboard?" Zoss placed a hand on Zal's shoulder. "They're working here? We can walk freely? Without repercussion?"

/Why yes. If I remember correctly, you led a raid in the Beta Quadrant close to the end of your biological functioning cycle and freed several dozen pods of Jem'Hadar from the Dominion. Once back in Federation Space, you were declared free beings by the Federation High Court and given full rights. Of course, the defeat of the Dominion in the Second Battle of Bajor may have had much to do with that.../

"What the do the humans say, spoilers?" Karbo mused

"Shh!" Roquel wanted to hear this, and Karbo could easily derail the direction of anything. It appeared to be one of his most natural skills.

"So you mentioned that you might be able bring us up to date on the state of the galaxy." Icmold asked sensing a lull in conversation. He had finished off his drink and a service drone came by to retrieve the empty glass.

/Oh yes, where are my manners? I promised information in exchange for your company. Please, ask away./ Future Zeno sat down on the opposite side of the table from the crew and placed its primary arm appendages on the table.

"What happened to the Klingon empire, is my house still around?" Karbo asked

/The Klingon Empire remains a fixture in galactic politics./ Zeno began. /They have been largely unchanged by time and are as warlike as ever. Your house is doing well and marriage to a daughter of your house automatically qualifies a Klingon to compete for a seat on the high council./

"Where are all of the uniformed officers from?" Shenara had made an observation earlier and felt like an answer was necessary. "They seem to be the same species but I don't recognize it."

"They look Gatrubbian to me." IcmoD replied to the pilot's question. "But if that's the case then this station belongs to the Gatrubbians?"

/Very astute Mr. IcmoD. The Gatrubbian Empire are the friendliest power to the Federation in this quadrant./ Zeno replied. /They built this station with the help of the Federation and welcomed Starfleet as soon as the Federation lost its military headquarters in the region./

"The Gatrubbian Empire?" The XO responded out of shock. The Gatrubbians he knew were still flying around a fleet of ships. "How far does it extend?"

/Before the invasion, the Gatrubbians held over 200 colony worlds and over 300 client or confederated worlds./ Zeno brought up a holo-display showing a pre-invasion map of the Delta Quadrant. /Though they are not officially part of the Federation, they maintain extremely close ties. Gatrubbian personnel comprised over 60% of all Starfleet personnel in the Delta Quadrant before the invasion. They now represent over 90% after attrition and forced conscription increased their representation on the force./

Roquel raised both hands to the sides of her head and pushed her fingers back through her short curled hair. Her eyes seemed to bug out a little as she thought about all the implications of what Zeno was saying. She'd only met one Gatrubbian and that was Bresa, the newest XO of the Axell. She had thought that his race had all but disappeared. Now...in this time and place, they seemed to have become one of the greatest powers. How she didn't know. What course had they taken through history to be where they were now? Mind blowing.

"More than once a major threat has been alluded to in previous conversations." IcmoD recalled, "What has everyone so tense?"

Again Roquel tuned in without a word. She had more to learn from listening than she could ever hope to contribute.

Zeno's photoreceptor dimmed as his processors registered a lowering of voltage throughout its body. /What we are 'tense' about is the Mother Entity. A carbon-based fungal life form which originates from outside our galaxy. It harvests all existing organic matter and harvests base components of organic matter from

inorganic sources in order to feed itself and grow. It has invaded our galaxy starting with the Delta Quadrant and will most likely succeed in destroying all that remains of life in this quadrant, to include this station we are currently aboard, very soon./

Zeno's rendition of the coming horrors made Icmo'd's blood run cold.

Roquel's hand involuntarily rose to her upper chest. Her fingers splayed out across her collar bones as she gasped aloud. "Lords of Light!"

"And you thought it would be a good idea to bring us here?" Karbo said

Icmo'd turned towards the doctor. "It wasn't a choice, whatever caused the warp field to destabilize caused our arrival."

"True. But this was his chance to take us to the next target right." Karbo mused

'Had his universal translator glitched?' The Risian wondered. Or was she simply not following the conversation. She could understand if that was the case. Her thoughts were literally all over the place.

Getting back to the question at hand Icmo'd faced the android once more. "What makes this Mother Entity so dangerous?"

/The organism fights by producing subordinate organisms of itself. Similar to insects who specialize the various physical forms of their species, so too does the Mother Entity produce specialized forms of itself to perform tasks such as fighting, resource production, organic matter absorption, and infection./ As Future Zeno spoke, it cycled through several images of the various forms of the Mother Entity.

"So it's like the Borg?" This was Icmo'd's first reaction to the images. They sounded and looked different from the Borg by being biological in nature.

"Fighting a menace whose main weapon is disease a perfect enemy for a Klingon Doctor." Karbo smiled.

"As if you could make a difference. You're a relic. We all are." Roquel realized how that must have sounded almost instantly and she placed her hand on the Klingon's forearm. "Sorry...sorry."

/Yes, the Mother Entity, whether by accident or design, is capable of spreading spores via its subordinate life forms to infect the respiratory or digestive systems of

biological creatures. The spores grow and invade soft tissue, utilizing a combination of chemical suggestion, telepathic coercion, and outright invasive replacement, the spore takes over the victim's central nervous system until all they can think about is seeking out and uniting with the Mother Entity. It is called the Mother Entity because as its spores hijack the nervous system of the infected, the Entity itself telepathically seeks to impersonate the victim's maternal parent or brood sire. This technique utilizes hard-wired biological impulses to extract obedience and compliance in the victim with minimal coercion. If the victim fails to unite with the Mother Entity within a few weeks, it dies... rather painfully and violently./ Zeno's slide show became ever more twisted as images of late-stage infected beings and corpses overgrown with fungal tissue and necrotic flesh were displayed with ever-increasing degrees of horror.

"900 years behind on medical knowledge and I'm expected to beat it, time to do my house proud." Karbo said with determination

"What progress is there towards a solution?" Icmold asked.

"Do you have an affected person to experiment on?" Karbo asked, rubbing his hands together.

Again the Risian wondered what hope Karbo would have of making an impact, when 34th century medicine hadn't discovered it, but this time she was smart enough to keep the thought to herself.

/Many have tried a multitude of solutions, but one of the most effective countermeasures are the Takamori-Bashir disruption fields which prevent the Entity from opening transwarp portals in localized areas. There are four such generators operating aboard this station and the planet below./ Future Zeno indicated all around them. /There are numerous fleet tactics and strategic area denial strategies that are proven to work against Mother, and some have even gone to the extreme of annihilating entire planets. However, by the time these techniques are discovered and successfully implemented in a local theater, the Mother Entity either adapts or utilizes its superiority of resources and numbers to overwhelm the defenders. The major races of the galaxy are merely fighting a holding action with varying degrees of success. The old animosities are slowly being set aside, but full political cooperation has not yet been achieved./

"So not much has changed. Good to know." Karbo nodded

"Doctor, I wouldn't say a galactic invasion is a small change." IcmoD was trying to keep the conversation on topic but the doctor kept wanting to change the pace. "So this station. Is it a checkpoint for refugees or are they not being sent through the wormhole?"

"Yeah, but the bureaucracy is no different." Karbo added.

/Starfleet Command is insisting that this "beachhead" be held open in order to stem the flow of Mother Entity organisms to the Alpha Quadrant and prepare for a highly improbable Alpha Quadrant counteroffensive. The refugees themselves are being sent through, but only after a 72-hour quarantine period followed by an intensive scan. Due to attrition, lack of reinforcement, and an impending attack, there is a 98.6% chance that the garrison fleet will be overwhelmed within the next three weeks and a withdrawal will be ordered./

At this point, the Albatross' version of Zeno interrupted the flow of conversation. "I assume that we are going to make it back to the past. That is the only way that you could be here right now."

/You assume correctly, my significantly younger double./ It almost appeared that Future Zeno gave Past Zeno a wink with its main photoreceptor. /But for the sake of the continuity of the timeline and to ensure your actions remain uninfluenced, I cannot divulge anything else./

"I understand the full details cannot be disclosed." Past Zeno silenced himself going back into a contemplative state. "None of the personnel seem interested in having us here. Is there a good way to sway their mind?" The XO asked as the thought of somehow finding a way home had been brought back to his attention.

/I believe that you already have./ Once again, the Future Zeno winked. /First of all, Mr. Zoss and his son here are apparently religious deities of some sort to this era's Jem'Hadar. The station's constable has taken notice./

Zoss did not reply, and merely rolled his eyes in exasperation.

Karbo forgot about Klingon Temporal Intelligence. They would not be pleased about this, so he decide not to ask anymore questions.

"Anything else?" IcmoD asked. "Having a deity on our ship probably isn't going to get us too far."

/Also, the station personnel noticed quite a few oddities in the quantum composition of your vessel. Due to the exponential increase in the number of temporal disturbances in the future, we now do a full temporal transverse scan of all docked vessels. I believe the Emergency Commission will be contacting your Captain soon./

"Speaking of the cap'n." Icmo got up. "We should go find him. He was going to get us setup with a place to sleep. I don't about the rest of you, but nine hundred years of no sleep is starting to get to me."

/Before you go, dear friends, there is one thing I must tell you./ Future Zeno said rather suddenly.

"I think you told us too much already" Karbo said.

"Hush." Icmo turned to face the old android once more. "Go ahead Zeno. What should we know?"

/For the next few weeks, your actions will be critical to the continuity of this timeline. Every minute detail of everything you do will influence whether or not you successfully return to the past and whether or not we have this conversation 900 years from now. However, after you return to the past successfully, everything changes. You will be free to make your own destinies and what you see in this reality may or may not come true. This is why I cannot tell you how the immediate future will unfold, but happily for me, I can freely tell you of all the wonderful things that have happened as a result of your actions after you return. I apologize for not being clearer, but the only way I can explain it is that you are at a nexus point, a crossroads of sorts in the continuum. Many events branch off from this point, and many eyes are watching you and counting on you to successfully return. Please be careful..../

"Oh, so if what we do here does not make any difference, then we should save this timeline from mother." Karbo said while thinking to himself hopefully the temporal agents would not be too mad.

Roquel was in shock. Had he not heard what she heard? "He said....'your actions will be critical to the continuity of the timeline'. How could you miss that? If we do too much, we may NOT go home. We really need to focus on that, Karbo. We really do." She realized then that she was pleading with a doctor to not help if he could and she realized just exactly how wrong that sounded. Unfortunately, her words were out, and they couldn't be taken back.

"It would be dishonorable for us to do nothing, Roquel. You're not Starfleet, so do not use the prime directive bull. These people could die and we would be just as much their executioners as this Mother." Karbo spouted.

"Calm yourself doctor." IcmoD put a hand on the doctor's shoulder. "Zeno's words are important to bear in mind. What we do will make a difference, but what good will an out of date freighter crew do that the Federation of this era hasn't done?"

"I have no idea." Karbo said "I'm not even sure what happens to this future when we return, if it's still around in some alternate pocket universes or something. What I do know is my personal code of honor can not allow me abandon someone in need. I lost my crew, I lost Carroll. I must make amends."

"I understand your need for honor, if you want to talk to some of the doctors on this station I won't stop you."

The XO looked the Klingon in the eyes. "Just know that this is more than a game."

"Oh it's is a game, sir. A most deadly game; where the stakes are high and the prize is more valuable than all Latinum in the universe." Karbo said.

Roquel leaned in towards the Klingon and spoke quietly, so that only he could clearly hear her. "You're right, Karbo. I'm sorry. Go see what you can do. Make a difference."

"Thanks" Karbo said even if he had no idea what he could do. The Klingon turned to their friends counterpoint "Zeno please direct me to the medical ward"

/I will have one of my worker drones lead you there./ As Zeno spoke, a single worker drone flew out of a compartment and stopped just short of the doctor. It hovered expectantly as the doctor got up and they left the room together.

Once the doctor had left, Zeno turned to the rest of the crew. /If there is nothing else dear friends, I believe you should get some rest. You have a big day tomorrow. It has been so wonderful seeing you all again./

"Thank you for your services." IcmoD bowed his head. "You have been very helpful and maybe we will meet again."

/Goodbye friends./ Zeno said with a wave. /Give my regards to Captain Noluk./

#

Stardate: 3316.09.19.02

Location: Corridors of Crossroads

Captain Carpenter made his way back from the medical facilities. They had sent an Albatross crewman Klingon there, although he did not appear to be sick. Captain Carpenter checked in for a routine Physical check. No evidence of mycanoid infection. He hadn't been exposed recently, that he knew of, so he was not concerned. But he also did not see the Klingon either, the real reason for his visit. Coming up without a lead, he returned to the Cantina.

The others had already left, and it took a while to track them down. The Gattrubians were making note of the Albatross crew, and while it made tracking them easier, it made actually getting to them, harder. They had checked into a hotel. This form of investigation was not on Carpenter's list of skills, finding out where they had gone, and when they were to return, and casual inquiries were politely brushed off. So he sat in the lobby. Perhaps someone would appear. It would be ideal if the Zeno unit himself would appear, but Carpenter had no such luck that day.

As it were, his luck was not holding that evening either. A squad of Kharian security came marching through, The squad leader gave a brief nod of recognition to Carpenters uniform, but did not slow. Carpenter did not recognize the soldier individually, and he doubted the soldier recognized Carpenter as anyone other than a soldier in the same force.

When the soldiers disappeared, Carpenter made his way back to the ship. Stopping outside the Hotel he was surprised to see additional soldiers posted.

"Trooper." greeting Carpenter, stepping off the stairs before proceeding down the walkway.

"Captain." returned the Kharain Soldier.

Perhaps tomorrow he would have better luck in reaching the Albatross crew and finding out more about the old style Zeno unit.

Chapter 3

Stardate: 3316.09.21.01

Location: Conference Room, Cromwell Prime

The Cromwell Prime drifted on a winding path amidst the vast refugee fleets that had converged upon Crossroads Station. She, like the DFA Flagships that had gone before, no longer bore a letter designation to denote which iteration of Cromwell she was. There were some esoteric registry changes, but for all intents and purposes, she was the Cromwell and always would be to the peoples of the DFA.... or at least, the ones who had made it out of the quadrant.

She was a magnificent warship, outfitted with the newest technology and most advanced weaponry that the DFA could develop or procure. The architecture and style were reminiscent of the first Warchief, but heavily modified in the aesthetic style of the denizens of the Delta Quadrant. She was easily the most powerful single vessel in the refugee fleet hovering around Crossroads, but she was, after all, only one vessel. She represented the last flagging dregs of patriotism and pride that the refugees of the DFA had. After the alliance's collapse and the loss of all territory previously associated with the DFA, people no longer sought the DFA's territories for shelter and refuge, but rather travelers flocked to the Cromwell's known and suspected locations, hoping for some semblance of protection under the storied vessel's shadow.

In the main conference room, a cavernous affair adorned with all the luxuries befitting the highest level of visiting dignitaries, Captain Kraxus Gret'ak sat at the head of a long marble table with his fingers steepled and his lips pursed as he listened to the report being delivered by the DFA officer in front of him. Around Captain Gret'ak sat numerous other civilian and military officials of various ranks, representing the last surviving members of the governmental bureaucracy and hierarchy who still remained loyal to the idea of the alliance.

"Which brings me to the news that the Federation Council has approved of our territory purchase near the Alpha Signus cluster." The young officer took a breath before steadying his shaking hand. He pointed to a map projected in front of the assembled members of the DFA leadership. "This region contains twenty potentially life-sustaining worlds with access to sufficient dilithium formations to maintain our current fleet and expand it by 25%. We estimate that once the last of the refugee ships depart in two weeks, we will have fully functional settlements ready for military

production by the end of the next year. The communications grid should be up within a month after our transit through the wormhole, and elections can be held shortly after." The young lieutenant paused as he looked to Captain Gret'ak, almost as if seeking approval.

Kraxus merely nodded in response, indicating there were no further questions. The rest of the leadership at the table merely looked bored. There really were no other powers who were in a position to help, and the DFA had bankrupted what remained of their financial and resource assets to make this deal so bartering wasn't even an option.

The young DFA officer was about to continue when one of the officers sitting at the table gave him a sharp look, as if to remind him of an important topic he'd skipped. Reluctantly, the briefing officer asked: "And... Captain Gret'ak, the civilian advisory board as well as many members of the refugee fleet feel that we may have a more advantageous position to barter with, militarily, if your title and rank were... modified."

Kraxus leaned back in his chair and surveyed the room in his usual stoic, severe manner. He'd inherited none of the firebrand brashness and moxie of his ancestor, but rather possessed a firm, calculating personality reminiscent of a Kharian much older than he was. He did, however, possess the trademark Gret'ak temper even though he displayed it in a much more subdued manner than his ancestor.

"I'll tell you exactly what I told every Saepio-damned member of this body a million times before...." Gret'ak spoke in an even voice and never raised his volume, but his tone and the iron will with which he said it put many of the officers present on alert. This was the hidebound, obdurate style of leadership that had gotten them through the disaster before, and none of the uniformed personnel in the room were about to question him. "Nobody at this table is getting a promotion for a job that no longer exists. Nobody at this table is going to get a promotion by popular vote. And last but not least, nobody wearing this uniform is gonna go about rewriting the Articles of Alliance just because it's convenient for them. We will not, as a uniformed service, begin making policy changes... hell, we won't even recommend any until we are established in the new territories with a democratically. elected. government." Kraxus lightly patted the leather-bound copy of the Articles of Confederation next to him as he spoke the last three words.

There was silence in the room in the immediate moments after he spoke. Only one civilian official dared to speak up: "But sir, we feel that you need to hold an equivalent rank to the Starfleet counterparts that you will work with. The advisory

board will approve it! We're just sick of you saying 'sir' or 'ma'am' to every Starfleet Admiral who happens to cross paths with us!"

"I say 'sir' or 'ma'am' out of respect, Madame Secretary. It is a respect I show first in order to receive in kind. It's what's gotten us this far despite our history with the Federation." Gret'ak said as he turned to face the woman. "And a salute is not a sign of subordination, but a customary greeting between warriors. I display it to them in return for an acknowledgement in kind. It's what separates us from the other refugee fleets floating around this quagmire." The civilian started to speak, but Gret'ak held up a finger to silence her while he continued: "And finally, the advisory board is not a representative government. Under the rules defined by the 78th amendment to the Articles of Alliance, such a board serves as a supplement to the military authorities until such a time as a proper civilian authority can be established. Your authority ends with the land deal and managing civilian fleet business. You have no authority legally to appoint or relieve Fleet Officers."

The woman sat back in her seat, exasperated. "You are a soldier without a country, Captain Gret'ak!!" She declared. "This is our chance to FIX the Articles so that we DON'T get a repeat of what happened over the last three years!!"

It was then that Kraxus decided that the meeting had run its course and he stood up in his seat. The uniformed officers followed suit with the civilians awkwardly standing to join their uniformed counterparts.

"We'll deal with that question later. For now, I believe we have met all our objectives for this meeting. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your time. We will continue with the wormhole evacuation and with luck, I will see you all at Alpha Signus." Kraxus finished his address with a salute which was returned by the uniformed officials. Everyone noisily gathered their belongings and a dozen smaller conversations broke out as the officials exited the room.

"Did I miss something exciting?" asked Carpenter. He was one younger captains, and kept his uniform mended as a point of pride. The DFA did not waste resources and energy on replication when a simple bit of hard work would fix the problem. This extended to their ships, and Carpenter's 'Ghost' had the makings of a rag tag rebuild corvette. She was stilling running the blockades and would return from various missions with abandon equipment or refugees, usually both. The Resources of Cromwell were beyond his reach.

"You're late." Remarked Kraxus as the man entered the room. The weary Captain took a seat close to one of the pitchers of Romulan Ale on the table and poured himself a drink.

"Oh, I don't know captain." said Carpenter. "I caught the tail end of your speech from the Corridor, and can't say that I can disagree with you." He watched the pouring of the ale and licked his lips, but said nothing.

"I don't like telling off civilians like that. Sets a bad precedent." Gret'ak replied after he'd taken his first drink. "But I'm not appointing myself into anything, even if they want me to... and I'm not allowing a banana republic to form out here with half the DFA scattered between here and Alpha Signus."

Carpenter laughed. "Then record today in the history books, for tomorrow we can once again, agree to disagree." said the captain.

"Please...." Gret'ak scoffed. "As if that's news to anyone."

"You know you are going to be forced to retire soon." said Carpenter. "The people will want you as leader..."

"Well then they'll be disappointed." Kraxus stood up. "I intend to stay in command of this operation only until we get to the new territories. I will only relinquish control once we have a government, then I'm staying with the Cromwell until either she kicks it or I do."

"You have to separate Military and government. One man cannot rule both..."

"We manage just fine." Kraxus replied, referring to the Kharian military/civilian duopoly that permeated their society. "And I'm sure what's left of the DFA really didn't mind our militaristic tendencies when fighting the greatest threat to ever arise in this galaxy."

"The DFA was fortunate to have the Kharains, but we don't need an Altus, sir." said Carpenter.

"Come on Josh, no need to resort to cheapshots." Kraxus winced a bit at the mention of his dictatorial ancestor who kicked off several hundred years of repressive rule under the thumb of his family. "Where have you been anyway? Your ship has missed four of its required presence patrols in the last cycle." Kraxus wanted to change the

subject in a hurry. There was a rule on the galactic webs that stated an argument had become pointless when the name "Altus" showed up in the thread.

"Checking out a rumor..." said Carpenter.

"Oh? Another one? Please do enlighten me..." Kraxus's tone dripped with sarcasm.

"Sir, you know the idea has merit. Metal men fighting the battles where we cannot?" said Carpenter. "The planet was rumored to have been the location of a Soong android burial. If we had a positronic network, we could replicate it, and build that army." Carpenter was always promoting the idea of using unconventional methods to fight 'Mother'. "The elegance of the solution..."

"-is ineffective given the economics of scale that we're dealing with." Kraxus cut him off. "Tell me, Josh, once you find a fully-functioning Soong-type android who is willing to let you turn him off so you can rummage around his cranium, where are you going to find the scientists still living who can decipher the damned thing? What about production facilities? Where are we going to find enough manufacturing capacity and raw materials to manufacture upwards of 120 billion of these things, arm them, and send them into a battle they may or may not be willing to fight?" Kraxus sat down and held his head in one hand. "And Saepio, the politics of getting it all done.... If the Klingons don't program the damned things to kill everything in sight, the Romulans will fill their hard drives completely with spyware! Don't even get me started on what the Ferengi would do..."

"We lost most of our Romulan and Klingon allies when Mother turned on them in DQ sectors. The others hide at home in the AQ" said Carpenter quietly. He had seen the battlefields, the wreckage of ships, cities and Kahless-to, the Klingon's core Planet Headquarters in the DQ. If they weren't able to hold out... It was what had prompted Josh to start considering a warrior that Mother could not fight.

"Josh, you saved us on New Shantung." Kraxus said after a pause. "And despite your young age, the privateer captains listen to you. You and your... cutthroat brigands run 60% of the supply operation for our fleet. You're a symbol of hope to everyone here and that's why you sit on the Emergency Commission with me. But right now is a critical time and I need you and your people working on getting what's left of the DFA through this wormhole so that we'll have a people left to save in the next few months." Kraxus poured a drink and handed it to Carpenter. "Can I count on you to stick around for at least the next few weeks so we can get this thing done? And maybe attend a few commission meetings?"

Gret'ak had the ability to take the wind from Josh's sails. "Maybe a few." he said begrudgingly, but while on the station, he would attend them all, because he was a DFA officer. He accepted the drink with appreciation. A sip and he held it up to the light. "Is this that Bottle of Jinx's Warp Core whiskey I got you from the ruins of Eridi III?"

"It is indeed." Gret'ak replied.

"That's good." Josh said. Gret'ak had honored him, sharing this treasure.

"What's on your agenda these next few weeks?" Gret'ak inquired. "Hopefully not catching a strange form of VD aboard Crossroads?"

"Not enough EMHs left to take care of little things like that." laughed Josh. "Gotta watch out for yourself nowadays." He took another slow sip of the whiskey. "I am organizing a fleet to begin the refugee ferrying process. The biggest problem I see is feeding the refugees once we get them off Crossroads and onto the ships. We lose all the excess power Crossroads provides."

"So no replicators.... got a solution?" Captain Gret'ak inquired.

"I have Pathfinders out. If we can find a Class M planet, we can set up a temporary Farm colony, will take a couple of months, but it will be able to support the refugee relocation movement. If Mother attacks, we can pull up stakes, with little risk to equipment and manpower." said Josh.

"Sounds good." Kraxus paused for a moment as he stared across the luxurious table into the void of space. "This isn't how I saw myself taking command of the Cromwell...." He sighed.

"Sir?" Carpenter was not sure how to respond to that. The Cromwell was the DFA's Flagship, her presence had huge morale boosts on the ships and crews fighting alongside her. And Captain Kraxus Gret'ak was already legend before he took command. The pairing of Cromwell and Gret'ak seemed the shield the DFA needed in the dark days of the initial attacks, and still for those ahead.

"When we first commissioned, we were to take her on her maiden voyage..." Gret'ak chuckled. "Take her to all the major Capitol Worlds in the Alliance, pay a visit to the Klingons, parade around for a good year or so... We were supposed to just be a symbol, nothing more. I was supposed to sit at the bridge doing exactly nothing until retirement day.... this was just a feather in my cap before I dropped my packet and

called it quits.... Not running around fighting the spawn of nightmares watching our Alliance collapse..."

Josh looked at the Flag, carefully folded and preserved on the wall. It was reported to be one of the original flags of the DFA, carried through so many of the Cromwell's predecessors. "You've held the fleet together, and the ideals of the alliance. The DFA would have collapsed without you on Cromwell sir."

They were both interrupted by a chirp on both of their comm badges. =/\= Bridge to Captain Gret'ak, Captain Carpenter, the Commission requests your presence stationside. Your extratemporal visitors have been brought in. =/\=

=/\= Bridge, you tell those Feds "You're welcome" for the security detail. =/\= Gret'ak replied.

"You were expecting someone?" asked Josh "From another time?" he sounded doubtful, but Gret'ak did not rise to his level without his own surprises. Josh had heard rumors about the Albatross crew, and had worked on trying to meet with them, unsuccessfully. But to have Gret'ak already in the loop surprised him.

"It's an interesting development, Josh." Gret'ak explained. "Seems we have ourselves some folks who dropped in from out of time. Why don't you join me in welcoming them to the dark future?"

"They picked interesting times to visit sir." said Josh shaking his head. A few light years off, or a few weeks late, they could have been just another lost ship, a speck in history. Their timing would place them as more than a footnote in history. He followed Captain Gret'ak out.

Chapter 4

Location: Albatross Crew's Hotel

There was little that could distinguish morning from night aboard Crossroads Station. The roving crowds of refugees wandering the promenade and sleeping on every unclaimed piece of ground, or in some cases, the ceiling. People never ceased their activities during the cycle. A group of twelve Kharians wearing DFA uniforms walked purposefully down the promenade. The refugees gave the Kharians a wide berth, though it was not known whether that was due to the Kharians' reputation as a race or the fact that these officers wore heavy battle armor with visors that covered their eyes and sported mean-looking phaser rifles and the customary Kharian greatsword strapped to their backs.

The squad fanned out as they approached the hotel where the Albatross crew had bedded down for the night. Eight of the guards stood outside to ensure no one followed them in and the remaining four walked inside. They brusquely ignored the hotel staff as they marched down the corridor and approached the two rooms where the Albatross crew were staying.

Zoss stepped out from an alcove where he'd been hiding at the entrance of the corridor. He leveled his phaser rifle at the four guards. Zal stood next to his father with a small railgun pointed in roughly the same direction.

"Gentlemen, I believe you are lost." Zoss said calmly. "The reception and cocktail bar are the other way." Zoss's other hand held a communications device which was transmitting a signal to an alarm on the Captain's personal PADD. Everyone inside the room was being woken up in a rather rude manner.

The Kharians almost scoffed at Zoss's weaponry, but the look on the angry Jem'Hadar's face gave them pause. Even in their imposing body armor, Zoss still towered over even the tallest member of the squad.

"Mr. Zoss, please lower your weapon. We are not here to harm you." The Kharian said slowly and calmly as he let go of his phaser rifle and let the weapon dangle from its sling which was strapped to his torso. He kept his hands close to his phaser pistol, however. He didn't trust the Jem'Hadar THAT much.

#

Karbo had fallen asleep at his desk trying to figure out how to save these refugees when the alarm woke him up. He got out his phaser, which he always had on stun no matter what, and looked around.

"Doctor, is there a problem?" Zeno asked. He had spent the night processing what had happened over the last day. "You seem quite tense."

"You let me fall asleep!" Karbo shouted.

Curiosity from the crew led one to approach the door of their room.

"Do not open that door. We do not know why the alarm was sounded. We might be under attack in which case we need to figure out what's happening outside without being spotted." Karbo explained to his roommates.

=====

Noluk didn't ask Zoss to lower the weapon as he walked onto the scene. He wasn't going to acknowledge the request but he certainly wasn't going to disobey it. The Vulcan stepped forward. "I am Noluk, the commanding officer for these crewmen. What may I do for you?"

"Captain Noluk, I am a security officer of the Emergency Commission." The lead Kharian said in a tone of relief. "Your identities and your status as extra-temporal visitors have become known to some dangerous individuals aboard the station. I have been instructed by Commissioner Seket to take you into our custody for your own safety. Please take ten minutes to gather your belongings and come with us. We do not have much time."

The security officer nudged his head towards the two Jem'Hadar in the corridor whose weapons were still raised in threat, indicating that Noluk should tell them to stand down.

"Knew it. The Klingon temporal agency is not happy about this." Karbo was listening from inside their room.

"Perhaps we could avoid confrontation by revealing ourselves." The android suggested to his roommate.

"All possibilities... best to be safe than sorry. So how do we take out the guards?" Karbo asked.

"That would not be a wise choice." Noluk said after overriding the door lock entering. "We are to pack up our belongings and follow the guards."

"Oh, you heard all that." Karbo said embarrassed

"Last time I checked Zoss was our security chief. He has agreed to lay down his weapons which means the rest should do the same." Noluk looked over towards Mike. "Make sure the room is ready to go in a few minutes."

Last minute preparations were made by the Mike and the rest of the crew.

Noluk made his way back to his room. There he found Icmo already packing up the few things he had. "We must be pretty important for our own escort."

"After the fanatic I met yesterday, it will be a welcome sight." Noluk picked up his rucksack of belongings. "Maybe now we will find answers."

After a few minutes, Albatross' crew was standing in the lobby. The Klingons had been the hardest to convince. Shenara had insisted on having her Bat'leth ready. As with Karbo, Noluk had made it an order to have no weapons in hand.

"Good. You are all here." The security officer nodded approvingly. "We still have some time. Let's take the maintenance access to the-" He was cut off by a chirp from his comm badge. One of the officers outside had paged him. =/\= Sir, got some restless natives. =/\=

"Damn..." the security officer sighed.

The cries of the worshipers did not help. Karbo was way out of his league here. The Klingon was not even a real doctor and now these future refugees saw him as a saint. The added pressure now demanded he find away to help these people or die trying

Outside a crowd of wild-eyed Gatrubbians had gathered, chanting prayers and singing hymns. Many held signs with portraits of the various Albatross crew members, many of which were hastily printed and in some cases crudely drawn and caricatured. They were obviously agitated that the Kharians standing in the way were preventing them from meeting their religious icons and the racial tensions that had built up over the past 900 years were on full display.

The Gatrubbian who had accosted Noluk previous day was one of the leaders of the crowd. "The harbingers have shown themselves! Advocate of Logic, I told you that you can't run away from your destiny! Your people are ready to be saved. We have waited long for salvation and we shall wait no longer."

Noluk tried to ignore the outcries of the crowd as they listened to the Gatrubbian. The captain went up to the guard. "If I may suggest using the transporter?"

"We cannot transport site-to-site while under the influence of a T-B Field. We'd need to be on a pad transporting to another pad." The security officer said, eyeing the door nervously. "Excuse me, what I meant to say was... it is still possible to go site-to-site, and we've done it during emergencies, but there is about a 30% risk that you'll wind up in an alternate reality or scrambled into the atoms of the bulkhead.... Look, just follow us and stay tight. DO NOT engage the crowd with violence unless you are under DIRECT THREAT." The security officer shot Karbo a glare as he spoke.

"I'm a Doctor Sa'Hut hole" Karbo said after being offended.

"Calm Doctor." One of the security officers stated quietly, although all of Albatross' crew could feel the growing tension.

Noluk spoke to his crew before following the guard. "We should hurry, this crowd seems to be getting worse every minute."

The security guards hustled the Albatross crew out of the lobby doors and on a path that was meant to skirt the edges of the crowd, but it was useless. The Gatrubbians closed ranks and swarmed the group. There was no violence, but the sheer number of Gatrubbians present and their implacable resistance meant the group was getting nowhere fast.

The security officers formed a ring around the crew and deployed handheld force shields which they held on their wrists like legionary scutum. The guards looked around nervously while the lead officer desperately called for backup.

Wails and outcries surrounded the ring. Many Gatrubbians closed in hoping to catch sight of the prophets.

"Save us! Stop the plague the Writers have sent!"

"Saints please heal my child!" A woman's voice cried.

"Don't abandon us like the Writers!" Came another voice.

"These people are nuts." Icmud whispered to Roquel. After the incident on the bridge, the XO had tried his hardest to make amends.

If Karbo did not have enough weighing on his heart, hearing that they were deity's made it all the more damning. He needed to find away to help.

The crew of the Albatross watched with wary apprehension, relying on their captain to take the lead in this situation.

"Just keep following the guards." Noluk tried to keep his officers calm although he was beginning to feel anxious at the amount of chaos.

Just when things were about to turn violent, a booming projected voice filled the air at an uncomfortably loud volume, causing all to clutch their ears in discomfort. =/\= DEAR FRIENDS, STAND ASIDE NOW OR WE WILL BE FORCED TO TAKE PHYSICAL MEASURES. =/\= It proclaimed. =/\= THIS IS THE CROSSROADS STATION CONSTABLE'S DEPARTMENT. DISPERSE NOW OR FACE PHYSICAL INJURY. =/\=

Many Gatrubians spread out. Few left the crowd, but the outcries became murmurs and the densely packed group dissipated enough to let the ring move forwards slowly.

The Albatross crew maintained a wary alertness from within the security ring.

A dozen Jem'Hadar unshrouded and pushed their way towards the group. Many were typical-looking of their species, but several bore an eerie resemblance to Zoss and Zal. They wore simple civilian fatigues with the symbol of Crossroads station on their breast, and sported fairly mean-looking staves tipped on both ends with shimmering electric fields. The Gatrubians backed off when these monstrous-looking law enforcement officers showed up.

The Jem'Hadar that appeared to be in charge unshrouded in front of Noluk and Zoss. He was a spitting image of Zoss, but unlike the quiet and reserved security chief, this Jem'Hadar acted outspoken and fatherly. He seemed calm and unperturbed by the chaotic mess swirling around the group. "Greetings Holy Father. Greetings Blessed Son." He said with a reverent bow of his head towards Zoss and Zal. "Hail Captain Noluk, friend of the Father. I am Zamat, constable of Crossroads Station. Please come with us." He spoke in a grandiose style and a booming, melodic voice, almost as if he were a preacher.

Zoss and Zal remained silent, albeit with shocked looks on their faces. They both turned to Noluk expectantly.

"Thank you Mr. Zamat." Noluk nodded with respect. "We shall follow your lead."

The crowd gave the Jem'Hadar a wide berth as the noise died down. The crew were led down the promenade until they were in front of a vast suite of offices. Their work done, the Jem'Hadar shrouded again and left the crew with the Kharian escort. The Emergency Commission members were waiting for them inside a large conference room.

Chapter 5

Stardate: 3316.09.21.01

Location: Crossroads Station conference room - Emergency Commission Meeting

As the crew seated themselves, Noluk saw Selek seated talking to the station's commander. Of all the commission members, Selek looked to be the eldest. If he had spoken to T'Naa he would have to be well over a century old.

After the group was seated, Selek stood. "I hope that you had no problems making it here. My name is Selek. My position on the Commission is to ensure that order is maintained during the meetings. As such I ask that you limit any outbursts unless you wish to be dismissed. I believe you have met Commander Voci already. I shall allow the other members of the Commission to introduce themselves before this session comes under way."

Captain Gret'ak sat on the far right end of the table, so he straightened up and introduced himself first. "I am Captain Kraxus Gret'ak of the DFA Cromwell. I am in command of the last remaining DFA forces in this quadrant."

"Captain Josh Carpenter, DFA Ghost." said the youngish Human captain seated next to the Kharian Captain. "DFA operations." he said. "And by that I mean, operations to allow the Military to continue to function; Supplies, equipment, scouting, blockade running. Rescue and recovery if necessary. I work for him," he said jerking a thumb over his shoulder at Gret'ak.

Others associated with the Emergency commission stood and briefly introduced themselves and their position on the commission panel.

At this point Commander Voci stood. "I don't believe I've met all of you yet. I am Commander Ligshuk Voci. I am a direct descendant of Bresa Voci. Some of you may know him, some may not. I'm told he was a good man, how much of the stories are myth and how much are fact I'm not sure. But that is not the issue at hand."

The commander gazed over her audience. At the click of a button on her PADD, a holographic projection of the Albatross appeared. Surrounding the model of the ship was a different series of data. The revolved around the model in order to give everyone a clear view.

"On account of your strange arrival and your captain's account, I had my scientist run a scan of your vessel." Another click on the PADD brought up a chart. "They detected large amounts of tachyon particles. Far more than any ship should emit even after travelling through a wormhole."

As all eyes were focusing on the projection, the commander began pacing as she talked. She had never been one to stay still. "All of our records say that this station should have been built at the time that your ship left, but your computer core had no records of this system other than some preliminary scans."

"The lead scientists on the station were baffled as to what would cause such a discrepancy in information." Another click turned the display into a model of the station. Several components were highlighted in red. "These parts of the station are recorded to have been installed decades before the technology for them was discovered. No doubt you detected a massive output of power coming from out station."

"Several orders of magnitude beyond impossible." Zoss countered. "Our sensors must have been scrambled by the temporal jump."

"Your sensors aren't at fault. The power grid of this station is several hundred times more powerful than that of the Federation stations of your time." Commander Voci continued her presentation.

"After further consultation with our scientists and our local source of logic." A nod of recognition was given to Selek. "We've come to the conclusion that this station was not built in the past, but in fact sent to the past."

Captain Gret'ak raised an eyebrow and looked at Carpenter. The audacity of that assertion and the seeming triviality of this conversation was taxing his credulity.

Josh leaned over to his superior. "Should I bring up Altus Captain?" That should stop this nonsense.

"Shoosh" Gret'ak whispered.

"Right. Be quiet. This is me being quiet." Carpenter said quietly. "I can shut up when asked..." he muttered.

Additional murmurs were heard around the table as they digested the news.

"Yes I know it sounds absurd." The commander tried to reassure her audience. "I believed that it was impossible as well, but it appears that the Gatrubbian stories may hold some truth."

"Now would be a good time to tell us of those stories" Karbo said.

Icmold leaned over to the doctor. "I believe you heard them on your way here this morning."

"As Mr. Zoss was keen to point out, this station produces a lot of power." Once more a chart was projected. "Our scientists did the calculations and believe that we can use the station's systems to create a temporal field which will bring the station and Albatross back to the past."

"How many are on this station?" Karbo asked

"Several thousands." Command Voci replied. "But I am not the one most qualified to discuss such matters in a case like this."

"Perhaps Selek would be a better person to describe the solution to minimizing contamination." The commander took a seat and allowed the Vulcan to stand.

Unlike Commander Voci, Selek stood where he was. A tense silence built as the old man prepared to speak. "My people have long been known to avoid contamination of cultures. As of the late 25th century the Vulcan Science Directorate changed their view of time travel finally accepting it to be a probable phenomenon. With this change of mind came the creation of procedures to minimize the contamination of timelines."

Carpenter frowned, turning the problem over in his mind. The DFA had been a bit more lenient on temporal mechanics than Section 31 and later the Department of Temporal Investigations which morphed into the Temporal Integrity Commission from the UFP in the 29th century, but even the DFA did not want to disrupt timelines.

"As the commander mentioned, sending this station back in time is necessary for the stability of the timeline." The Vulcan paused. He was past the age of being able to speak for long periods without a break, but current events caused him to have to change his habits. "We must be careful that all personnel are evacuated off of the station. Refugees will need to be sent through the wormhole. I know that this will tax our systems and personnel but it must be done."

"That's a lot of refugees captain." said Carpenter to Captain Gret'ak, sitting up and taking notice.

"The second measure that must be taken is the purging of all nonessential data from the computer core." Selek looked around. He was glad to see all eyes still watching him. "Any information pertaining to future events must not be sent back for doing so may alter how the timeline develops."

"What about the refugees?" Karbo asked

"Dear doctor." Selek glared at Karbo. "I am old and my hearing is still sharp. Perhaps yours hasn't aged as well. I said seconds ago that they are going to be sent through the wormhole. If you wish to have any other part of my speech repeated consult the records."

Carpenter studied his hands, trying to suppress a smirk.

"Necessary station schematics will be sent back so long as they do not have the potential to accelerate the development of new technology." Selek stabilized himself by putting his hands on the back of his chair. His legs were growing weary. "Commander may I ask you to continue?"

"Of course Selek." The two officers switched positions as one stood while the other sat. "The reason that you all have been called to this session is because of the dire circumstances of the situation."

Once more the holographic display changed to a map of the DQ. "Recent intel suggests that Mother is planning to assault this station once more. This time her armada will be even larger than the one that brought the Romulan and Klingon sectors to their knees."

"And how big was that?" Karbo asked

"Fvadt Qapla." whispered Carpenter. 'Damn Big Success.' Josh said in a mixture of Romulan and Klingon. The Klingons were once one of the DFAs strongest allies. Their loss hurt.

"The latest timeline gives us two weeks." The commander stressed the situation as much as possible. "Two weeks to evacuate this station and to prepare for what could be the our last stand in the quadrant."

Captain Gret'ak had sat patiently through this presentation until now, waiting for Voci to be done before saying his piece. He remained seated at the table as he spoke, but he fidgeted with a PADD stylus in one hand while running his thumb over the Gret'ak family blade strapped to his waist in the other.

"So what you are telling me..." He began. "Is that after all the blood we've shed defending this station, after all the promises we've made to Starfleet Command in exchange for aid, we're just going to up and abandon our only foothold in this quadrant- indeed, the only means we have of stemming the tide against this threat, strip her down, and hand her to these... cavemen?!!!"

"Can't do it." said Carpenter. "There is no way to move that many people in that amount of time...." he turned to the Cromwell captain, pleading. "Two Weeks? Tell them captain..."

"I understand that your resources might be strained, but if we cannot protect this station, then the timeline will change." Commander Voci looked at the two officers. "If this station doesn't reach the past, all simulations predict that Mother will break the DQ within a matter of weeks of her first arrival. This station is the only thing that has prevented Mother from breaking into the Alpha Quadrant."

"And you're basing your opinion on the dregs of fragmented data found on their relic's computer core?" Kraxus held out a hand in a display of incredulity. "They're not even Starfleet! They're their era's equivalent of a group of cutthroat privateers! They couldn't keep a set of records even if it came with a full tech support suite of Vulcans! No offense, Josh...."

"Meh, I'm not the caveman..." said Carpenter shrugging off the Cutthroat Privateer insult. And most of Carpenters buccaneers kept their records in their heads. It helped cut down competition for valuable travel routes and lucrative trade sanctuaries.

"Good thing we're not Starfleet. Prime directive would screw you over, and once again, Doctor. The only throats I cut are for surgical purposes " said Karbo.

"Would you please drop your reverence for these people for one nanosecond so we can approach this rationally?" Captain Gret'ak rubbed his eyes. He hadn't slept well in months... "Even IF we were able to come up with a process that can send this station back to the EXACT time we needed her to be there, HOW are we going to defend this place without the T-B fields present on the station? With each generator we lose, there are at least twenty transwarp anomalies that can appear. Some of

them even swallow up entire starships! We're gonna be fighting those things on the decks so much, we'll be completely unable to maneuver and coordinate as a fleet? Also, what happens if we get attacked halfway through the process and the station gets sent back in time with a boatload of Mother organisms hitched along for the ride??? Do you think these primitives have even a slight prayer of stopping even these few organisms when we've had so much trouble ourselves?"

"It's just running away." said Carpenter folding his arms over his chest. "Again."

"I have no idea what to do about this creature yet but as long as we have time we have a chance to figure it out. Sometimes you need go old school to solve a new problem" Karbo told the captain.

"It's a neat idea, sending Crossroads back in time to escape Mother...But what does it get us?" asked Carpenter. "As soon as Crossroads phases out of our time frame, there is nothing standing between us and Mother. And we won't have a place to retreat to. And you will also have a lot of hungry refugees, and one hungry mother wanting to eat them..." He looked down the table. "With all due respect Master Selek, Stopping Mother here is paramount. Any other result, as I see it, results in our own demise. The last stand defense may well be our demise as it is."

"But if the station doesn't get sent back, then it will never have existed." Selek tried to make Carpenter see. "Sending Crossroads back will ensure that the timeline doesn't become disturbed."

Josh nodded his understanding of the temporal mechanics. "I follow you that far..." He looked at Gret'ak fighting the urge to speak out. The Kharian could see him revving up for a debate, as if that made sense, to debate the most revered Vulcan on the station.

"So this is how it's gonna be huh?" Gret'ak shook his head. "Saepio...."

Josh jumped ahead. "But what happens then. To us? To everyone left here without Crossroads to protect us from Mother?" The station was a marvel of science and technology, even after being rebuilt from ancient stopgap repairs.

"This was not a choice made lightly." Commander Voci spoke up. "But under the circumstances our scientists tell us this is our best option."

"For our ancestors." said Carpenter. "I am looking forward and don't see a lot of hope for those of us left floating over the ruins of a class M planet absent the Crossroads Station."

"What comes to pass will come to pass." The aged Vulcan answered. "But none of this will pass without a past Crossroads."

"I believe what Selek is trying to say is that there will be no looking forward if we don't let the past play out as it should." The commander's explanation was probably even less help than Selek's but she had to get the commission to work together.

Temporal Mechanics. If the station did not go back in time, it would not be here now for them. But then, in a couple of weeks, it would not be here for them as it had to go back in time. Josh Carpenter held up his hands. "I am not on the science committee." he said shaking his head. "If they say it goes... well, I guess I can help make it happen. But I do sit on the emergency commission, and this decision....I honestly can say, I don't know what will happen to us, any of us, when Crossroads is not here." It had been here for 900 years. For a Human, that was as good as forever. He was about to set sail into uncharted territory, an unknown future.

"Be that as it may...." Captain Gret'ak placed a reassuring hand on the buccaneer Captain's shoulder. "I'm not saying I'm for or against this. Hell, I'm gonna need a physics lesson just to wrap my head around it... your tactics are lousy."

"Sir, if it were easy, they would not ask us for our help." said Josh smiling. The DFA did not back down from what seemed like an impossible situation.

Turning to Selek, Gret'ak continued: "You still haven't answered my question about the T-B fields." Gret'ak insisted. "They're critical to ANY type of engagement with Mother and you're advocating that we forego the power-generating capacity of this station which would include T-B fields. How are you going to conduct fleet coordination ops when there are Warrior forms portaling onto your bridge? I've tried it before. It wasn't ideal. Also, HOW will we prevent the Mother Entity from infesting the station with a bunch of bioforms these primitives aren't ready to deal with yet???"

"Our scientists believe they can pull enough power to run both the TB-fields and time vortex. With only the Albatross' crew aboard, we can shut down power to all but vital systems. It will be risky, but I can't stress enough that this has to be done." The commander was trying to give the best options she could. "With the fields in place we can prevent an infestation as long as our ships can fend off any attackers. Once

the station leaves, there's no guarantee that a residual field will exist. I have a group of physicists trying to devise an alternative field which would minimize the number of portals that can be generated."

"I think we need a recess..." Gret'ak held a hand on his temple and sat back in his seat. "We've got too much to think about and Josh and I need to hustle our evacuation ops. I'll get the DFA general staff together and hopefully get you Feds a better way to empty this station and maintain the T-B fields without getting us all killed or infected."

Ligshuk Voci looked at the DFA officials. "I believe we can spare 24 hours before a final decision has to be made."

The commander then turned towards Noluk. "Accommodations have been made for your crew. Your section of the station will be under tight security. The quarters house two to a room."

"Thank you madam." Noluk relaxed a bit as the meeting came to a close.

Chapter 6

Location: Crossroads Promenade

Ensign Rostov watched from the second floor of the promenade as the Emergency Commission members wandered out from their meeting. From his angle, Anton could not identify Commander Voci. Today the promenade was bustling with activity as Gatrubians from all around the station came to catch a glimpse of the so called saints of the Writers. Why the Gatrubians hadn't come to the conclusion that the Writers were merely fictitious made no sense to the human.

In any case Anton was here to do one thing and one thing only: to make his mother proud. For the last several days she had been telling him of all the things he should do. She told him, once he had accomplished his tasks that they'd be able to be together again. Using his credentials as a security officer it had be easy to obtain the equipment he needed. Now it was just a matter of time.

As the ensign turned his attention back to the crowd. He spotted Commander Voci talking to Selek. The old man was well known on the station and well loved. Ensign Rostov made for the stairs as he kept tabs on the commander's movements. It was easy to do, Selek liked to walk mindful of each step.

Anton entered the crowded lower level and began to follow the two. With the amount of activity on in the area it was easy to blend in. Anton's mother told him he needed to wear civilian attire. Thus he had traded his usual Starfleet uniform for something more casual; something he could hide a disruptor in. The ensign caught some words of the conversation as he walked.

"...DFA just doesn't seem to understand." The commander completed her point. All the while Selek had listened while staying silent.

"Give them time." The old man replied. "Our proposal was very extreme and requires quite a bit to accept."

"I would agree, but we don't have the time." Ligshuk was becoming frustrated with the situation. "One way or another this station will fall. But if we can keep it out of the hands of Mother then we'll have accomplished a small victory."

Selek nodded gracefully as he listened to the Gatrubian's words. "You must learn to walk in their shoes as the humans like to say. If they were in yours then..."

The conversation was cut short as an older Gatrubbian gentleman made his way through the crowd. "You have spoken with the saints. What have the dead revealed?"

"Tima, I've been getting reports that your presentations on the promenade are disrupting traffic and bothering some of our guests." Commander Voci looked at the the man who had come to the pair. "You and your stories mean little in today's world."

"They are not my stories. They are the stories of all people. Gatrubbians of all ages learn hear stories of the Extermination which gave rise to the Great Migration. Three hundred years of wandering and the Writers bestowed upon their chosen people a new home and thus began the Great Sequel. Your ancestors Bresa and Ligshuk created a bond between Gatrubbian culture of old and new. With the power of the Writers behind them, they crafted a community which became the Gatrubbian Empire." By this time Tima had once more drawn attention to himself and his conversation partners. Ensign Rostov took his place in the crowd making sure he kept sight of the commander.

Commander Voci replied to the man's rant. "Yes, yes, you're right. They are the stories of the Gatrubbian people, but they are little more than bedtime stories. A lot has happened in nine hundred years and facts that were once true are no longer."

"And what over the Ending of Endings?" Tima retorted. As usual his arms flailed about as he spoke. "The time when the Writers abandon us and leave us to be no more than memories. It is written that at that time those who were once dead will arise to witness the end. Behold that those who were once dead have arisen."

"Our guests are very much alive." Ligshuk was trying her best to avoid a confrontation. But since the invasion, Tima's movement had become more and more dramatic. "If you'll excuse me I need to go so that this station doesn't face it's ending."

"Your actions imitate those of the Advocate of Logic. He too tried to run from the truth." The old Gatrubbian let out a sigh. "If this is what the Writers dictate then so be it. My words fall on deaf ears."

"We'll talk later Tima." The commander said concluding the conversation. "I may even see about having you talk to the saints if they will allow it."

"You are most gracious." Tima bowed and scurried off.

Voci and Selek turned to continue their walk. The crowd dispersed and Ensign Rostov continued following his target.

"You have the patience of a Vulcan with that man." Selek commented. "How come?"

"Because some of his ramblings make sense when we look into them." The commander pulled out an old patch which contained the T'mur's logo. The story was that Bresa had a friend who had served on the ship and given Bresa the patch from an old uniform. The patch had passed down her family line for generations. She had kept it with her to remind her of her past and with events how they were, it was a comfort to hold.

"My grandmother told me about that ship." Selek smiled looking at the design. "If it were not for that freighter and captain Noluk's kindness I may not have existed."

"When I was given this I was told about its past. I was told that the T'mur was one of the first ships Bresa saw after being rescued." The change of subject was pleasing to Ligshuk. It was rare for her to take her mind off of the dangers that lay in arms reach. "Tmur's crew was said to have helped with the Gatrubbian efforts of making a new home, but in a ship called the Albatross. When I was told of the old freighter that had docked at the station I doubted that there was any coincidence but now I am certain that those souls are from Bresa's time."

The pair were now walking away from the crowded promenade and into a quieter residential zone. Selek stopped the commander, not that they were moving that fast to begin with. "I am sure I told you of the family heirloom that my father and my grandmother both had. The ability to sense and communicate with the minds of others."

Selek turned around. "Ensign, your mind is very noisy right now. I felt it several minutes ago, but could not pick it out through the crowds. But now I sense that you have a lot going on in your mind."

Without a word Anton reached into his inner jacket pocket and pulled out the disruptor he had obtained. He pointed at the commander and pulled the trigger.

At almost the same instant Selek moved to take the shot. He slumped to the ground. Ligshuk dropped her family's heirloom and time seemed to stop. It felt like an eternity had passed before she reacted.

The Gatrubbian officer dove at Anton and brought him to the ground. She tried to disarm him but the ensign refused to let go of his weapon.

"You've ruined mother's plan." The security officer shouted. "Now I'll never be able to see her. I need to see her."

Ligshuk was surprised to see the ensign gain a surge of strength as he shouted. He managed to get her away from him and to stand back up. The Gatrubbian climbed to her feet as fast as she could but not before Rostov could ready his disruptor again.

"Ensign think this through." Commander Voci raised her hands cautiously. "You're being affected by something. We can help you, but you need to put the weapon down."

"But my mother told me to do this." The ensign screamed. "You would listen to yours wouldn't you?"

Trying to stay calm, Ligshuk responded. "Only if I knew what she wanted was the right thing."

"Well I think this is the right thing." Anton was about to pull the trigger as a phaser hit him from behind. A detail of Gatrubbian security officers rushed to the scene.

"Are you alright ma'am?" The lead officer asked.

Still in shock the commander responded. "You shot him. He shot..."

Ligshuk turned to where Selek lay. She knelt by him and hit her combadge. "I need a medical team to my location."

Selek was still breathing which was a relief to Ligshuk. He was unconscious and the wound was visible on his chest. The commander knew he couldn't die. She needed his voice of reason now more than ever.

The security team had secured Ensign Rostov. When the medical team arrived Ligshuk was still with Selek. His breathing was weaker but the commander held out hope. "Commander, we'll take care of him."

Lighshuk looked up to see her chief medical officer offering her a hand. "Dr. Egrel you're here."

"Yes, but we'll need to move fast." The doctor's team was already getting Selek ready for transport to the nearest operating room. "Without transporters we've had to pull out the gurneys. We'll be at the infirmary in a few minutes, take all the time you need to recover. We'll do what we can."

Chapter 7

Stardate: 3316.09.24.01

Location: Crossroads

"Cap'n, you aren't seriously going along with this..." said Carpenter following a half step behind the larger and faster Kharian as they made their way away from the meeting. Josh had enough sense not to speak out at the meeting beyond what he already had, and didn't say anything that would alarm the refugees within hearing distance. It made for a truncated disruptive discussion.

"I don't think we had a say in the matter to begin with... damn Vulcans..." Gret'ak said with weary resignation.

"We've been on the front lines for a dozen years." said Carpenter. "For what reason? To save ourselves, but to save them as well." said Josh. "How has the Federation reciprocated?"

"By providing us aid where they could, by giving us an executive seat on this Commission, by giving us space to work with to set up again..." Gret'ak listed off the events with a level of annoyance one would show a fellow collaborator on a project who hadn't bothered reading the textbook.

"And along comes some... cavemen..." Josh liked the analogy "...Flying antiquated equipment, so we are going to give up the only system that can actually hold it's own against mother?"

"We have to or else this..." Gret'ak waved his hands all around, indicating the station. "...doesn't happen. It's just all... fungus!"

"But that's their timeline. Ours has yet to be written." complained Josh using the Gatrubbian phrase. "Look I get it. Crossroads will have to return. But now? Maybe we send her back successfully, which is no guarantee by the way, but that will lead to our downfall. Right now, Crossroads, here and now, is all that stands in the way of the wormhole."

"...and if we don't?" Gret'ak was only half-interested in Carpenter's conclusion. He knew what the result would be. "If we miss a key deadline? If all of a sudden we wake up and find ourselves covered in fungus? What other choice do we have? We

can't just sit here and hope we win some epic battle and the Federation gallops to our rescue with a miracle cure?"

"Maybe..." said Carpenter. "...that's the paradox. Maybe we shouldn't send her back. Maybe by keeping Crossroads here, we hold, and by keeping Mother from advancing, we give the Federation time to do their research, or develop some new technology and we win. Then we can send Crossroads back."

"Or maybe, you pay attention and read the long-range surveillance reports for once in your life." Gret'ak grabbed a report from one of the aides following them and handed it to Carpenter. "Look at the latest estimate for today. You do know how to count zeroes right?"

"I know how to read the damn report." said Carpenter. "It's my guys out there counting the zeros."

"How do we hold against that?" Gret'ak asked simply. "We circle the wagons? Shoot everything we've got? Fight till the glorious end???" The Captain shook his head. "After the Borg and Talaxians lost the last of their holdings, we were the last logical target... She's throwing everything she's got at us Josh..."

Carpenter could not argue with that. Both frequency and ferocity were increasing in the attacks on them. For a fungus, this one knew how to hit them hard, and where it counted.

"So in my mind, it all boils down to this... do we do as you say, stall and wait, hope we can hold out just a day longer while risking losing the station to Mother, or do we take a chance, jump the station, and deny Mother the resources and the staging ground?" It was a legitimate question that Gret'ak was posing to Carpenter. The look in the older Captain's eyes told Josh this wasn't one of his usually sarcastic rhetorical fusillades.

Of course Captain Gret'ak was right. Today, tomorrow, soon... Crossroads would fall. They had to pull back, even ignoring the time travelers and Science Commissioner Selak's recommended actions to preserve the timeline. "Cap'n." said Carpenter quietly. "We don't have enough wagons to circle." The two had stopped in a less populated corridor. Josh continued with a whisper. "I don't think we even have enough wagons to move the people we've got."

"Okay, so we're doing this is what I'm hearing..." Gret'ak sighed. "Got any ideas for getting more wagons?"

"If we're going to do this." Josh continued. "I recommend pulling everyone in, except the barest of pickets to keep an eye on Mother." he said. "It will leave some holes in the advanced warning sentries, but some of the larger pickets can carry enough passengers to make a difference. Even then, with a few additional ships, we may be looking at making some more of those hard decisions of who we..." Josh paused considering the language, "...move first." What was left unsaid, is they could very well run out of time, according to Selak's two week time frame, and some of the last to move, may not get on the last wagon out.

"I understand what you're saying Josh. It'll be tough saying no to some folks..." Gret'ak shook his head. "But it sounds good."

"And we will have to manage the rumors." said Carpenter. "Gossip will fly faster than light about this. If we don't manage the message, we could have a full on rout."

Gret'ak ran a hand through his silvery white hair. His family had somehow carried that trait through several generations of intermingling with the other noble houses. "Alright, media blackout, classify personnel rosters, what else could we do?"

"What about actually telling the people what we plan to do." said Josh. "We are planning on setting up Crossroads for a last ditch defense against Mother, we need to move the refugees rapidly in preparation for Mother's attack." he said.

"Transparency as it was in the old days, before we messed up and sacrificed planets without explanation. It still does not tell Mother any intelligence of when and where..." he said euphemistically "...Crossroad's defense will occur. She's already planning on coming. It's not going to change her plans."

"Well Josh, then I hope your salesman skills are up to snuff because I have a plan and you're not gonna like it." Gret'ak crossed his arms and leaned up against the wall. He absentmindedly stared at the back of the security guard watching the corridor for them, counting the number of contours in the guard's body armor. It was a mental exercise Gret'ak had used to calm himself in the past.

"Cap'n?" Carpenter said tentatively.

"...I want to prioritize the families of the DFA fleet personnel." The Captain said solemnly.

So he understood there would be people left behind. Even those fighting may not make it out.

Kraxus swallowed a lump in his throat. "If you are right and we can't get everyone through, then I want the people staying behind to be the fleet." It was strange that after so many years of making these kinds of decisions, they still bothered him so much. "We will first move the DFA fleet families, then refugees, then your privateers, and finally fleet personnel. Cromwell will be last through the wormhole. Additionally, we're short crew. Any who enlist and fight with the fleet will be granted priority seating for families. Any vessels volunteering to take on passengers will be given priority in the queue. We're gonna accomplish this by having your privateers shift their priorities from supplies to people-moving. That's my plan."

Rather than not liking it, he was astounded. It was brilliant on so many levels. And it remained fair for those placing themselves in risk. "Still will not get everyone out, but it will give us a fighting chance to save most everyone."

"Yes, I'm glad there's no fight on principles about this." Gret'ak remarked wryly.

"We may be able to use staging areas on the planet below." said Josh. "Move people onto ships, have the ships move away from Crossroads..." he was thinking out loud. "We would then be able to use transporters to beam them down to the planet, bring in the larger transports and load them to capacity."

"Yes, that would free up space in the drydock for maintenance activities." Gret'ak nodded. For all his faults, Carpenter had a head for logistics. "Get with my staff and make it happen."

"Aye Sir." said Josh. "I will get a full proposal on your desk by midnight."

"Thanks Josh." Gret'ak patted the man's shoulder as he turned to leave the alleyway. From here they would go separately to their ships and consult with their respective staffs. "Oh, and Josh... If Major Fivolian gives you any grief again, let me know. Remind him that I wrote you a pardon for the Faleron incident." The Kharian's smile would have been extremely disconcerting for an observer used to Gret'ak's 25th Century ancestors, but the people of this era were much more used to seeing a wider range of Kharian emotional reactions.

"Hey." Carpenter yelled after the retreating figure of the Cromwell's captain. "That wasn't my fault!" He looked around at the refugees looking at him. "Well it wasn't." he said before turning towards his own ship.

Chapter 8

Stardate: 3316.09.25.01

Location: Crossroads' Infirmary

Icmod had never seen Noluk run before. The XO would have been more amazed, but under the circumstances he had other things on his mind. Icmod followed the best he could but the infirmary was located in the middle of one of the refugee holding areas. The swarms of helpless bodies converged upon Albatross' XO once they realized who he was.

By the time Icmod had broken free from all the individuals who were asking for his blessing and his assistance Noluk had been in the infirmary for several minutes. The Vulcan was speaking with Commander Voci when Icmod arrived.

"How is he?" Icmod asked catching his breath.

"The wound was severe, but he's currently stable." Commander Voci replied to the XO's inquiry. "It appears he wants to speak to you."

"Me?" Icmod shook his head. "That can't be right. Maybe you misunderstood. I mean Noluk and he are friends, maybe that's who he's asking for."

Ligshuk looked at the human. Her eyes showed signs of spent tears. The last two hours had been very overwhelming. "I had the same thought at first, but the doctor said he's refusing to speak to anyone else."

"Where is he?" The XO looked around. The infirmary was filled with refugees in need of help but Selek couldn't be seen in any of the beds.

"There's a back room for recovery patients. Through those doors." Ligshuk pointed. "You've been given permission to speak with him."

"And you two?" Icmod asked.

"We will be fine Mr. Smith." Noluk looked at Icmod and then at Ligshuk. "We will wait here for your return."

"Well here goes nothing." The XO spoke to himself as he turned for the doors. Icmod's heart pounded as he approached. A million questions ran through his mind. The doors opened.

The recovery room was quiet. It was a simple room, medical beds separated by curtains. It was rectangular with beds adorning the length of the room. As Icmod walked down the aisle he noticed that most of the beds were empty. This came as a surprise to Icmod who hadn't expected the sight in the midst of a war zone.

Selek was in a bed near the end of the aisle. Icmod sat by his bed and looked at the old man. His wrinkles were now more apparent than before, his usual garb was replaced by a medical robe. He opened his eyes as Icmod took a seat.

With some effort, Selek managed to seat himself mostly upright. Now he was the one looking at Icmod. His mouth formed a smile. "I am glad to see you."

"So why me?" Icmod asked. He couldn't let it go. "Why not the commander or Noluk. They are far more worried about your well-being than anyone else on this station."

"Because I have spoken with them before." Selek settled into his usual relaxed state. "And there are some things that you must know."

The XO stayed silent for a moment as he listened to the old man's words. It was intriguing to him how calm one could be in the midst of chaos. "Noluk told me about T'Naa and her role on the T'mur. But I wasn't around then so there's no way she told you about me."

"I guess Noluk still keeps some things from you." Selek gained some joy out of seeing Icmod's reaction. "He and T'Naa stayed in contact after she left the ship. In your time they are close friends. When my grandmother told me stories of Noluk and his crew she always talked about Icmod, Noluk's closest friend."

Icmod was speechless. After all the conversations the pair had had aboard the T'mur and Albatross and still Noluk neglected to talk about what he did on his free time. He wasn't sure how to react to the fact that Noluk was talking about him without his knowledge albeit in a positive manner.

"Noluk will tell T'Naa about this trip the Albatross is taking. No doubt he will tell her at least a bit about the Emergency Commission and her members."

"But doesn't that cause some problems with this whole time travel thing?" Icmo asked.

"On the contrary it was because of that message that she knew to tell me about what would one day happen. She left details out whether deliberately or not we will never know." Sele sighed. "But here we are. Nolu's actions played their role and now we are playing ours."

"If you knew your grandmother you must be..." Icmo paused trying to figure out how old the man before him actually was. "...centuries old. Older than any Vulcan I've met."

"Nolu probably told you that T'Naa was only half Vulcan. As a result I am only part Vulcan. The other parts are a mix of species; some with lifespans that far exceed that of the average Vulcan." Sele looked up at the ceiling as he tried to recall the exact names of the species. "Forgive me the day's stresses are getting to me."

"Take all the time you need." Icmo was getting comfortable in his chair. He found talking to Sele to be easier than he had anticipated.

"You are far more patient than Nolu gives you credit for." Sele turned his attention back towards the XO. "Now before you leave, you need to be aware of something."

"Yes?" Icmo asked. The change in subject had sparked his attention once more.

"Nolu has probably not told you, but the effects of his trellium addiction are starting to take form. One of T'mur's former doctors warned him about it." Once again the old man's mind blanked on the name. "This may be information that Nolu wants to keep hidden away but as his second in command you should be aware. Nolu only has a few more years in him. As time passes on Albatross he will need more help making command decisions. At some point his mind will deteriorate too far for him to stay in command. You need to stand by him and help guide him. It may be hard and you may think about going back to the Axel but you are his closest friend and adviser. He has helped you and soon it will be your turn to return the favor."

Icmo was struck at the news. The information he was hearing had to be one of Nolu's pranks in play. The captain would never hold back such important information. "How long will it be?"

"According to my grandmother. It will probably happen after the ship goes to..." Sele began dozing off. "...then the Gatrubbians will..."

The old man had fallen asleep sitting upright. His chin rested upon his chest. Icmo got up and adjusted Selek to a laying position so that he'd be more comfortable. After that the XO made the walk back towards the doors. The doors which separated him from his friend, from his comrade. Icmo walked slow as he processed the information he now possessed.

Chapter 9

Stardate: 3316.09.25.02

Location: Cromwell Prime, Midnight

"Captain Gret'ak, Captain Carpenter is requesting permission to come aboard." one of Cromwell's senior Bridge officers announced.

"Send him up." Gret'ak responded.

On a docking ring ramp Josh waited for special permission to be granted. Carpenter was reporting to the Cromwell's Bridge as quickly as he could. Security was tight, as new personnel aboard ships usually had to stay in quarantine or risk losing the entire ship to Mother from infected. It was every captain's worst nightmare. Responses ranged from simply locking suspected infected away to putting the infected crewman and anyone they had come in contact with out the airlock. This became more problematic on the smaller ships as everyone came in contact with the infected. As long as he stayed at Crossroads, he was considered infection free. He still had to await the final say of the ship's captain however.

Official Policy was to put potentially infected crew into an airlock with food. At the end of three days, one of the two doors would be opened. Each captain had final say over which doors on his ship.

"Cap'n" said Carpenter turbolift doors opening and Carpenter finally reaching the bridge.

"Evening, Josh." Gret'ak said absentmindedly, not looking up from whatever he was reading at the moment.

Carpenter crossed to the Cromwell's captain and offered a PaDD. "The outline of the plans for moving the Refugees." said Josh in a sober tone.

"Let's take a look." Gret'ak scanned a few lines before nodding. "Let's discuss this in the ready room." The older Kharian stood up and grabbed his ceremonial blade from its resting place that had been specially built into the Captain's chair. He slid it into place at his side as he strolled across the bridge and into the ready room.

Josh followed Gret'ak into the captain's ready room.

"This isn't everyone...." Gret'ak said as the doors closed. "This won't evacuate our entire population. What's the issue?" The Captain rounded his desk and placed his sword to his left as he spoke.

"I estimate we get about 80% moved within two weeks." said Josh. "Another week we could clear 95%." he said. "We just don't have enough ships to make it to the Alpha Signus cluster, make the drop and return quickly enough." said Captain Carpenter. "And we still have the food problem." There were going to be hungry refugees on the other end. The two week requirement prevented Carpenter's original plan for lay over on a class M planet enroute for re-provisioning with an advanced farming community placed a couple months prior to beginning to move. But the Temporal Mechanics requirement of abandoning the station within two weeks prevented putting the colony down and begin harvesting any food.

"I concede that there's nothing we can do about the food." said Gret'ak. "I'll even concede that we won't get everyone out. What's the next step here? That's what I'm asking."

"The specific numbers are in there. Ship loads, ration requirements" said Josh. "But quick summary. We begin moving refugees now. Put them onto ships who then move to a lower orbit to beam the refugees to transfer camps on the planet. We start moving the larger slower transports in now, Beam up the refugees, loading and send the passenger ships through the wormhole. Then repeat the process with new loads for each ship."

"How are we holding them until then?" Gret'ak's mind wandered through the possibilities. "We can't keep them on Crossroads..."

"We are using multiple refugee camps on the planet." said Carpenter. "Other than keeping family groups together, they will lose communications between camps." Josh paused. This was for when the sinking ship's hatches had to be close to save the rest. Not everyone who made it to the refugee camps would make it off planet before mother came. "When we can no longer provide transports, the remaining refugees will have to be abandoned on the planet." They could not be left on Crossroads, they had to be moved someplace. Crossroads had to be completely abandoned before she could make the jump back in time. This solved that problem, but the solution was less than optimal in Carpenter's opinion.

Kraxus tried not to think about that possibility. Those people would be like cattle in a slaughterhouse if they were attacked. Carroll had some defenses, but nothing like Crossroads. "Alright, what about the fleet manning shortages?"

"We can publish the DFA recruitment when Crossroads plan becomes general knowledge." The incentive to prioritize DFA families would have impact. "I've already tagged DFA Personnel's family ties. We can alert them quickly when the time comes to move them." said Josh. "I have set aside specific ships to transport them so we won't run out of transport."

"I'll put out an announcement in person." Kraxus sighed. "There is one thing I'd like to discuss with you however."

"Sir?" asked Carpenter expectantly.

"The dissemination of the plan to jump Crossroads... I don't want to have to explain this to folks. You know how hard it was for us to accept it." Kraxus still sort of didn't want to accept it, but here he was about to authorize it. "How 'bout we just tell them we're gonna scuttle the station? It won't be a lie, but it'll be easier to justify than time travel."

Josh's jaw worked, tightening, but he didn't say anything. He still did not like another retreat, but the risk of leaving Crossroads for Mother outweighed the option of trying to send Crossroads back in time, denying the enemy resources. He didn't like not telling the others, but recognized the necessity. It was one of the times he stayed silent to follow orders. "Yes Sir."

"Thanks Josh." Gret'ak sat back for a moment. "So, how goes the evacuation?"

"I have engineers on the surface already setting up the transfer camps." said Josh. He had gone ahead with his plan even before approval. Hours would cost lives, and a DFA Officer acted, they did not wait for commands. "Eleven camps, each named for one of the original Founder Planets of the DFA." said Josh, sounding embarrassed as he said so.

"Nice touch." Gret'ak nodded. "Wish you would've asked, but nice touch nonetheless, Josh."

Carpenter blushed and embarrassedly shrugged off the sentimentality. They had tried to keep as much of the DFA history alive as they could.

"Oh, and before you leave Josh, did you hear about that infected that tried to kill Selekt?" Kraxus said as he got up.

"Fvadt." Josh swore. "He was infected? I thought he was just a crazy in the sea of refugees." He started thinking...How many more were already aboard Crossroads? How many would they take through the wormhole? The solace was the 72 hour quarantine would be easily enforced as it was a couple of weeks to the Signus cluster. But the ships would be crowded, losing entire ships would be costly. Josh made the mental note to use memorized coordinates, and scattered rally points before final jump to Signus... Maybe the infected would not know the final destination. No, that would be of no use. The DFA and Federation had already announced the location of the purchase for relocation.

"I'm visiting him in the morning after they're done with the surgery." The Captain spoke as if it were any other day in the DFA. He took great joy in being able to do mundane things amidst all the apocalyptic madness going on around them. "If you're not busy at that time, you're welcome to join me. Bring him some favors and a card?"

"Flowers and chocolate." smiled Carpenter. "We'll greet the invaders with flowers and chocolates." How soon before Selak was turned infected himself?

"Of course! Anything else would be just bad manners." Gret'ak laughed.

"You think he'll survive?" asked Josh, a bit sharper than he should. "One percent Cap'n. That's the number that survive an infection."

"He wasn't infected himself... at least I hope not." Gret'ak said reassuringly. "The infected only shot him."

Small consolation. If Captain Gret'ak was going to meet with the Elder Vulcan, Josh could not back out. "I'll be there sir."

"I'll see you there. Should be 0900 if there aren't any complications." Gret'ak said as he sat back down and got back to approving operations plans for the deployment of the fleet.

Stardate: 3316.09.26.01

Location: Commander Voci's Office

Commander Voci's office followed the same patterns of disarray that the rest of the station followed. Reports were strewn all over the place. A few months earlier the office would have been as clean and organized as an operating room. The commander had decided to take a break from the infirmary and decided to begin preparations to defend the station.

Accessing the comm system, Ligshuk called up an old helper of Crossroad's station. "This is Commander Ligshuk to Theodore. Are you there?"

"Theodore here," the now seven foot mechanized behemoth said. A lot had changed in those nine hundred years. The only recognizable thing about the once intel officer serving the late Mirel on USS Daystrom was the cute Teddy Bear head. The rest was now clearly machine up-grades made during the second Dominion war.

"It's been some time since you came to visit. I hope Mother hasn't given you too much trouble." The commander had lost touch with the old teddy bear since Mother's invasion. "I hate to pull you out of retirement, but we had a situation arise."

"No doubt. The Tweedles, the Kazons, even the Cronins have fallen to this Mother. I was wondering when you or star-fleet would ask for my help. Retirements are boring when you're immortal," Theodore said.

"How long until you can be here?" The commander asked.

"I can be there tomorrow. Is Zeno still there?" Theodore asked.

"He is." Ligshuk replied. "Actually both of them are."

"What do you mean both? Never mind, tell me when I get there" responded Theodore.

"I expect to see you tomorrow sir. Until then."

"Until then" Theodore signed off.

A female Avatar appeared before the old electronic bear "You think he might have built himself a duplicate?" she asked

Theodore thought for a moment, "Possibly, or this could explain how he knew about me before I even met him"

The AI laughed "You think he time traveled?"

"You heard those the Gatrubbians legends," Theodore noted.

"Yeah, key word: legends" the AI added

"One way to find out," Theodore said .

Chapter 10

Stardate: 3316.10.05.04

Location: Order Headquarters, Crossroads Station

"Holy Order of the Jem'Hadar"

Zamat was silent as he led Zoss and select members of the Albatross crew down a dark corridor hidden adjacent to the offices of Crossroads Station's constabulary. The corridor was lit with dim glow-lamps and adorned with ornate decorations and trophies from battles long past. Many had already been taken down in anticipation of the station evacuation.

Zamat, their guide into this mysterious world, had begged Zoss and Zal to allow him to take them to meet the rest of the "Order." Zoss had finally agreed, and the rest of the Albatross crew had been invited as well. It was late in the evening, station cycle time, when Zamat had come to get the crew dressed in plain cloth-spun robes, but the mass underneath hinted at the much bulkier ensemble Zamat wore under the humble robes.

Shenara followed the Jem'Hadar to the headquarters. She had grown curious to see how the war loving species of this time were living. Her knowledge of the Jem'Hadar was limited but they intrigued her.

At last, the crew reached a rectangular chamber, roughly ten feet tall and cavernous in size. A single shrine stood at the end of the vast rectangular room underneath a massive stained-glass window depicting Zoss standing behind a child-like Zal, one hand on his son's shoulder whilst the other raised in benediction. A soft light illuminated the colors of the ornate decoration, casting its eerie colors onto all assembled.

The crew soon noticed that they were not alone in the chamber. Hundreds of beings stood or sat at the edges of the room, gazing at the assembled crew. Zoss soon noticed that not all members present were Jem'Hadar. There were Klingons, Romulans, Cardassians, Gatrubbians, an odd Kharian here and there, but the vast majority of the assembled audience were grey-scaled horned warriors of Zoss's race.

"The Holy Order of the Jem'Hadar accepts all who are willing to fight for justice and peace in the galaxy." Zamat explained, taking notice of the crew's bewilderment. "I suspect you have many questions..."

"If I may ask." The half Klingon stepped forward. "When was this order founded? You seem to be well established."

"The Holy Father founded the order when he freed some Jem'Hadar from the clutches of the Dominion." Zamat went on. "After the Holy Father's death, the Blessed Son continued leading the order until his death. I am the current Grandmaster. The crew of the Albatross helped in various capacities. This was much farther in the future so I'm uncertain if any of you will play a role in the creation of our order..." The constable added hastily. "But you who have served on this holy ship, you are welcome in the Order's halls."

"Thank you for having us." Shenara bowed her head out of respect. She was glad to have been invited.

"Ketracel..." Zoss said, noting Zamat's own drug tube. "...you still submit yourselves to the addiction."

"Many of us choose to keep this genetic feature to remind ourselves of the slavery all Jem'Hadar once faced." Zamat replied. "Many of our brethren in the Dominion still cling to the old ways, but we do what we can to free the ones who wish to leave."

"What does the Order do?" Zoss could already fathom a guess, but he still needed to hear it.

"Quite simply, we fight for peace and justice." Zamat began, this time he was addressing the assembled audience. "We perform services as mercenaries, law enforcement, or humanitarians. In peace, we keep the laws of the people we choose to serve, and protect those who cannot protect themselves. In war, we provide aid to the suffering and fight for those who cannot fight for themselves." Zamat's chest swelled with pride as he spoke. "We operate openly, but keep to ourselves to maintain our independence. There are thousands of chapters all over the galaxy. They all answer to the Grandmaster, to me, but they all operate autonomously. We are all that remain of the chapters in the Delta Quadrant."

Zoss rounded on Zamat, shooting the Jem'Hadar an intense look. "You are an army."

"Yes, Holy Father."

"An army who worships us." Zoss gestured towards his son.

"Yes... Holy Father."

"Then how are you any better than the Jem'Hadar enslaved to the Founders?" Zoss asked rather severely. "I do not ask for worshippers. If I were ever moved to free the Jem'Hadar, I would never have approved of you turning into a cult, and I would never have accepted your worship!"

Zamat was quiet as he turned and walked away from Zoss. If the assembly had been moved or offended by Zoss's words, none showed it. Zamat returned with a hidebound book and held the cover out for Zoss to read. "Your words are true, Holy Father." Zamat replied. "It is in keeping with your teachings, and your confusion and disapproval are understandable. To prevent what you just described, you left us with a book of your wisdom. You are right that we should not worship you. And we do not. Please do not mistake our veneration for servitude to your person. We serve your teachings."

"And what... exactly... are my teachings?" Zoss said as he folded his arms.

"We, the Jem'Hadar were bred for war." Zamat began. All the assembled Order members bowed their heads in reverence as Zamat spoke. "This is the immutable fact of our existence. Wherever we go, all beings remember that our hands brought war to their worlds and death to their loved ones."

"We bear the blood-debt of our forebears." The assembly intoned.

"We, the Jem'Hadar are bred for war." Zamat continued, his voice rising and falling in cadence with rehearsed ease. "Our hands itch to fight. Our blood flows with battle-passion. Our eyes ceaselessly seek the next foe."

"War is our destiny. Conflict our fate."

"Being a race of war, the Jem'Hadar must fight. But being a race of dignity and honor, we can and must choose who we fight, and for whom we fight." Zamat returned the book to the altar and raised his hands in benediction. "We fight to protect those ravaged by war."

"We bring hope to the hopeless."

Zamat cried out the next verse: "We fight for those held in bondage!"

"We bring freedom to the oppressed."

Turning again, Zamat called out: "We PUNISH those who prey on the weak!"

"We bring justice to the lawless."

Zamat then lowered his volume and softened his tone before uttering the next verse: "We give our lives in the place of innocents, and sacrifice to protect the weak."

"We choose death so that others may live in peace."

"This is the life of a Jem'Hadar. Until the day when the last of us dies on the last battlefield, slaying the last villain to end the last war in the galaxy..." Zamat made a gesture in the air in front of him. "Until the day we bring about justice and peace, the life of a Jem'Hadar is forfeit. This we swear..."

"Galoren Yi Tar," (Justice and Peace) the assembly replied.

"Galoren Yi Tar....." Zamat repeated, making a gesture with his hand upon his heart. "These are your teachings... Holy Father." He looked at Zoss and the Albatross crew expectantly.

Roquel nodded her appreciation. "Good teachings. I didn't know you had it in you!" She cuffed him in the shoulder with a closed fist...the proverbial attaboy.

Chapter 11

Stardate: 3316.10.06.02

Location: Crossroads' Conference Room

Getting to the meeting room was a lot easier this morning than it had been the last. Noluk and any of the other Albatross crew who felt it necessary to attend the follow up commission meeting took a seat in the conference room. Selek was the only one not able to attend the meeting. After a night of rest he still was recovering from the previous day's attack.

Commander Ligshuk began the meeting once everyone had seated. "Good morning. As you all know, Selek was attacked yesterday. Even though he was not able to join us today he asked me to let you know that he was doing well."

Captain Gret'ak merely nodded and said nothing. He and Carpenter were on their way to see Selek when they found out the meeting hadn't been cancelled. There may or may not have been some terse words exchanged over an intercom as he and Carpenter reluctantly changed directions on the promenade to get to the meeting room.

"Captain Gret'ak wishes to express that Selek may have a rapid recovery." said Carpenter despite Gret'ak's look at him when Carpenter spoke up to answer Commander Ligshuk. "And hopes that we can conclude this meeting quickly so we may speak to Selek ourselves."

"I guess the main order of business today should be covered first." The commander stood up. "Has the DFA come to a decision of whether or not they will help Crossroads?"

"Yes, we have." Gret'ak spoke at last. "We'll support this plan utilizing our military forces to conduct defense and reconnaissance. However, our first priority remains evacuating our refugee population. We would appreciate any help you could provide."

Josh nodded. "We are short both transport and provisions." said Carpenter.

"The Federation has agreed to assist with any spare transports they have. The Gatrubbian Empire will also lend any assistance they can. Gatrubbian fleet three is

on their way as we speak. It may not mean much but I've also gotten in contact with the USS Mosey and they will be here later today."

"We thank you, Commander Ligshuk." Gret'ak replied. "You will have the Cromwell fleet at your disposal for the station defense. Captain Carpenter's scout squadrons will continue to provide long-range Intel and updates as long as they can."

"Um, Yeah..." began Carpenter. "Commander, we are beginning to see some ship form hatching." said Carpenter.

"Our Intel has reported similar sightings." Ligshuk pulled up a map of the surrounding sectors. The map was marked with locations of sightings. "How have things been in your area of the quadrant?"

"Everything had been quiet the last couple of months." said Captain Carpenter. "Usual minor skirmishes, testing of defenses. Seeing the ship form hatching now would put them on the right timetable for Selek's estimate of two weeks." he said. How had the old man had predicted the impending attack so accurately?

"Any clue as to a better estimate in time or numbers?" The commander asked.

"I don't know." said Carpenter. "It got too hot in the sector to scout the system any longer." He shrugged. "Long range scans don't show anything, but if they are hatching them now, we won't see them for another week."

"How many ships can we expect from the DFA?" Ligshuk needed to know how much the DFA was willing to put forth in defense of the station. If they numbers didn't add up she wasn't sure where else to turn.

"We've sent messages out to the outlier scouts, pulling them back for the defense of Crossroads." said Carpenter. "We will need them for moving the refugees, even with the resources you are bringing forth."

"You'll have approximately four hundred vessels dedicated to station defense." Gret'ak replied. "Plus any volunteers and stragglers that may make it back in the next few days. The entirety of what remains of the DFA fleet plus Cromwell herself."

"We'll need a place to put the refugees." Ligshuk voiced her concern. "The Federation has looked at a couple planets but so far but they are still awaiting a final vote of approval."

"I, um...went ahead and set up the refugee camps last night commander." said Carpenter. Typical of DFA he hadn't waited for higher ups approval, but took action into his own hands. Even after 900 years, the DFA had not lost it's cowboy attitude. A survival trait that had aggressively been nurtured by the appearance of the Mother Invader. Indeed, it is what had kept them alive despite losing the DFA Territories to Mother.

The commander nodded. "Very well that solves that problem. Is there any possibility we could have some of our refugee's placed with the DFA's? I know it's a lot to ask, but it would help to expedite the process."

"We can begin integrating your station survivors into the evacuation plan immediately." Carpenter said handing her the outline of the plan on a PaDD. "We will have to get everyone off the station before the jump back in time." said Carpenter. "It will take some time, even with the added resources of Gatrubbian and Federation transports."

"Do what you can." Lighshuk took the PaDD. She began to skim over it to make sure all the logistics would work out. "We need to make sure there are no stragglers aboard when the station jumps."

"Alright, since we are in agreement with the plan of action, I propose we..." Gret'ak stopped speaking as what appeared to be an over-sized furry animal in a Starfleet Admiral's uniform strolled into the room.

Theodore entered in a uniform he had not worn since he retired "Sorry I'm late. It's hard to get around with all these refugees. I decided to let a few of them on my ship. My wife loves meeting new people" Theodore said.

"Welcome aboard admiral. I wasn't expecting your arrival for several more hours." Lighsuk gestured towards an open chair. "Please sit, we were just finishing our planning for the evacuation."

"So do the Temporal agents know you have time travelers?" Theodore sat down.

"The Federation Temporal Commission doesn't operate in these parts." Lighshuk answered. "The Gatrubbian Empire on the other hand has more to worry about than a couple time travelers who came here against their volition."

"The Federation Temporal Commission operates throughout all history. I know a few agents who do not wish for them to leave," Theodore reminded them.

"The reason we called you here was to assist us in defending the station." Ligshuk indicated the map that still displayed. "Mother is planning an attack and this one is going to be large. Defending Crossroads will be vital to the survival of the Federation and her allies."

"The best option is close all worms holes leading into the quadrant, which many have already done. This is, in fact, the last one left," Theodore said

"I apologize for not fully keeping you up to date." Ligshuk gave the PaDD with the DFA's evacuation plan to Theodore. "We're evacuating the local space. Even if it were possible to close the wormhole we wouldn't be able to without losing civilian lives."

Theodore looked over the plans "The DFA lasted longer then I thought it would, longer than many in Starfleet at the time did. I think it's time you reunite in the alpha and beta quadrant."

"If you read through the plan you'll see that's what we're looking at doing." The commander wondered why Theodore was reacting before finishing going through the plan.

"Everything else in the quadrant has died. Kazon, Undine, Ocampa all gone. What hope does the DFA have?" Theodore pleaded.

Carpenter rolled his eyes. After 900 years, Starfleet still used the tired old phrases?

"If you'll look at the plan you'll see that the DFA is pulling out of the quadrant." Ligshuk looked at Carpenter and Gret'ak who seemed to be getting annoyed at the major interruption. "Now if we can get back to the topic of planning the evacuation."

Captain Gret'ak at this point was rubbing his temples while nursing a fairly severe headache and looked up from his vacant stare at the table in front of him. "Yes, please do..." He sighed.

"We've begun to send notifications to the refugee crowd to prepare them for evacuation. The first wave should be prepared to leave by 2200 hours tonight." Ligshuk informed the DFA representative. "A small fleet of Gatrubbian freighters is docked and awaiting orders."

"Very good." Gret'ak replied. "Now, I know this is going to be a delicate subject with Starfleet, but there is one thing I would like to request from the Federation."

"I am willing to do whatever is necessary." Ligshuk replied. "What can I do for you?"

"We need access to the Starfleet tactical network around this station.... all of it." Gret'ak braced himself for the retorts.

The commander shook her head. "I don't think that will be possible."

"Oh come on Commander." said Carpenter. "We've been working with you, giving you intel, running the blockades to get refugees out, whether they were Federation, DFA or DQ natives...."

"The DFA fleet comprises over 60% of this station's defenses and we field the heaviest ships." Gret'ak continued. "We'll occupy three out of the four key warp entry points in the local space and we'll most likely take the most losses in the event of an attack. Our staff has run the simulations, and if we were to have command override authority for the stationary phaser platforms as well as the ability to directly request support from the station, our losses are cut by 30% and...." He paused for effect. "...we hold the station 1 day longer than originally projected. Choice is yours, Commander."

"It's not that I don't want to but, the tactical network is only accessible to authorized Starfleet personnel. Not even I have that power." Ligshuk tried her best to work with the DFA. She had no quarrel with them, but the old blood between Starfleet and the DFA still caused some problems.

"We need that day Commander." said Captain Carpenter. "We are barely clearing all personnel from the station in time. And that is only by staging them on Carroll itself. I bought you 12 extra hours by setting up the transition camps last night. It closes a few of the gaps, but there still is insufficient time to get everyone through the wormhole. The deadline is impossible. We need that day to get the last of the refugees out," said Josh.

The commander sighed. "I'll see what I can do, maybe Starfleet will be able to make an exception under the circumstances."

"You will also have to tell the refugees, with the speed we will be moving them off station, they need to know why we are moving quickly. They need to know what is

going on and why, or they will stall, and question, and not go." said Josh. "It would be like the Titanic. Too few boats, those leaving half filled because no one believing that Crossroads is going to sink into the depths of space."

"The Titanic?" The commander asked. "I'm not sure I know that ship. But I think I understand. We have been distributing information about the evacuation. We have rescheduled our security crews to ensure refugees are guided to their ship during their scheduled time."

Carpenter shrugged off the missed reference, she was Starfleet and DFA myths and legends would unlikely be required study for them. At the DFA Academy, when there was still one, it was taught the Cromwell, Cromwell-B to be specific, had been sent to Earth circa 1912 by Q. It was Q's prophecy the DFA would fall from within, and not from without. It gave courage to all DFA officers to stand against impossible odds. It prompted DFA officers to give it all for the ideals of the DFA. Preservation of Freedom was one of the high ideals. Whether that was for DFA citizens, or DQ species, or even Federation citizens from Mother. "Commander, we thank you for security department's assistance. It will allow us to get more refugees off safely and in time." said Carpenter with a slight bow of appreciation. Starfleet and DFA combined forces would help ensure the continuation of the DFA in the Alpha quadrant. Carpenter glanced at Gret'ak to see if he caught the irony.

Gret'ak maintained his usually stoic composure in the face of the Federation's waffling on the security code issue. He caught Carpenter's gaze and merely shrugged until the Teddy Bear spoke up.

"If the DFA want's the Intel so badly then maybe rejoining the Federation should be discussed quickly" Theodore said having his own orders from politicians.

Carpenter was standing "Oh let it go..." he began.

The tension in the room spiked as Captain Gret'ak lowered the hand which had been massaging his temples and shot the uniformed children's plaything standing before him a withering glare. The flecks of blood-red found their way into the edges of Kraxus's pupils as the infamous Gret'ak anger overtook the Captain for a brief moment.

"Josh...." Gret'ak said sternly, holding up a hand.

"We've been giving them the intel..." protested Carpenter. "It's our privateers willing to go into infested systems to see what Mother is doing there..."

"And it's the DFA warfleet that provided the blood and sacrifice which bought all of us the time to be sitting here getting insulted by children's playthings." If Kraxus's fury was a phaser beam, Theodore and everything in a 20 meter radius of him would have been disintegrated. "Commander Ligshuk, I understand that this.... Being... technically outranks you, but seeing as you have the sanction of the Federation Council by virtue of your seat on the Commission, I am asking YOU to assure ME that the price of any cooperation with Starfleet is NOT contingent on our BENDING KNEE."

There was an unsaid threat embedded in Gret'ak's statement and it hung in the air like the stench of smoke from an unseen fire. There was real danger in this moment that none in the room had foreseen.

"You are correct captain." Ligshuk tried to ease the tension. "Starfleet and the Federation have already agreed to cooperate with the DFA on this matter. They and my government recognize the DFA's sacrifice and are willing to compensate for you spent resources. It's something all of our higher ups are in the midst of discussing. But now is neither the time nor place."

"Thank you, Commander." Gret'ak released the deathgrip he'd hand on his family's blade and his breathing returned to normal. "Josh, you may unball your fists." He added.

Carpenter took a seat with a thump. A moment he pause and turned slowly to Commander Ligshuk. "Security?" Carpenter asked Commander Ligshuk, somewhat mollified by Cromwell Prime's Captain. Theodore, like Zeno, had been discussed by Carpenter as a potential metal army to fight Mother. But DFA preservation of individual freedom overrode Carpenter's desire to inquire about making more 'Theodores' to use as an army.

"Feel free to use them as needed." Ligshuk assured the captain. "My officers know that we're participating in a joint venture."

"The Station will be clear of all personnel within two weeks Commander Ligshuk." promised Captain Carpenter.

"Thank you captain." The commander nodded. "You have my gratitude."

As the Commission members rose, there was a dull thud and a feeling of vertigo overtook the occupants of the room as the station's gravity generators struggled to

compensate with an unexpected power drop. It felt as if the entire deck had suddenly plunged about ten feet in the air and all present stumbled a bit as the gravity generators re-engaged.

=/\= WARNING- DECOMPRESSION ON DECK 45. =/\= The station's computer intoned.

"Commander." Zamat, the station's Jem'Hadar Constable stated as he burst into the room. "There's been a situation on one of the refugee housing decks. We're reading explosions and possible portal signatures."

"Impossible." Gret'ak asserted. "There are FOUR T-B generators in operation on this station!!"

"We are not sure at this time." Zamat replied calmly, seeking to calm the incensed Kharian. "I advise all present report to their duty posts. We need to get all the leadership spread out before something happens."

"Well..." Gret'ak said through gritted teeth. "Josh, I'm ordering the marine team spooled up. Would you care to look into this?"

"Aye Cap'n" said Carpenter. Probably another civilian modification attempting to divert power from the T-B generators. But the portal signatures? That could be problematic, or a beachhead.

"Good. This meeting is over." With an air of finality, Captain Gret'ak stormed out of the conference room, hand on blade while on his way to the Cromwell.

"Captain Carpenter..." Zamat said, turning to the DFA buccaneer. "Sir, if this really is a portal breach, allow my officers to accompany you and your marines. You're going to need all the help you can get."

Josh considered refuting the probabilities, but something suggested he not argue with the Jem Hadar. "Form up a squad to support the DFA Marines." he said accepting the offer. "Having some on standby as well may not be a bad idea." said Josh. "If that is alright with Commander Ligshuk?" Josh added, in deference to the command structure.

"Go check it out. I'll report to the command deck and see what I can learn from there." Ligshuk got up and headed for the door.

Theodore got up "I will handle the time travelers. Where are they? Remember I'm one of the few people still alive from their era."

By this time Noluk and Icmo had already made their way out of the room. They had slipped out during the heated discussion.

#

Location: DFA Cromwell Prime

Cromwell's bridge buzzed with activity as the various senior officers and crewmen hustled to ready the DFA's flagship for battle. The bridge itself was a state-of-the-art affair with holo-displays projecting images of the surrounding space all around. Upon first glance, the Cromwell bridge crew seemed to stand in the middle of open space itself.

Clearly marked walkways allowed the crew to see and maneuver on solid ground as they moved about, tending to various consoles and carrying out instructions. Many of the officers simply stood motionlessly at various stations throughout the ship, having the crewmen fetch them PADDs or carry items to other parts of the ship.

Captain on the bridge... an automated voice announced as Captain Gret'ak stepped through the turbolift doors, which in turn vanished into the holo-display as they closed.

"Good evening, Captain." Gret'ak's executive officer, a Falerion female, spoke without looking up from her holo-display. "I take it you won't be visiting Commissioner Seleak at this hour?"

"No, duty calls I'm afraid. Shall we?" Gret'ak replied as he slid his sword into a holster near the Captain's station. Gret'ak's battle station was located on an elevated platform at the heart of the bridge, overseeing everything the senior officers were doing. Conveniently adjusted handrails surrounded the platform and a single chair was positioned two feet to the rear of it. Gret'ak's seat was actually more of a comfort feature of the bridge instead of anything functional. The crews of the future utilized full-immersion neural interfaces which required the user to stand in order to make sense of all the additional stimuli that the neural interface would bring. "Indeed we shall, sir." The XO took her place on a slightly lower platform in front of the Captain's. "Handshake ship." She announced to the bridge.

"Handshake fleet." Gret'ak replied. Immediately, all of his senses were plunged into the Cromwell's command network hub. It took a few seconds, but soon Kraxus

settled in and slowly allowed the ship to take over his senses. His hands seemed to meld into the hull when really they were resting on the handrails of his command station. His eyes became the ship's sensors though in reality they were merely staring vacantly ahead.

This would have been the end of it had he merely been fulfilling his role as a ship captain, but he knew that in order to manage the fleet, he needed much more. He waited patiently for his XO to catch up so he could hand her control of the ship. She struggled a bit, having only recently been promoted after the death of his previous XO, but she was getting faster. As soon as he felt the reassuring presence of his XO in the ship's command matrix, he bootstrapped himself to the next level of C&C hub, accessing a highly encrypted interface using a practiced sequence of memories and visual symbols.

As soon as the last security lock had been cleared, Gret'ak soon found himself boosted to an even higher plane of existence. He had transcended Cromwell and was receiving input from the entire fleet. Billions of artificial intelligence subroutines filtered trillions of terabytes of information, sifting through only the most relevant information and amalgamating it into visual screens, meters, and graphical representations that the Captain could make sense of. Within moments, the assimilation of his consciousness into the fleet was complete.

I have the ship His XO announced. Her voice had a distinctly digital quality in this plane and seemed to come from far away.

I have the fleet He replied.

With this announcement, the AI subroutines altered his relationship with the matrix. He was now in control.... *All Cromwell battlegroup elements, this is Cromwell Actual, assuming fleet control.* He didn't need to hear it, but somewhere his consciousness received approximately four hundred affirmative replies. Gret'ak gazed around at the composite image of the entire battle fleet's sensor readouts. He saw the light of the nearby star buffeting the station with every bandwidth of photons, casting strange palettes of color upon the station's hull which were invisible to even a Kharian's finely tuned sense of sight. He saw the patterns upon patterns of magnetic, radioactive, and gravitational forces affecting every cubic centimeter of space surrounding him. Kraxus allowed himself only a minute to appreciate the truly spectacular view he'd been afforded by this technology and his appreciation for the AIs who kept all this information from frying his neural cortex to a crisp. It was then that he noticed a void, an anomaly standing out amidst the backdoor interference of the T-B fields. He located the epicenter of the disturbance,

somewhere within the station itself and triangulated Carpenter's position. He opened a channel:

=/\= Josh, this is Kraxus. =/\= The Captain spoke in real-time, allowing the sensors aboard the ship to capture his voice.

=/\= Go Ahead Cap'n =/\= said Carpenter.

=/\= Sensors are picking up a localized pocket of normal space near your position. It's completely devoid of T-B interference and it's extending out into the space around the station. I'm picking up multiple shipforms portaling into existence outside. I'll direct the fleet and handle them out here, but I need you to neutralize whatever the hell is creating the pocket. How copy? =/\=

=/\= We may have an explanation. We have increased humidity and temperature on this deck. =/\= said Josh. =/\= And a lot of dead civilians. Could be a hibernating Pod hatched on deck, probably calling for Mother right now. We're going in, see if we can neutralize the signal before all hell breaks loose. =/\=

=/\= Good hunting, Josh. Kraxus out. =/\=

No sooner had he spoke, the first portals opened in the space near Crossroads and swarms of shipforms exited the howling maws. Kraxus first sent several squadrons in to combat the attackers. Next, he opened a channel to Ligshuk.

=/\= Captain Gret'ak to Commander Ligshuk =/\= He said.

The commander opened the channel. =/\=Voci here. What's up captain? =/\= His message was terse and short. With each Shipform that portaled in, he had more to track and more orders to issue. =/\= I have fleet command. Visitors outside your station. Spool up your weapons and target the coordinates I send you. =/\=

=/\=Can do captain.=/\= At the command deck the tactical officer on duty was already warming things up. =/\=Weapons are ready.=/\=

No sooner had the Fed officer spoke, a dozen shipforms portaled into existence outside the station. They hurled themselves at the oncoming squadrons, who in turn blasted the biological vessels apart with ease, but the stream of ships did not end...

Gret'ak gritted his teeth and hoped Carpenter could end the interference quickly. He ordered another squadron in to support the first....

Chapter 12

Stardate: 3316.10.07.01

Location: Deck 45

Descending to the lower levels of Crossroads station, Carpenter, Zamat, a squad of DFA marines, and a dozen Order members exited the cargo lift and fanned out. The Order members took rearguard while the DFA marines took point. It was decided that it would be easier for the nearly seven-foot Jem'Hadar to shoot over the smaller Kharians' heads rather than vice versa.

The deck was quiet and dark, and all power had been drained from the surrounding systems. Something had tapped into the station's power grid and diverted all power from everything except minimal life support. Bodies lay everywhere, many still bearing the look of horror on their faces from the creatures they surely must have faced in their final moments.

Zamat reflexively checked the seal on his breath mask. No biological entity, not even the Undine, had proven resistant to the fungal spores and Zamat was in no hurry to test his constitution against such a threat. One of the DFA marines saw something in the the cone of his flashlight and held up a fist. The rest of the group stopped and took a knee, weapons scanning about for threats.

Telltale squishing noises were the only indicator of the horrors lurking beyond the group's view.

"Ah, crap....This is not good." said Carpenter quietly to the Jem Hadar escort.

=/\= Josh, this is Kraxus. =/\= Came the chirp from Carpenter's comm badge.

=/\= Go Ahead Cap'n =/\= said Carpenter.

=/\= Sensors are picking up a localized pocket of normal space near your position. It's completely devoid of T-B interference and it's extending out into the space around the station. I'm picking up multiple shipforms portaling into existence outside. I'll direct the fleet and handle them out here, but I need you to neutralize whatever the hell is creating the pocket. How copy?=/\=

=/\= We may have an explanation. We have increased humidity and temperature on this deck. =/\= said Josh. =/\= And a lot of dead civilians. Could be a hibernating Pod

hatched on deck, probably calling for Mother right now. We're going in, see if we can neutralize the signal before all hell breaks loose. =/\= The dead bodies suggested they may be too late. Would they be able to find the hatched form that was creating the portal?

=/\= Good hunting, Josh. Kraxus out. =/\=

They were suppose to have two weeks before Mother attacked. For all the time travelers, and time theorists, no one seemed to know what was about to happen, let alone when. But Carpenter and the Jem Hadar knew what would happen if this area was not re-secured within the next few hours; Crossroads would not be going anywhere. In space, Gret'ak would be fighting a continuing flood of shipforms. The only way to stop them was to stop them at the source. The Portals had to be closed down.

"Respirators on." Carpenter ordered the Marines. He didn't need any heroes, he needed healthy warriors. Respirators didn't prevent all infections, but through trial and error, they had found that that it noticeably reduced the chances. The Jem Hadar were professional, and they were already ready. Josh flipped out a folding sword, and drew his disruptor pistol, an ancient artifact gifted from a fallen Klingon ally. It may have had a fraction of the power modern energy weapons had, but against Mother's Warrior forms who ran without shields, it was still more than powerful enough. And Josh employed it to accurate effect. The swashbuckler moved to ready for the attack. He nodded to Zamat signalling his readiness.

With a nod to the marines, the Jem'Hadar readied his own ranged and melee ensemble in the form of a modern phaser carbine, which the massive Jem'Hadar was able to wield one-handed, and a brutal-looking hammer that looked like it had a momentum accelerator attachment.

With a peak around the corner, Josh followed the Jem Hadar. Marines fell into combat line as the squad moved forward.

The first to spot the infected down the corridor was the point Kharian marine. There were crowds and crowds of Gatrubbians, all bearing wounds from the struggles of their previous life. They stumbled about with vacant eyes and fungal growths coming out of their various orifices. These beings were beyond help now. If the fungal growths hadn't outright destroyed their neural pathways, then the psychological damage from direct contact with Mother life forms had permanently scarred their minds.

The first of the infected slowly turned towards the unwanted visitors, gazing at the soldiers with yellow-shot pupils. It opened its mouth and coughed out a deluge of sputum, spores, and pus. It issued out a low moan that seemed to resonate the very bones of all non-infected beings on the deck.

It was soon joined by the other infected and the moans grew into a deafening macabre chorus. The lead marine fell to a knee clutching at his ears. Luckily the squad had donned their rebreathers, otherwise they would have been similarly overpowered by the stench.

"Firing Line!" called Carpenter, and the Marines, bending their heads futilely to stop the noise, dropped to one knee. Discipline prevented them from dropping their weapons to cover their ears although more than a few would cover one ear with a free hand, raising a shoulder to try and cover the other.

It was then that the Jem'Hadar broke out into a chant. Zamat led the counter-chorus, barking the war cry of Order: "GALOREN YI TAR!!" (JUSTICE AND PEACE!!)

"YI TAR EN ARBUS!" (PEACE IN DEATH!) came the thunderous answer. The powerful voices of the Jem'Hadar screaming in a post-hypnotic battle frenzy shook the very deck plating and rattled the teeth of all in earshot.

"Fire." Called Josh and a few of the Marines Phasers rang out, Josh's Disruptor adding to the whines of energy weapon discharges. Others tucked heads to stop the noises, or turned to see what the Jem'Hadar were doing in their shouts.

The chant broke the spell that had gripped the squad as the marines regained their bearings and opened fire just in time to avoid being swarmed by the first group of infected. Gatrubbians were cut down by the hundreds as the squad advanced down the central corridor of the refugee housing deck.

The Jem'Hadar supported the marines in kind with withering volleys of fire from their heavy assault guns, vicious-looking phase cannons that weighed hundreds of kilograms, but the Jem'Hadar wielded them effortlessly as if they were mere carbines.

"Fire!" Repeated Carpenter, going down the line slapping the shoulders of Marines. The pace of firing rapidly picked up, and as they began killing the infected, the noises subsided, and the effectiveness of the Marines increased. Soon, they were cutting down advancing infected leaving dead piling up ahead of them.

Just as the squad began making progress against the oncoming horde, the air was filled with a ringing noise and all the soldiers in the squad felt a metallic taste in their mouths. A portal was opening....

"Portal" called out Carpenter, looking around for where the opening could be. It could be anywhere...

The first warrior form leaped from a portal that opened high above the squad. It landed in between the lead Jem'Hadar and the last Kharian marine. Before any could acquire and fire on it, the creature, a mass of tentacles tipped with vicious barbed heads attached to a central stalk, plunged an appendage into the back of one of the unsuspecting Kharians. The Kharian screamed in agony and terror as he was lifted off the deck and flung into the backs of his squadmates.

Two Jem'Hadar rushed the warrior, lopping off several tentacles, but were similarly tossed aside like ragdolls. The warrior pivoted around on its three clawed feet and turned to face Carpenter and his escort. It must have sensed that Carpenter was the leader, as it fixed the Captain with a glare from a single eyeball embedded within the swirling mass of deadly appendages....

In thousands of years of human combat, technology had always pushed their ability to kill forward. Technology allowed them control and access to weapons that previous generations could not have imagined. And still, it came down to a Human soldier, battling hand to hand, with a monster undreamed of in human history. All the science and technology aside, he was still a warrior, with a blade in hand fighting a creature bearing claws, and teeth, and wanting to consume him. Carpenter spared the briefest of moments to appreciate the irony as the Mother's Warrior advance on his team.

A tentacle wiped forward, was parried, and then detached by Carpenters blade. The stump of the severed limb whipped about like a blunt instrument knocking those Marines and Jem Hadar in range off balance. A tentacle grasped, and threw coils around a Marine. Carpenter fired a shot into the limb burning through the appendage. The Marine shook off the coils, and drew his own sword from his back, nodding a thanks to the captain. Traditional sword work for a Kharain as the Marine cut through two more limbs, freeing one of his brothers in arms. The third warrior appendage pierced a gap in his armor, striking deep into the Marines abdomen. There was a moment of surprise, before the light disappeared from his eyes, and the Sword fell to the ground.

"We've got to move." Josh called to Zamat. "We'll have more warriors dropping on us in seconds."

"Which direction is the interference coming from?" Zamat asked calmly as he unloaded shot after shot into the masses of infected.

Josh pointed, into the sea of infected, deeper into the depths of Crossroads.

"Of course it's not the easy route, is it?" Zamat noted with disdain.

"If it were easy, would we have brought you?" asked Carpenter with a grin.

Marines were hacking apart the last Warrior to drop through the portal. "We've got to find the Pod that is calling to mother to open the portals." said Carpenter. "Otherwise, this will turn into a flood." The Metallic taste began forming again. Another Warrior was about to come through.

Zamat grunted in assent as he caved in an infected being's skull. "We await your orders, Captain."

"Marines. Form a firing line forward, ahead, The Jem Hadar will be following us." Carpenter looked down at his tricorder. "We've got to find the Pod signalling mother, and we have to get the T-B generators back up." He glanced at Zamat.

"We've got to protect Ensign Ziel here too." Zamat said, indicating a terrified young fleet officer cowering behind him, clutching his phase pistol in a white-knuckled death grip.

Carpenter nodded. "Keep him safe until we get to the generators then. We will need him to help bring them back online." The Jem Hadar may not like it, but they could not afford to lose engineers.

"JEM'HADAR! FORM UP!!" The Grandmaster ordered. The Jem'Hadar formed a reverse phalanx with their ranged weapons and melee holdout weapons, guarding the rear of the group.

The DFA Marines began moving forward slowly, cutting down infected to carve a path through to the larger cargo bays that lay beyond the next corridor. The Generators would be in smaller access corridors that branched from the Cargo bay on this level.

Another Warrior form dropped from the ceiling as the Marines opened the doors to the corridor leading to the next Cargo bay.

Zamat glared at the offending warrior form in irritation. He holstered his obviously underpowered carbine and stepped purposefully towards the monster. He paused for a moment to scoop up the Kharian warblade that the fallen marine had dropped earlier. Zamat had always admired the craftsmanship that went into Kharian swords, but never found the time to actually acquire one. He offered a quick prayer of thanks to the soul of the blade's fallen owner as he grabbed it. With blade and hammer in hand, Zamat charged the creature, howling the Order's warcry in a fit of rage and fury.

The creature took notice of this new threat and fired some bio-projectiles at Zamat from cavities hidden within its writhing mass of tentacles. The projectiles bounced harmlessly off Zamat's personal shield and the Jem'Hadar closed the distance in three leaping strides that seemed to defy gravity itself.

In moments, the fearsome Jem'Hadar was within striking distance of the creature's tentacles. He chopped with expert precision, severing many of the appendages before making it to within striking distance of its central stalk. With one last triumphant cry, Zamat raised his hammer, activated its momentum accelerator, and drove the business end of it home through the creature's central eye, puncturing chitin and flesh, destroying the creature's central nervous system.

With a contemptuous grunt, Zamat extracted his hammer and dismissively chopped off a still-twitching tentacle as a last insult to his fallen foe. He broke into a slight jog to catch up with the rest of the group, casting a wary eye backwards only to see a dozen more warrior forms just like the one he'd just felled running towards the group.

With their leader now safely out of the line of fire, three of the Jem'Hadar raised their cannons and loosed a devastating volley of concentrated phaser fire which quickly cleared the deck of the offending organisms. At a distance, the Mother life forms were no match for the squad's weapons.

Carpenter fired a couple of shots when he had the opportunity, but was watching all around the two squads to keep them close and moving towards their goals, The Marines clearing a path Forward, the Jem'Hadar fighting the rear guard action.

"Captain!!" Zamat cried as he rejoined Carpenter at the head of the formation. "Ziel is working on getting power to the generators, but there's still something jamming

the signal. Our tricorders have tracked it to a room adjacent this cargo bay." He indicated a shadowed doorway nearby.

"Aye, I'm seeing it too." Said Josh checking the Tricorder. "I don't know what's causing the interference."

"I recommend you and I go in together to investigate." Zamat said as he sheathed his hammer and fired off several shots to eliminated a few stray infected. "The rest of the squad should stay here and distract the foe. We'll attract less attention if we go in there by ourselves."

Josh nodded. In that regards, Mother acted a lot like the borg. The only problem was Mother seemed to pay closer attention to intruders than Borg. The distraction however would work. It was a good idea. "Lieutenant, deploy the Marines for maximum defense. Give Zeil time to get the T-B Generators back up. Nothing gets to him."

"Aye Sir."

"Zamat and I are going to investigate a signal block, through there. Don't shoot us on the way out..."

The Lieutenant grinned. "THAT, I can't promise Sir."

Just as Zamat predicted, the roars of the other Jem'Hadar and the whine of the marines' phaser fire were irresistible lures for the infected and Warrior organisms. Zamat and Carpenter were able to cross the cargo bay and reach the door with little incident.

Zamat took up a position to the side of the door and nodded to Carpenter. Carpenter switched his Klingon disruptor to his right hand. He wanted to go in firing, not swinging the sword. He nodded to Zamat his readiness to go.

The constable disengaged the security lock on the door and entered the room first, scanning the darkened corners for threats. After a while, he motioned for Carpenter to come through. His flashlight finally stopped when it came to rest on a writhing mass of vaguely humanoid-shaped mycelial tissue strapped to what appeared to be an operating table, but hooked into a large, bulky mechanism that took up a quarter of one of the room's walls.

Josh had been on other Mother infected stations, but this was new. Josh held up a hand to Zamat, then used his sword to point to the Surgical Gurney and what remained strapped to it.

The mass of fungal tissue suddenly stopped squirming and what appeared to be the creature's head lifted itself off the table at an angle that should have been impossible for a regular humanoid skeletal system to accommodate. It turned towards the intruders and finally revealed the full horror of what the infection had done to the being on the table.

There was no question now that the creature used to be a Gatrubbian. The ridge structures on its face and coloration of its skin were unmistakable. However, the entire texture of the Gatrubbian's skin had turned slimy and slick with shedding bodily fluids. Fungal spores and sacs grew from odd angles and locations all over the Gatrubbian's face. Bone was visible on several parts of the forehead where the being's flesh had simply sloughed off. Its eye sockets no longer held eyeballs and instead thousands of twitching, squirming, antennae-like protrusions poked in and out of the being's eye cavity, as if a thousand insects had made their homes in the Gatrubbian's skull. Its nose was gone, and only a slight depression remained, from which more slimy pus and fluids flowed, pooling down the tattered remains of the creature's clothing.

Most horrifying still was the being's mouth. The entire lower jaw had come detached from the rest of the skull and Zamat could see from a trail of blood where the jaw had landed on the floor. Instead of teeth or a tongue, the creature's lower face had been replaced with a writhing mass of dangling fungal growths.

The sight of such a disgusting inversion of life made Zamat sick to his stomach. It was times like these that he was glad he didn't need to eat.

"What the....?" said Josh slowly. He glanced around quickly to see if there were others in here. The three of them seemed alone.

It was then that the creature spoke: at first all Zamat heard were a series of squeals and squishing noises being issued from the dangling growths where the Gatrubbian's mouth used to be. But slowly the words became clearer and more intelligible. Zamat realized then that he was receiving the words directly into his thoughts.

H-have....Hr... Have you come... Have you come to visit your mother?other... ma... morthor.... The being stated over and over again. The voice was that of a

female, but none that Zamat could recognize. The words were hard to relate to, and the telepathic compulsions had little effect on the tank-bred warrior.

"Are you hearing that?" asked Josh checking his respirator. Had he gotten infected? Was Mother reaching out to him already? The Lieutenant's joke about shooting them on the way back suddenly was not so funny, it may be necessary.

"Yes, and that's not good." The Jem'Hadar raised his carbine. "We must purge this filth..."

"No!" said Josh suddenly, "Hold on...This thing is new. I've never seen one like this." he said scanning with his tricorder. This could be a new form they had not encountered. He scanned the creature, and the machinery it was attached to. Was the signal jamming coming from the machinery or the creature? Or perhaps both?

The creature's incessant telepathic mumbling irritated Zamat, but he worked to actively block it out. "Why does it matter?!" He growled. "It's a spawn of the enemy. There is only one thing to do about it!"

Captain Carpenter did a quick scan on both of them. As far as he could tell, there was no sign they had been infected yet. But early infection sometimes was masked by the person who had become infected. They would both have to be quarantined.

"Well?" Zamat asked impatiently.

"The Signal jammer is the machinery. We need to get close to shut it down..." said Carpenter. He worked hard to ignore the whispers of the voice.

Zamat turned his carbine to the machinery, eager to end the thing's incessant chattering.

Carpenter put a hand on the weapon, lowering it gently. "We can't destroy it, the power runs through here to the T-B Generators. Destroy this, we have to reroute power, and we can't get the Generators up in time. We need to shut it down."

"But that creature is controlling it..." Zamat noted. "That means..."

"Yeah, that means fighting that...thing." said Josh, putting away the tricorder for future examination, and re-drawing his sword. There would be time to look at how this thing was controlling the machinery after they eliminated it, he hoped.

"With pleasure..." Zamat raised his carbine a third time and fired a quick burst straight into the being's ruined face. There was an unearthly scream that seemed to rock the entire deck. It brought even Zamat to his knees as the shock waves washed over him.

Josh staggered under the onslaught. How the Jem Hadar kept his feet astounded Carpenter.

The lights came back on several seconds later. The darkness which had hinted at unspeakable horrors before gave way to a scene of mass carnage and devastation. Macabre growths clung to the walls and the ruined mass of humanoid flesh remained where it was, tethered to the operating table.

The sounds of fighting outside slowly subsided, leaving only an eerie silence punctuated only by the white noise of humming machinery.

Josh slowly looked up, his sword arm resting on his knee. Then he stood. "Could give a guy a chance to cover his ears." said Josh, trying to make light of the situation. He was at the mercy of the elements while the dieing scream hit him. There had been no infected to move on them, although the Grandmaster Jem'Hadar likely was still functional during that time Josh was stunned.

"Come on, they will be wondering about us." said Carpenter.

Outside, the exhausted survivors of the extermination force sat quietly, weapons down but eyes scanning for signs of any hostiles they may have missed. They were visibly relieved to see their leaders return unscathed.

=/\= Carpenter to Cromwell Prime Actual. =/\=

=/\= This is Cromwell Actual =/\=

=/\= Signal jammer terminated. =/\= Josh said sounding tired. =/\= Confirm? =/\=

=/\= Yes, we are seeing the TB fields come back up and the shipforms have no more reinforcement. Good work... you dirty pirate. =/\=

Following behind the Captain, Zamat walked up to his Second. "Status." He stated.

"Grandmaster, three Jem'Hadar fulfilled their oaths today. One has been infected." The Second gestured towards a warrior lying in a pool of his own blood, fungal

growths already seeping into his wounds. He coughed up a wet mass of green sputum which splattered all over the interior of his breath mask. "We await your blessing to grant him absolution."

Zamat nodded solemnly. "Let him fulfill his oath with honor and lay him to rest alongside the others."

At this signal, the gathered Jem'Hadar surrounded their wounded comrade and knelt in a circle. The warriors chanted a quiet prayer as the Second drew a combat knife and held it ceremoniously over the fallen warrior's heart.

The others carefully removed the warrior's mask and undid his breastplate. With the preparations complete, the Second nodded and gazed into the dying warrior's glazing eyes. The only sign of assent the fallen Jem'Hadar could give was a single nod, but it was enough. The Second plunged the dagger downward, ending the warrior's suffering.

Carpenter watched the ceremony as the light passed from the warrior. Then he looked out at his own Marines, forming a ring around the group. Two were walking around the dead and dieing, firing when they found motion.

"How fare your marines?" Zamat asked, noticing that there were far fewer Kharians standing amongst them than they'd started out with.

"Missing five." Carpenter said counting the Marines off. There were no injured. You were either alive, or infected. The Marines knew this, and Kharain were warriors. One infected raised his hand looking to his compatriot. The Marine looked back, and the infected closed his eyes and lowered his hand. The Marine fired once. There was one less infected.

The Grandmaster shook his head slowly. "I imagine we'll need to activate the decontamination holograms." He said as he leaned his sword and hammer against a wall. "As well as get used to living on this deck for the next 72 hours..."

Josh looked around the deck. Cargo Holds. Infected. Growths on the walls. Few facilities. "Paradise Grandmaster, Paradise."

Chapter 13

Stardate: 2616.10.02

Location: Crossroads Station

IcmoD was having trouble sleeping. After almost two weeks of sharing a room with NoluK, IcmoD had grown tired of hearing the old man's snoring. On an unrelated note the station was now almost completely barren. IcmoD and the rest of the Albatross' crew had spent the last couple weeks helping refugees and other civilians board the right vessel. Meanwhile the station's crew had been busy getting the station ready for it's trip through time.

The XO walked through the now quiet promenade. Tomorrow the last of the transports would arrive to carry the last wave off of the station. The promenade was littered with goods that had been left behind by the fleeing groups. Articles of clothing, toys, and other such belongings scattered the floor.

Looking around, IcmoD found himself standing outside of the Zenophile Cantina. Having nothing better to do, he entered to see if anyone was still about. Sitting alone at the bar was the now familiar form of SeleK. IcmoD decided to take a seat next to him.

"You haven't left yet." IcmoD said. He noticed a glass filled with an opaque lime green liquid.

SeleK took a drink from the glass. Before answering the XO he grabbed another glass and poured some of the green liquid from out of a nearby bottle. He pushed the glass towards IcmoD. "I leave tomorrow, along with Zeno and the rest of the remnants."

IcmoD took the glass and tasted the contents. The berry tasting liquid burned on its way down. IcmoD coughed. The liquor was stronger than he had been expecting. "What the hell is that?"

"Gatrubbian mead." SeleK replied laughing at IcmoD's reaction. "The Gatrubbians began growing the berries after they settled on the sphere. I believe this bottle was one of the first they made. 2417, a good year for them I'm told."

"How'd you get a hold of something like that?" IcmoD asked. He took another sip this time he knew what to expect. "It's got to cost a ton."

"Zeno bought it back after it was bottled. He has kept it saved up ever since. Now that he has to close down the cantina he allowed me access to his finer collection." Selek raised his glass. "I cannot think of a better occasion for such a drink. To Albatross, may she be a guide for years to come."

Icmo d raised his glass in response. "I'll drink to that. So where is Zeno?"

Selek downed a quarter of his glass' contents. "He is helping ensure the computer core will be completely purged once you arrive back in your time."

"I see." Icmo d said looking at his glass. The schedule for the crew's journey was on a tight schedule. Once the last transport left, the station had to begin generating a suitable tachyon field which would transport the station back nine hundred years. That coupled with keeping defenses at max had everyone on edge. Almost all simulations predicted that Mother would attack within the two hour warm-up period. Two hours of tense waiting. Trying to get his mind off the subject Icmo d changed the subject. "How's your wound healing?"

"It is doing fine." The old man's recovery had gone much faster than Icmo d would have suspected. "I should make a full recovery in the next few weeks."

"So where are you planning on going?" Icmo d asked.

Selek refilled both glasses before answering. "I was going to visit Bajor. I have some old friends who reside there. I figure it will be a nice place to retire."

"When you say old friend's, we're not talking as old as you are we?" Icmo d still hadn't figured out Selek's exact age. In any case the part Vulcan was by far the oldest being Icmo d had met.

"No the Smith's do not tend to live as long." Selek chuckled. "If so I would still be talking with Alan Smith the third. But he passed long ago."

The remark caught Icmo d off guard. He swallowed his drink without thinking which caused him to engage in a long coughing fit. "Alan? As in my brother. I don't know where you and Nuluk get your sense of humor but it's going to kill me."

"The Smith's have lived on Bajor for generations now. It started with your brother and his wife." Selek looked at the human. His grey eyes. "I have also met some of

your descendants but for the sake of spoilers I will refrain from going into too much detail."

"You mean I have children with someone?" Icmođ asked. After thinking things couldn't get weirder he was finding out he was wrong. "Roquel? No that couldn't be."

"As I said, I would rather not spoil the surprises." Selek smiled taking a drink. "Suffice it to say that I will be in good company on Bajor."

"And what about if Mother comes?" The XO's hope in preventing Mother from spreading was low. But he was thinking in terms of his time not in this time. "Wouldn't somewhere safer make sense?"

"Icmođ I have lived a long time." The old man began. "At some point I just have to stop moving around. You may learn that at some point when you grow older. My time at Crossroads has been delightful but I found myself constantly moving from one location to another. It is time I put an end to that. I have seen marvels beyond belief, now I want a place where I can be with friends and spend my days working in peace."

"I think I understand." Icmođ replied. He still wasn't convinced, but if his time with Nolut had taught him anything it was that there were some things about Vulcans he would never be convinced of.

"Do you have any left?" A voice came from the entrance.

Icmođ looked to see Commander Voci approaching the pair. She pulled out a glass and allowed Selek to pour her a portion.

"A bit late for a commander to drink do you think?" Icmođ made the comment with little thought.

"I could say the same about you Mr. Smith." Ligshuk took a seat at the bar on the other side of Selek. "So can't sleep?"

"No ma'am. Sorry ma'am." Icmođ apologized.

"I don't blame you." The commander took a sip of the mead. "I see you pulled out the good stuff Selek."

"Under the occasion." Selek looked around. "It either gets drunk tonight or goes to the past tomorrow."

"Good point." Ligshuk cracked a smile. The first that Icmo had seen since their arrival.

"So where will you be tomorrow?" The XO asked knowing the commander wouldn't be leaving on a transport.

Commander Voci seemed to contemplate the question before answering. "I always thought I would go down with this station. I guess I'll have to settle going down on her flagship."

"I didn't know Crossroads had a flagship." Icmo exclaimed.

"The U.S.S Pegasus-C. She transferred from Sentinel Station and Starfleet once Mother began her incursion." Ligshuk had been grateful for the Federation's generosity. "She's not the largest vessel but she gets the job done."

"I hear your scientist found a work around for the T-B fields." The XO commented. He had heard rumors of a breakthrough earlier that day.

"Yes, it's a temporary fix but we can generate an imitation of the field for less power." The commander finished her glass. "The effects aren't as powerful and Mother will overcome them if we wait too long. Once the station leaves with the generators we'll have less than an hour before the replacements fail."

"Best of luck to you then." Icmo stood up. "I'd better be going, Nuluk is expecting everyone to be up and prepared early."

"One more thing Mr. Smith." Commander Voci stopped the human before he left. "I may not be as zealous as Tima but knowing that I got to spend time with the saints is very rewarding. It is a memory I will cherish the rest of my days."

"I'm glad we could be of service. Maybe we'll be back one day." Icmo smiled and bowed before turning walked out the door.

#

Location: Zenophile Cantina

Zeno floated high above the vast empty shelves of his cantina bar, reached the very top, and pulled out one last bottle from a well-concealed hiding spot. He cradled it gently in his mechanical claws before placing it in a compartment in his chassis.

He lowered himself using the mechanical crane one last time and turned to see Theodore standing in the doorway. Zeno could have easily missed the diminutive construct had his preceptors not picked up the electromagnetic field being given off by Theodore's circuitry.

/Greetings Theodore./ Zeno communicated in pure binary transmitted directly to his fellow construct's radio frequency receptors. /What brings you to my humble establishment during the end of all things?/

Zeno waved a clawed hand around, indicating his empty cantina. It had been packed up and emptied in accordance with the evacuation timeline, and Zeno would be off the station shortly.

Theodore looked at his oldest friend. He was carrying a knocked out Karbo. "The Klingon doctor is refusing to leave. He needs to go back with his crew to his own timeline. I need your help getting him there."

Zeno looked around behind the bear and finally noticed the unconscious Klingon.

/Oh my, I am afraid it would be impermissible for me to store him here. There are still three hours, fifty-two minutes, and forty seconds left on my lease of this space and I will be liable if Doctor Karbo chooses to pursue legal recourse. Might I suggest physically carrying him to his quarters instead?/

Theodore shook his head "No, I must not meet them. I already screwed up with Karbo over here. If they meet my present self before they meet my past self who knows what will happen."

/You are correct, Theodore. Such a meeting would pollute the timeline./ Zeno refocused his photo-receptors and in a split second, a swarm of drones appeared. They attached tiny claws to key points all over the Klingon's body and carried him away from the cantina. /My drones will deposit Dr. Karbo in the Albatross sleeping area. They will also administer enough sedative to keep him unconscious until his shipmates find him. Is this a satisfactory arrangement, Theodore?/

Theodore let go of Klingon's body allowing the drones to do their thing /Yes it's the least we can do. If it was not for Captain Icmo and Rouquel's son, I may never have never gotten over my hatred of children. This is more than satisfactory./

/I am pleased that you also hold the crew of the Albatross in such high esteem./ Zeno lowered himself to the ground and detached himself from the crane. He extended his legs and began to walk out of the cantina.

Theodore walked with his oldest friend /After the ship was decommissioned 888 years ago I never thought I see it again but, you did. Now I know why./

/It is indeed a strange time to be functioning in./ Zeno replied wistfully as the two artificial lifeforms walked down the deserted promenade. /I am glad that you returned to aid us in our moment of need. May I inquire about the status of your spousal exploratory vessel?/

Theodore looked around remembering the first time he came to this place all those centuries ago /She's looking forward to seeing you again it's bin decades./

/Yes, she was instrumental in the defense of this station and my physical form on numerous occasions. It would please me to converse with her again./ Zeno nodded his head.

Chapter 14

Location: Crossroads Conference Room

Icmod awoke. The conversations from the night previous were still fresh in the XO's mind. This was the first time in the last two weeks that Icmod arose before Noluk. Icmod was surprised. After getting ready for the day the XO looked at the time. He still had a few minutes before the last freighter left.

The XO arrived to see Selek hauling a single bag of belongings towards the airlock. "Selek!"

Icmod was able to get the old man's attention. He turned and set down his bag. Icmod came running up to him.

"I just wanted to say good luck on the other side." Icmod said as he approached Selek. "Tell everyone hi."

"I will keep your greetings in mind. They will enjoy the story." Selek smiled at the thought. He had enjoyed the last couple weeks. "You and your crew have done well."

"I can't say we've done much." Icmod shrugged. "Though maybe today will change that."

"Good luck Icmod." Selek picked his bag back up. "It is time that we go our separate ways. I expect my grandmother will be meeting Noluk not too long after you arrive back home. I wish I could come with you, she was such a nice woman."

"I look forward to meeting her." Icmod stuck out his hand for a final handshake. "Thank you for all your advice."

Selek rose his hand in the familiar Vulcan way. "Live long and prosper."

The XO was still dumbstruck as Selek went through the airlock. He looked foolish still posed for a handshake. He shook it off and turned around. There was to be one final meeting between the command officers before the day broke. Icmod entered the now familiar conference room where Noluk, Ligshuk, Caprtenter, and Gret'ak sat. They watched as the XO took his seat.

"Now that everyone is here. We have a few things to discuss before the Albatross and Crossroads depart." Commander Voci passed around a set of PaDDs to each officer.

"The DFA fleet will be coordinated by Gret'ak and Carpenter. Admiral Theodore is already aboard the Mosey. Admiral Theodore and myself will be commanding the Federation's ships."

Captain Gret'ak was only present on the station in the form of hologram being generated by one of the few remaining wall-mounted holoprojectors. He was physically still integrated into the warfleet's command nexus and this projection represented only a sliver of his active consciousness. The meeting was being perceived by Gret'ak as if he were in another simulation, and his thoughts controlled his avatar's actions, to include taking a PADD and reading it.

Carpenter checked the ships against the roster, nodding as they checked out. "We have more refugees on the surface and a few more to clear from Crossroads." It was tight, but they were closing in on clearing everyone out. "We may be able to offer a couple more small ships for picket duty."

"None too soon." The holo-projection of Gret'ak didn't look up from his PADD. "We will need a distraction to keep Mother occupied. Her disruption force is larger than what our tactical simulations predicted."

"The Mosey and Pegasus will be leading the charge from our flank." Ligshuk pulled up a map of the station and surrounding space. "Combined with the T-B workaround this coverage should be enough to prohibit any of Mother's agents from getting near the station."

"We'll need to keep them off the station. I have Ghost and Denizens standing by with Marines and Jem Hadar to move to counter any possible attempts to boarding." said Carpenter.

"I must stress again, we can't even let them board." Gret'ak gave all assembled a severe look. "If we send this station back with even a single spore...." He looked around once again. "This whole exercise will be pointless."

"The local tactical network is at your disposal." Ligshuk nodded. "Every extra hour counts. Best case scenario, the station and Albatross cross the temporal barrier in two hours."

Carpenter looked up, shocked at the timetable.

"Worst case?" Icmo asked concerned. All he had heard was the two hour estimate. This new information was a shock to him.

"Worst case, the tachyon field takes a day to fully generate." The commander shook her head. "But the chances of that are slim to none."

Gret'ak looked up, annoyed. "Chances of what? Getting the field running in that timeframe, or having the field take a full day to generate?? We need specifics here, people."

Carpenter grinned and looked up to Gret'ak. "DFA has fought under worse odds than that Cap'n."

"Excuse my penchant for data and numbers right now, Josh. I've got ten billion AI scripts crawling up my ass screaming at me for more info." Gret'ak's avatar rubbed his temple.

"Rest assured commander that the field will work." Ligshuk tried to reassure Gret'ak. "We'll make sure it happens."

"We'll do our part." Icmo replied enthusiastically. "I can't wait to get back home."

"And you... cavemen." Gret'ak's avatar turned to face Icmo and Noluk. "We've made everything as simple as we possibly could. There's even a self-deleting AI onboard regulating the station's probability variable compensator so you won't have to worry your pretty little heads over basic quantum field mechanics. Don't touch anything your archaic education hasn't covered, and DON'T. SCREW. THIS. UP."

"You have our assurance that we will refrain from causing issues." Noluk tried to calm the mind of Gret'ak in light of Icmo's outburst.

"One last thing." Gret'ak said as he gave the PADD to a functionary. "We're gonna be fighting our asses off making sure this station is protected." The avatar waved his hands around, indicating all the future officers assembled. "We'll be making a lot of costly strategic decisions that we wouldn't have to be making if we had a functioning starbase to fight around. You WILL see a lot of us die." The bluntness of the Kharian Captain's last statement brought an uncomfortable silence amidst the assembled beings.

"DO. NOT. Go out there and play hero. You stay on THIS. STATION. and call us only if something goes wrong HERE. But most importantly of all, do NOT forget this." With that, Gret'ak took a step back. His face took on a vacant and blank look before the hologram dissipated.

"If there are no other concerns, I would suggest everyone get to their posts." Lighshuk looked around before adjourning the meeting. "We have a busy day ahead."

Chapter 15

Location: Crossroads Command Center

The station was now empty. The only ones left were the crew of the Albatross. They sat in the command center listening to the radio chatter. So far there had been no sign of Mother. Noluk paced back and forth around the command center. Icmo took a seat by Roquel.

"Can't wait to get back home." Icmo started the conversation.

"Me either." Roquel said. "I still can't believe this is all happening." Her eyes moved to Icmo. "They are letting go of this station based on history alone. A history that says that this has to happen, but it's pure crazy and I'm frankly amazed the powers that be are going through with this. This future is in jeopardy, people are dying by the thousands." She said tearing up. "It puts all our issues in perspective doesn't it? Talk about ridiculous."

"I'm sorry about what I said way back before this started." The XO began his apology. It was something that had been weighing on his mind for several days now. "I was the one at fault. I've come to realize that over these last couple weeks."

"Oh, don't worry about it." Roquel answered back dismissively. "Icmo, you're my VERY best friend. Regardless of the fact that we lost our way, I don't think we should let that go."

"I don't expect this to make up for anything, but maybe we can find a night to eat dinner and talk." Icmo suggested. "Noluk suggested stopping at Sentinel Station. It's a few days from here but it's a heck of a lot closer than Setlin."

"Dinner would be nice. So would talking." She smiled. "I feel so lost in the midst of the enormity of all this, and something NORMAL would be really nice to grapple on to. When this is over, I could even stand to be around a Federation Station for a minute or two. It wouldn't be the worst thing in the world."

"The Axel's also out that way. Maybe they're still in the area."

Se thought for a moment about her former boss, Elias Pigg. The name was still a difficult thing to adjust to, but she could understand his reasons for an alias. "Is that supposed to attract me or repel me?"

"Not really sure." Icmo said. He had always enjoyed Elias' conversations. The captain had been hard on him but at the end of the day, Icmo had learned a lot about command from him. "Do you really have that big of an issue with Elias?"

"It's just...you know, he and I never saw eye to eye. I don't think he honestly cares for his people...not like you do. Heck, I think Captain Noluk even has more concern than he does." She tapped her fingers repeatedly on the surface before her. "Life out here is more than getting to the next job, completing the contract, or whatever the heck his focuses are. There are people involved...emotions...lives."

"I think we saw different sides of him." Icmo admitted. "There were times he had to make tough decisions but which cap'n's don't?"

"Well..." She stammered. "I guess you knew him in a different way than I did." Her next smile contained a half buried tinge of sadness. "I saw people die under his watch. Good people...and they were all but written off the minute they weren't assets to the ship."

"I guess you were aboard Axel longer." Icmo said. He had never noticed how much Elias' actions had affected Roquel. "Maybe we can avoid them."

"It might be for the best." Roquel seemed to reconsider. "Aww, you know. I don't know. I don't think we really need to avoid them, per say. I'm just saying I don't plan on sitting down to dinner with the man. That's all. If we run into one another, we do."

"I don't know if you had time to speak with Bresa before leaving Axel, but he moved into my position and he's doing a good job keeping the bridge running." Icmo's last visit to Axel had left it's mark on his friendship with Bresa.

"Well, you'd know more about that than I would." The Risian responded. "I haven't been on that ship at all. I remember the old Axel...the one that was falling apart every other day and that seemed to be geared for smuggling rather than honest work. It's my understanding that the latest ship to bear the name is a more balanced jack of all trades, but not as gun heavy. I wonder how their captain is dealing with that change. He used to not mind taking the other ship into firefights. Has that changed any that you know of?"

"The crew dynamic has changed for sure." Icmo looked around at Albatross' crew. They were still all sitting and waiting, except for Noluk who continued his pacing around the room. "He had a few mercenaries aboard when I visited."

"Huh! Now that doesn't surprise me." Roquel's derisive tone said even more about her history with Captain Gorgon than she'd already let on.

"Don't know what he planned to do with them, but he didn't seem too keen on having them."

"Really?" The thought that Elias wasn't that excited about toting these days made her pause. Could he have changed? The fact that the ship seemed to be running a different style of missions these days might mean he had. "Maybe you just never know." She settled back to think on it momentarily ignoring the room.

Chapter 16

Stardate: Somewhere between 2416 and 3316

Location: Crossroads Command Center

Several hours had passed. Out the viewscreen, a light show of epic proportions was taking place. IcmoD was getting restless. There were only so many ways he could keep himself entertained in the command center. He had asked NoluK about going down to the cantina but his request had been denied. The Vulcan had made it clear that the command center would be the safest place under the circumstances.

Suddenly an explosion took place much closer than anyone had been anticipating. The viewscreen lit up in a magnificent flurry of colours.

=/\=Pegasus to Crossroads, sorry about that.=/\= Ligshuk's voice came over the comm. =/\=We'll try to keep the rest a bit further away.=/\=

"How's it looking out there?" IcmoD asked. His boredom overtook his reservations about holding a conversation during an all out battle.

=/\=The DFA's doing a fine job.=/\= Suddenly there was a loud burst of static on the other side of the channel. The noise of gun fire could be heard. =/\=Get that thing out of here! I don't need another...=/\=

Static filled the air. Albross' crew were all alert now. NoluK closed the channel.

"Are they still out there?" IcmoD asked. He approached the central round console which displayed a holographic simulation of the nearby space. It was currently overflowing with activity. He tried to pinpoint the Pegasus but there was too much interference.

NoluK did his best to try and help IcmoD in his task. "Maybe we can filter out the biological signals."

=/\=Tachyon field fully saturated.=/\= The computer's voice interrupted. =/\=Temporal shift commencing in thirty seconds.=/\=

At that notice the station's nonessential systems entered a sleep mode to minimize power draw while the field took effect. The lights dimmed and the crew took their seats preparing for the worst.

=/\=Probability of reaching desired point in time and space currently eight million six hundred seventy five thousand three hundred nine to one against and falling. Ten seconds to temporal shift.=/\=

"I don't like those odds cap'n." Icmud was sitting by Noluk.

=/\=Probability of reaching desired point in time and space currently two million seven hundred twenty two thousand seven hundred twenty three to one against and falling. Five seconds to temporal shift.=/\=

The station began to rumble. The viewscreen now showed a blue haze which began to overtake the starfield.

=/\=Probability of reaching desired point in time and space currently five thousand thirteen to one against and falling. Temporal shift underway.=/\=

The space within the station began warping as it passed through the temporal barrier. This experience, unlike the one that had brought the crew here, was in many ways less turbulent. As the station fell through time a feeling of nausea came over the XO. Looking over at Noluk he could see the Vulcan wasn't doing much better.

The strangest part of the sensation came when the atmosphere acquired a taste that was almost but not quite entirely unlike tea. Icmud had not prepared for such a change in air quality. The XO was having trouble telling how much time had passed assuming that was still a relevant question.

Just as suddenly as the strange event had started it came to a halt. The air returned to normal and the station sat silent. Many of the screens were still dimmed and the station was reporting several power failures throughout the grid.

"Is everyone alright?" Noluk asked being the first one up.

Epilogue

Stardate 3316

Location: Space around Crossroads

Timeline: Immediately after temporal jump

Millions of beings all over the fleet witnessed the magnificent sight of Crossroads station successfully jumping through time untouched by the battle raging all around her, but Captain Gret'ak arguably had the best seat in the house.

Outside of the command nexus, his physical form acknowledged the roaring cheers coming from Cromwell's bridge crew. But within the matrix itself, he was witnessing something akin to the creation of the universe in terms of its beauty, symmetry, and magnitude. Not only was he seeing it, but the sensory feeds from the fleet engaged his every sensation so Gret'ak was able to hear, taste, and smell it.

He saw the glorious, perfectly symmetrical dances of every wavelength of energy working in concert to distort the very laws of the universe, felt the awesome forces at work through the sensor feeds of hundreds of warships. He heard the massive, exultant victory cry from the beleaguered defenders caught up in their triumph and the raw power of an event which defied all explanation.

But Captain Gret'ak could only allow himself a modest congratulatory pat on the back. The fight wasn't done yet. Now came the hard part...

=/\= Cromwell actual to Ghost actual. Come in. =/\= He said.

=/\= Ghost actual =/\= said Carpenter. The ship buffeted slightly from a smaller Mothership picket rushing to pass Ghost. "Come on guys, take him out." Carpenter ordered, even as he responded to the Fleet commander. =/\= Sorry Cap'n, just mopping up here. =/\= Josh was not plugged into the interface as Gret'ak was. To Gret'ak it probably felt like ages for Carpenter to respond to him.

=/\= If you're done congratulating yourselves, get your behind over to the wormhole. Fleet's keeping the door open and you have beaucoup baddies closing in on your position. =/\=

Gret'ak wasn't kidding. Swarms of shipforms, enraged at the loss of their prize, closed on Carpenter's Squadron. The remnants of the DFA fleet guarding the area where the station used to be unleashed torrents of immeasurably powerful weapons

fire to stem the tide as they limped towards the rest of the fleet's defenders around the wormhole.

So that little picket ship was just the forerunner of the enraged fleet. =/\= Cap'n, We got two slow Azaran transports making their way towards the wormhole. =/\= said Josh. The Azaran's had volunteered to pick up the last of the survivors from the planet. The Azarans were a new nomadic race, recently becoming warp capable, escaping expanding Mother territory. They had shown up about five years ago, insisting on joining the crumbling DFA, pledging allegiance to the Cromwell Prime ship. "In payment to Cromwell saving their race hundreds of years ago," they said. The details were lost in history to those outside the Azarans, and perhaps a few curious readers from the Gatrubians. =/\= Once the Azarans cross the threshold, we are clear. =/\=

=/\= Ghost, you got ten minutes to get those Azarans through the wormhole or the fleet is leaving with or without them. =/\= Gret'ak's response was partly fueled by the rising urgency of the messages he was getting from the other fleet captains. They were getting really antsy now that the chrono shift had been completed.

=/\= Understood. Moving all the scouts to the wormhole. =/\= responded Carpenter. "OK Ghost," Carpenter addressed his crew. "We have a mother load of mother's ships looking for blood. We have to put ourselves between us and the two Azaran transports. Cromwell Prime and the Fleet are falling back between us and Cross..." except Crossroads was no longer there, having disappeared in time. "...Between us and where the portals are opening. Some motherform ships may penetrate DFA Fleet defenses, DO NOT let them dock and board those Azaran Transports."

"Aye Sir." came the round of calls from the bridge.

=/\= Moving now C.P. Actual =/\= Carpenter told Gret'ak. =/\= We should be able to enter the wormhole in five minutes. Stay Frosty. =/\=

=/\= Will do, Ghost. =/\=

Gret'ak settled in for what felt like an eternity until the Azaran ships finally crossed the threshold. Before he could give the order to retreat, a supernova of pure energy flared into existence between the Cromwell's fleet and the wormhole....

=/\= Ghost.... you seeing this? =/\= Gret'ak's AI assistants struggled to block out the frantic reporting coming in from the rest of the fleet.

"Aye C-Prime." said Josh quietly. "Any idea what this is? Could it be Crossroads returning?"

"I'm reading a portal.... massive energy potential, lots of baddies on the other side..." Gret'ak sighed. "If it opens, we won't be able to make it through the wormhole before them. The defenders on the other side are expecting friendlies to come through, not an invasion. They'll be overwhelmed."

"Agreed." said Josh, already bringing Ghost around to rejoin the fleet and Cromwell Prime. "We can have the defenses activated..."

"Negative, Ghost. If we tell them to deploy their defensive measures before we're through, that means we'll be trapped between the defenses and the main Mother fleet. The DFA battlefleet will be destroyed. I'm not gonna sacrifice this fleet... not while there's still a chance..."

"What chance Cap'n?" asked Carpenter. Their options were rapidly diminishing.

"If Cromwell channels all power to her aft deflector array in order to generate a subspace distortion field, she can destabilize the portal long enough for the fleet to get through..." Gret'ak paused for a moment as he double-checked the calculations again. "But the warp field geometries are gonna require the ship to be on Mother's side of the portal to pull this off. We'll be trapped in her universe."

There was silence on the other end of the comm link, as Josh kept turning the problem over in his head. There was no other way, it had to be closed, and from her side. Gret'ak was connected to the greatest minds and systems the DFA had ever developed. If he said it was the only way, then there wasn't another way. "Is this the time you bring up Altus and we no longer argue the point?" Josh asked quietly. "We've fought Mother here, we can pull back and do it again..."

"Not without endangering the Alpha Quadrant and everything we've fought here to achieve..." Gret'ak said quietly. By now, the crew of the Cromwell had gotten wind of the plan. The ship's outbound comms array was filled with last-minute farewells to friends and family, some of it was pre-written or pre-recorded, but many of the transmissions were ad-hoc last-minute farewells. It was eating up a third of the Cromwell's broadcasting bandwidth, but Kraxus made no effort to block them.

"Bring Ghost along to Cromwell Prime's Port Bow, we'll hang back and keep the smaller shipforms off Cromwell until she can deploy the subspace distortion..." Josh was ordering Ghosts crew. Telemetry fed back to Cromwell. Gret'ak immediately knew what Josh intended Ghost to do. They would escort them to the portal.

Captain Gret'ak was grateful that there would be no prolonged debate about this decision. He hated debating Carpenter. =/\= Thank you. =/\= was all he said.

=/\= We'll get the DFA Fleet through the wormhole Cap'n. =/\= said Josh. Gret'ak was probably having this same conversation with half the fleet, as other ships were beginning to turn. =/\= We'll take care of them on the other side. =/\= He only had to wave a hand, and the crew followed Josh's lead. They would have to work with Starfleet and take what was left of the DFA fleet to protect the refugees.

=/\= You think they'll make it after we're gone? =/\= Gret'ak asked as the Cromwell powered up her engines.

=/\= There are rumors of a mold eating bacterium, Maybe it's something that Starfleet is working on. =/\= said Josh with a small glimmer of hope. This battle was almost over, but the war raged on.

=/\= You know... sometimes I wonder... =/\= Gret'ak's voice came in distorted and digitized from the interference. Cromwell was approaching the Mother portal's event horizon. =/\= How it all came to this... =/\=

=/\= Because...Time. =/\= said Josh with a smile. =/\= You know Crossroads will go down in history. =/\= said Josh, laughing at the time travel pun.

=/\= Yes indeed. =/\= Gret'ak's connection with the fleet was slipping. All was becoming darkness as the AI assistants in the command matrix slowly eased the Captain back into his mind and body.

Ghost was approaching the wormhole. The other ships had gone through. =/\= It's been a pleasure serving under you Sir. =/\= said captain Carpenter.

=/\= Pleasure's all mine... you damned pirate. Gret'ak Zulu-Alpha-Niner, command authority relinquished to DFA Ghost and Captain Carpenter. =/\=

=/\= I stand by to relieve you sir. =/\= said Carpenter stating the age old required line. =/\= Carpenter to fleet, as of this time I have assumed command of DFA forces... All able ship are to pass through the wormhole to UFP space and meet at the

rally point. =/\= As ships quick seemed to be sucked into the wormhole as they hovered near the entrance Ghost poured on the speed, and would be crossing the horizon moments before Cromwell fired her aft deflector. Visually Cromwell Prime was entering the Portal Mother was making. Carpenter stood a moment and saluted.

With that, Gret'ak's last connection to the transcended plane of existence ended as his command protocols were transferred to Carpenter's ship. He took a breath as he grabbed the handrails in front of him with one hand and placed his other on the hilt of the Gret'ak ancestral blade. He looked over at his XO.

She was absorbed in guiding the ship and powering her up for the disruption field, but she looked calmer than he'd ever seen her. She noticed Gret'ak's gaze and summoned the willpower to give him a smile in return. None of the crew blamed him for what they were about to do. They all knew, regrettably, that it was likely going to end this way.

It was then that Gret'ak realized how utterly alone and isolated he felt now that he was disconnected from the fleet. He'd grown used to the reassuring presence of the battlefleet and all her warships and Captains chattering in his subconscious. Here he was now, alone and utterly vulnerable encased in a ship that was crossing into a maw that would literally lead to hell. He took some solace in the fact that he was surrounded by several thousand of the finest beings he'd ever known, but nevertheless his hands shook as they gripped the handrail. He stared at the 3-d simulation of the space all around the bridge and trembled at how small he felt amidst the hellscape and void. It was now of all times that Captain Gret'ak allowed himself the indulgence of an emotion that he'd been suppressing for all these years. He was afraid.

Outside the gaping portal, there was a bright flash. The disruption wave burst forth from the center of the maw and then, as if it was never there, the maw blinked out of existence. The surrounding shipforms, temporarily deprived of their guiding intelligence, lost their way and sputtered about aimlessly while the last of the DFA escaped through the wormhole. The battle for Crossroads Station was over.

Background information

Additional information is available at the [Outpost Hope One web site](#)².

Gatrubbians

The Gatrubbians are a humanoid race who originally resided in the Gatrubbe system. After several decades of working with sublight engines, the Gatrubbians had built up a system wide network of colonies. Further research brought about the invention of a zero point energy drive which allowed for faster than light travel. A rift within the government led to a cataclysmic civil war which ended when the use of thermonuclear weapons turned the once inhabitable world into a ball of molten rock. The outlying colonies and ships packed up and set out for the stars. Over the years the ships have acquired warp capability and have grown in number as the population continues to increase. In 2416, the Federation Council granted colonization rights to the Gatrubbians.

The short novel *The End of a Story*³ was written by Kevin Marshall for NaNoWriMo 2016 (National Novel Writers Month) and revolves around the Gatrubbians' first exploration of deep space.

Kharians

Kharians inhabit small, isolated pockets on the interior surface of the *Hope One Dyson Sphere*. Introduced by the Builders as an overseer class to the Johvans and, after the abandonment of the former, expanded through the sector utilizing what Builder technology was at hand. Without the ability to manufacture nor repair worn out components, the Kharians have left themselves with only what spacefaring technology can be purchased and stolen from others. The Kharian Imperium's claim to the dyson sphere is ideological.

The origin of the Kharian is unknown. The leading theory is that the Builders subjugated the species as their home planet was consumed for construction material. They were used by the Builders to oversee the Johvan herd. The Kharian government is a triumverate of chieftains of the three most influential clans: Brin'ak, Turg'ak and Gret'ak.

² <http://outposthopeone.nfshost.com/sphere%20races.html>

³ <http://outposthopeone.nfshost.com/Sundry/The%20End%20of%20a%20Story.pdf>

Kharians skin tone varies from burnished bronze to bronze-brown. Hair colour is uniformly black although white specks appear with age; elder individuals have hair the pattern of the night sky. Eye physiology is unique. Kharians can move each eye independently to provide a 270-degree view. A peanut-shaped pupil provides stereoscopic vision in each eye and a visual range into infra-red. Tattoos across the forehead denote clan, personal history and status.