

New Enterprise

an *Axaverse* short novel
written by Doug, Kevin, Rich and Tim

Star Trek: Borderlands

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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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Characters

SS Albatross

Noluk
Captain, played by Kevin

Roquel Atrell
Pilot, played by Rich

Jillido
Crew, played by Doug

Karbo
Doctor, played by Doug

Shenara
Pilot, played by Kevin

Icmod Smith
XO, played by Kevin

Zal
Zoss' son, played by Tim

Zeno
Engineer, played by Kevin

Zoss
Tactical, played by Tim

Guest Characters

Drayka
Sezha (Healer) of the Vegone,
played by Rich

Kalestro
Raeldra Fighter, played by Kevin

Pelira
Governor of New Enterprise Colony,
played by Rich

Prologue

Location: SS Albatross Bridge

The Risian Pilot of the Albatross sat at a new station looking into options for the ship's next adventure. Captain Noluk had promised that she would be able to select it on her own. Of course, it had to be reasonable no doubt, so she was leaving no stone unturned in finding just the right job for the struggling old freighter. One thing making her job easier was a search protocol provided by Exemplar Nova which was designed to help independents to vie for individual jobs without the need of porting first. There was so much information here, it was crazy and any ship could conceivably find something and all they had to do was pay a finders fee to the fledgling offshoot of the Setlin Commerce Guild now operating in the area.

She put cost of operations, distance, time necessary, profit, and safety into her equation. She also considered the state of the Albatross including its cargo bay size and engine capacity. In truth, there was a lot to it, if you wanted to make a good choice. Her short list had become shorter and shorter until there were only two options, and now in her mind, there was only one. "Icmo! Come here!"

Icmo went over to where Roquel was. He had been given command of Albatross while Noluk was on the Axel. "What did you find?"

"Look at this!" She grabbed his hand and pulled him over, wrapping her arm around his waist the moment that he was within easy reach.

"The console?" Icmo asked. He scoured the screen for some hint as to what she had been looking at. There was too much on the screen for him to focus on any particular thing. "Looks like a bulletin board."

"This is a request for a ship to go to a planet called New Enterprise." She said pointing to the posting. "The planet has a moderate climate. A large portion of the Northern Hemisphere is covered with lightly rolling hills and plains. Apparently, the Akkritians have been hunting and herding an animal called the Raeldra and shipping both the meat and the live animals home for domestication and consumption. They are paying a VERY GOOD PRICE for both supply runs and off-world shipping." She bent towards him tucking her head against his side. "Let's do it!" She said, half pleading. "It could be very interesting." She went so far as to bat her eyelashes at him, coyly.

"Noluk said it was your call." Icmo merely shrugged. He looked more at the posting. Everything Roquel had said seemed to hold true. He smiled. "It sounds delightful. I can talk with Noluk and see if we can depart straight out. How far is it?"

"Fifteen Hours at Warp seven - four." Roquel said knowing that pushing Albatross for much more wouldn't be advisable for that long a time.

"That doesn't sound too bad." The XO nodded. From the sound of it, the run would be easy money for the distance.

"Well I hope the captain feels the same way." She said, uncertain that he would go that far. "But we won't know until he comes back from the Axel, huh?"

"I guess you're right." Icmo agreed. He was a fan of the idea but in the end it would be Noluk's call. "Do you want to visit Axel while we wait?"

Roquel laughed. "No, I don't. I know I should let things go, but Paul Gorgon USED TO BE a good man, but I watched him let people die. He thinks more of his ship's than the people on them and you know that too or neither one of us would be on the Albatross today."

Icmo smiled. He remembered the day he decided to leave the Axel. He had hated the Elias for taking away his role as acting captain. It had meant so much for him and like that it was gone. "I don't think he calls himself Paul anymore, maybe he's been trying to turn over a new leaf."

"Well I don't care what he calls himself." Roquel said sounding somewhat bitter. "Tigers don't change their stripes, you know?"

Icmo sighed. "Maybe that's true, maybe there's nothing new under the sun for Paul Gorgon, but maybe it's time to forget about him and accept that we're a part of the Albatross now."

She looked up at the man that she now considered the other half of her. "Bygone's right?" She sighed. "I'll try, but for what it's worth. Captain Noluk never made me feel like I did over there."

Chapter One

Location: Albatross Bridge

Beneath the Albatross, New Enterprise revolved. It's various biomes were visible beneath the scattering of clouds. Noluk had arrived back from Axel once things were confirmed to be okay. He was quick to agree to Roquel's request and the Albatross departed straight out.

Shenara sat at the helm. The Klingon had been slightly disappointed that the Albatross hadn't needed to enter into combat. But that thought passed her by once the ship arrived at its destination. Once more she felt like an explorer, a feeling she didn't get from her experience in Starfleet in the Alpha Quadrant. "Stable orbit entered."

Noluk sat in the captain's seat. He turned towards where Roquel sat. He had decided to give her a lot of freedom this mission. Over the last few months the Vulcan had recognized a lot of command potential in the Risian and decided to give her more responsibility as a result. "Ms. Atrell open a channel."

"Opening channel." Roquel answered in return.

On screen an Akritirian face appeared. He was a grey haired gentleman with a stern looking face. "Hello my name is Pelira I am in charge of New Enterprise. You must be the one's who accepted our ad."

Noluk looked over to Roquel. He gave her an approving nod. The two had decided that she should be the one to discuss the contract that she had accepted.

Feeling a little self-conscious about her role, Roquel spoke haltingly. "My name is...Roquel...Pelira. It's nice to meet you." She looked back at Noluk, who was still nodding his consent to continue. "My captain has authorized me to speak for the Albatross. We are ready to take on your shipment, whenever you're ready."

"We are still preparing our shipment. Once it is prepared we will commence delivering it to your ship's cargo bay." If Pelira was offended by the captain's lack of speaking, he didn't show it.

"Oh...." Uncertainty filled her for a moment. "I thought you were needing immediate transport. I'll uh....we'll wait and..."

"The crew is welcome to visit the colony while you wait. We do not have much to offer but will do what we can."

The idea of seeing New Enterprise filled her with delight. She had assumed it was going to be a quick turnaround stop and that she wouldn't see much at all of the surface. "I think I'd like that, Pelira." Roquel said smiling at the Akritirian.

"Very well, feel free to beam down whenever you wish." Pelira gazed once more over his view of the bridge. He spoke some final words before closing the channel. "Once again welcome to New Enterprise, enjoy your stay."

Roquel looked from IcmoD to Shenara and finally to her captain. The smile that she'd already had, just seemed to grow. "I just got you shore leave." She flipped her head. Her auburn curls bounced with the movement. "What do you think of me, now?"

"Just lovely darling." IcmoD smiled. He hadn't expected a bit of leave with this assignment. "When do we leave?"

"I'd say, now." She looked around at the others. "Would you say now?"

Shenara shook her head at the two lovebirds. She then turned to the captain. "Permission to leave?"

"Granted." NoluK replied, "I will keep everything in order here."

Roquel stepped away from her seat and came around to the captain. Then she bent and kissed him on the cheek. "I like you so, much."

"Love you too dear." IcmoD smiled. He was glad to have Roquel by his side.

"I said LIKE, DEAR!" She teased. Then she walked over to him and patted him on the rump. "You're the one I'm taking with me."

IcmoD stood up and linked arms with Roquel. An awkward smile crossed his face. "If you insist."

"Just come on." She urged him. "Captain....thank you."

"Don't thank me Ms. Atrell, this was your decision." Nolut smiled at the two lovers.

"Enjoy yourselves. I'll may join you at a later time."

Chapter Two

Location: Akritirian Colony 'New Enterprise'

The colony could best be described as a boom town. Even though, the Akritirians were quite advanced as a society, shuttles flying everywhere, ground vehicles of a dozen designs, power aplenty, etc; the colony itself was an assortment of temporary prefab structures, little more. It had the setup of an industrial processing plant on one end, with holding facilities for Raeldra not too far away. Most of the temporary businesses were in the center of town and the residences worked out from there in a C formation. Most importantly the animal processing plant was downwind. The framework of a 12 foot containment fence could be seen near the edge of town. It was old school, not a force field fence. Instead, solid fencing blocked the view of the topography beyond. There were coils of barbed wire at it's top and a sentry or two could be spotted, if you looked really close.

As Roquel stood there, some raucous Akritirians came out of a bar, laughing. They sounded as though they'd had a lot to drink. Each wore a sidearm and a hat to ward off the day's sun, since there were few trees in the area. No true roadway had been built. The streets were just packed earth. "This isn't quite what I expected." The Risian admitted.

Jillido exited the ship with Zeno glad to be out of the ship hoping he could find work he was really a part of their crew yet and not sure he would be unless it pays.

Zeno looked around. He had never seen such a rustic outpost. The metropolis he came from even in it's worst days of decay never looked like this. "I never realized advanced organic beings still lived such a basic lifestyle."

IcmoD gazed around. The archaic look of the colony had him in awe. "It's quite a quaint little place isn't it. What were you expecting?"

"Well I don't know!" Roquel said, a little more miffed sounding than intended. "Just not...." She gestured in several directions with both hands. "Just not this! I guess."

"Well we might as well take a look around. Pelira was kind enough to invite us down." IcmoD continued to look around. He had to remind himself that wasn't in an old western.

Jillido looked around this might interest the syndicate.

"Welcome to New Enterprise!" A well-dressed Akritirian called to the group. "Our little home away from home among the natives."

Icmo stepped forward. "Hi there. We're from the Albatross. What's there to do around here?"

Pelira, the settlements leader approached them. "Depends on what you like to do. Of course, we've got a good selection of modern conveniences, but there's always the bar, the brothels for the men." He reconsidered. "Or women, I suppose. There's also a Raeldra busting competition scheduled for tonight." He looked at them askance. "Have you ever seen a Raeldra?" He waved his own silly question away. "Of course not, they're indigenous to New Enterprise and in sum, truly the only reason we're here!"

"Raeldra?" Icmo asked. He had seen many grand sights in his day. He was always up for broadening his horizons. That was what he loved most about the DQ, the feeling of being on the frontier.

"They are large majestic creatures with large forward swooping horns." The awe of them was obvious in his voice. "We hunt them, you know." He gestured with a backhanded flip toward the fence line. "Out there on the plains; in the forests. The locals say they have an indomitable spirit, and they do, during competition you can feel it. It's quite exhilarating how they project."

"So what do the natives think about the colony and the hunting?" Icmo asked. He hadn't seen any evidence of the local inhabitants. "Most colonies seem to have trouble settling with locals."

"What do the natives, think?" Pelira scoffed. "Does it matter?" He waved it away as a ridiculous thought. "And as to settling with them, there's nothing they can do. The Raeldra are here. WE are HERE." The statement was made with such firmness of conviction that there was no arguing with it; at least not to Pelira, at least.

"So what the heck is a Raeldra busting competition consist of?" The XO was eager to get out of the sun. There seemed to be a lack of good shade and the hats that the colonists wore looked more and more appealing.

The Akritirian grabbed the collars of his vest and gave a forward tug. "A Raeldra busting competition is a chance for Akritirians to face the beast on its own terms. There are no force fields, no stun weapons. We enter an arena with little more than ropes and our wits!" His voice rose in excitement, volume, and speed of speech. "Oh it's 3 on one, but it must be! Raeldra are marvelous fighters, but we wear them down and eventually the Raeldra is tied up and bled upon the field with a swift stroke of a blade, the one and only time it is allowed in the event."

At this description, the corner of Zoss's mouth twitched. Only those who knew him personally would understand how annoyed this description made the Jem'Hadar.

"That's brutal!" Roquel expressed after a moment's hesitation and held breath.

"Not at all." Pelira dismissed. "They are majestic but an animal. We demonstrate our superiority over them this way." He laughed boisterously. "And then we feast on the best MEAT in the galaxy!" It looked that his mind had drifted far away for a moment, but then he returned it to the group. "Do come tonight. Really, you must." But an afterthought occurred to him and he sobered quickly. "It can be difficult for first timers though, I warn you."

Icmud gave a halfhearted smile. He wasn't too enthused about the event but knew it would be rude to refuse the offer. "Well I would be interesting in going I guess. What do you guys think?"

I'll try anything once Jillido said.

Roquel looked at both of them. She definitely had misgivings, but this job had been her idea, and the last thing that he wanted to do was destroy the ambiance of the location. They might all New Enterprise fondly, if they just gave it a chance. "Is there anything I should know before we do this?"

"Raeldra project their senses." Pelira explained. "You can never quite brace yourself for the flood of it all."

~Suck it up! You'll have fun!~ Roquel told herself. After all, she had been scared of what the humans called 'roller coasters' once upon a time. Now it was her favorite thrill ride. She put a brave smile on, but despite that, she slid her hand into Icmud's for comfort and reassurance.

"Just give us a time and location." Even if no one else would go, IcmoD took it as his duty as XO of the Albatross to attend.

"Excellent!" Pelira said slapping his leg with excitement. "In the meantime, get settled in at the inn and come down for dinner and drinks. On me."

"Pelira I think will get long wonderfully" Jillido said

Turning his head, the Zoss made a show of intensely scrutinizing a nearby gatepost to avoid showing his face to Pelira. Zal began wandering up to the various livestock in the pens and touching them.

At once, there was an explosion against the outside wall of the east gate, but it didn't breach it. Pelira's visage became hard, anger filling every nuance. "Damned Vegones!" He cast a look around until he found a small group of Akritirians seated at a small table in front of a small establishment. He yelled loudly to them. "They're at it again! Drive them off and secure the gate!"

The trio bolted from their seats. Two of them pulled holstered sidearms. The third grabbed a longer one that had been leaning against a post. "Yes, sir!" As one, they tore off toward the wall.

Roquel was totally shocked. Ten minutes down and it was already dicey. "What's going on?"

"Nothing to worry about, my dear." Pelira said, raising her free hand and kissing it gently. "I have to go, but come to the show tonight. The rest of this will sort itself out."

"Seems they have not fully tamed these inhabitant's yet" Jillido noted

As Pelira walked away, IcmoD turned towards his crew. He looked at the two Jem'Hadar members. He was now glad they had decided to beam down with the rest of the group. "Zoss you and Zal see if there is anything you can do to help."

"Right away, sir." Zoss gestured for Zal to follow and together the two shrouded and took off.

"The rest of us should find some cover in case something goes wrong." Icmold looked towards Roquel and then scan his eyes over the rest of the crew. "Follow me."

Despite her wish decision to take this job, Roquel was definitely worried. Things were not right here. She'd seen things like this in the past. Whenever cultures at different levels of development clashed, the more advanced one nearly always dominated. It was her opinion that the Vegones and the Akritirians were playing out that age old truth, much to the dismay of the Vegones.

She looked to the wall. It seemed they were fighting back. It also seemed that they would probably lose.

Several Akritirians went by with energy weapons at a fast run. Roquel lowered her head as if it were weighted. She shook it and sighed. "Right behind you."

Zoss and his son had reached the perimeter wall within ten minutes from the first explosion. There were gangs of armed colonists rushing to and fro from the wall with no visible organization or purpose of movement. The Albatross's security chief decided against shrouding in this crowd, as bumping into a colonist would be far more difficult to explain than just walking around as a Jem'Hadar.

The walls of the settlement were flimsily constructed at best and had a feeling of being a pre-fab structure rather than a solid defensive bulwark. Zoss could see the entire structure shake as something impacted the defensive perimeter from the other side. It was a credit to the manufacturers of the prefab structure that the whole edifice was still in one piece.

Ignoring the colonists' confused looks, Zoss and Zal bounded up to the ledge for the defenders to shoot over and gazed over the parapet.

They saw small flashes of grey as the attackers dodged between pieces of local vegetation, expertly dodging the defending colonists' phaser fire. The low-powered phaser rifle blasts were met with a barrage of coconut-like projectiles that exploded with surprising force upon contact with the barricade. The hardened shells fragmented outwards in a manner reminiscent of howitzer shells used in European Battlefields on ancient Earth, sometimes exploding in midair above the barricade, causing grievous injuries to the unlucky few caught below.

Zoss winced as a shell fragment bounced off his toughened hide. He ducked behind the nearest barricade and grabbed a colonist by the front of his shirt.

"Who leads the defense here?!" He demanded.

"Hell if I know!" The Human male replied after getting over his initial shock of being grabbed by a Jem'Hadar. "When these varmints start hollerin' fer a scrap, we's usually jus' keep shootin' till they skedaddle! They don' stick around this long normally!"

Tossing the Human aside in disgust, Zoss drew his phase carbine from his holster and beckoned for his son to do the same. The father/son team cranked their power settings to max and together took aim at a nearby native tree. They both fired in unison and vaporized the tree and ignited the surrounding foliage. Several natives were thrown clear of the blast and several more took off in a panicked run as their clothes were set ablaze by the heat.

There was a pause in the fighting as the combatants stopped to process what just happened.

"WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?!!!" Zoss roared at the colonists. "CONCENTRATE FIRE ON THEIR COVER! DENY THEM COVER!!!"

The mixed band, mostly Akritirians but with a few humans peppered in, seemed to take well to the leadership. They aimed for anything that the Vegones might use for cover and let loose.

Under a blistering barrage of fire, the protection shredded in front of the Vegones, and they fled in twos and fours until there wasn't anyone left. Several Akritirians took the opportunity to cut them down as they ran. "That's the way to do it, boys!" One shouted to another. "That'll teach them for interfering with our business!"

Zoss blew the smoke off the muzzle of his carbine and holstered it. He shook his head in disgust at the colonists and he gestured for Zal to follow. Several colonists made to talk to Zoss and his son, but the pair quickly shrouded and walked off.

=/\= Icm0d, this is Zoss. Do you read? =/\= The Jem'Hadar said as he took Zal into an alleyway with lower foot traffic. =/\= There are natives on this planet. Sentient and definitely intelligent. They attacked the perimeter defense but were repulsed. These

colonists are undisciplined and lack a coherent defense force and equipment. I'm surprised they're still around. =/\=

Chapter Three

Location: Raeldra Fighting Arena

Icmo took a seat with the rest of the attending Albatross crew. The erected wooded benches surrounding the Raeldra fighting arena. The arena floor was dirt covered. It was a large arena, its appearance reminded the XO of the old rodeos that were once held on Earth. The benches were filled with Akritirians of all sorts some were making quite a ruckus.

Jillido saw opportunity here if he could get in touch with some of his old Orion Syndicate bosses maybe he could do some business on New Enterprise. Turned the natives in to slaves to be sold at auction and a percentage of the found they use for trade could get them back in the game.

Shenara braced herself for the fight. She only wished she could get an opportunity to participate. The colonists all praised the Raeldra as a fearsome beast, one worthy of being fought by a Klingon warrior. She told herself it wasn't her place but somewhere deep down her Klingon half yearned for a good fight.

Roquel looked around at all the activity. She was not fond of blood sport and she knew full well that what she was about to experience was going to be exactly that. Dealing with the Akritirians was her idea...she knew that. Not attending would have been a slight to them and it could blow the contract. She knew that too. None of it made her feel any better. "Why isn't the captain, here?" She asked, feeling that she was too much at the center of this. Underneath it all was a feeling of 'be careful what you wish for...you just might get it'.

Icmo leaned over, "The captain decided to decline such an invitation. He claimed to have more pressing matters to attend to."

"That's convenient." She replied, exasperated.

Before Icmo could respond, an Akritirian walked to the center of the arena. His voice boomed as he spoke. Speakers located around the structure emitted his voice. "Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, welcome to the weekly Raeldra busting competition. Tonight's fighters Vestria and Masula return from last week's fight. Our third fighter is Kalsetro, one of our newest colonists. He has claimed to be able to wrangle even the wildest of beasts."

As the fighters entered the arena, cheers erupted. Icmo could feel a wave of anxiousness enveloping him. He wasn't sure how to describe it, it was like nothing he ever felt. "Do you have the feeling something bad could happen with this?"

There was definitely a feeling in the pit of her stomach and she said so. "Actually, I feel like I'm going to be sick. I thought maybe it was the food from earlier..." Her face contorted as she searched her memory. "...but, I don't think so."

"We can head back to the ship once the fight is over." Icmo kept his eye on the area waiting for the event to start.

Noise erupted from behind a shielded corner of the arena. An animal, a heavy one and doubtless a Raeldra, fought against handlers out of eyesight. There was a scream and some increased commotion which probably meant that the beast had outmatched them, at least for a moment.

"It's scared." Roquel said, softly. "It knows it's going to die."

The Akritirians in the stands started whooping and hollering for the spectacle that was about to commence. Many of them removed a boot and used the heel of it to pound on the rail before them or the bench at either side. After 20 - 30 seconds those who had done so settled into a steady rhythm - the drumbeat of death.

"Looks like we're going to be testing this arm in combat very soon friends." Jillido said

The Raeldra broke free from its captors and charged into the arena. By this time the announcer had made his way to safety and allowed the three fighters to enter the arena. The beating continued as the fighting started.

Jillido wished he had some money to bet on the game, but he lost that after the Borg incident.

The Raeldra charged, but not at the combatants. He tore for the fences. All the beast wanted was out. The prairie beckoned. Free open spaces were just out of reach. He knew it. He could feel it.

"He doesn't want to fight." Roquel said in a far away tone. "Escape."

As the youngest and most inexperienced with the Raeldra, Kalestro ran at full speed to cut off the large beast. He raised his spear and challenged it. "HAH! HAH!" He cried as he thrust the spear menacingly towards the Raeldra's face.

It knew.

"It doesn't want to die." Roquel declared, still in a sing-song tone.

"If this is too much, maybe we should go." Icmo tried to get Roquel to move but she seemed glued to her chair. For now the only thing he could do was sit by her and try to keep her comforted.

"This fight is the least honorable thing I could imagine." Shenara growled. Her urge to fight was no longer there; in its place was feelings of anger. "Fighting a helpless and scared creature is pitiful."

"No one's forcing you to watch I'm just trying to enjoy the show" Jillido said

Focused on Kalestro, the Raeldra couldn't see what was happening all around it. It saw one of the other two fighters, but it lost one. Where did it go? Pain shot through its back and side as the spear lanced down through its body. Its mind lashed out in terror.

"Oh, no. Oh no." Roquel cried, tearfully. "I'm dying. I'm dying. Help me. Where are you? Why won't you help me?" She slipped to the ground and laid on her side feeling all the pain and anguish of the Raeldra.

Icmo tried to shake Roquel out of her panic. She no longer seemed to be fully in control of what was going on. "Roquel! You're alright; we need to get you back to the ship."

Roquel simply shuddered as the mental waves of fear and pain being felt by the Raeldra washed over her. She was totally elsewhere, unable to sense her own surroundings, only the projections of the beast.

The crowd roared in approval as a second lance penetrated the Raeldra's side. It didn't kill it, no...it barely entered its body, but the pain...the pain was there.

The Raeldra jabbed at Kalestro with horns large enough to spit him and it did. Kalestro was thrashed about by the whipping head of the Raeldra, until he was dashed and broken against the dirt.

"Booooo! Booooo!" The crowd called.

IcmoD stood up; with some effort he got Roquel to her feet. He looked at the rest of the crew. "You guys can stay if you want but I need to get Roquel to Albatross."

"I'm fine here" said the one armed Orion.

Had any been looking they would have noticed that the Akritirians were also fine, although they were hyped up by the display of violence. If anything they fed on THAT rather than the any other stimuli.

A pang of pain ran through the XO's body as the Raeldra was jabbed again. Whatever had affected Roquel was now affecting him as well. A wave of panic rushed over him, he had to escape, to flee. Panicked he fled down the stairs to the exit. He was no longer certain if Roquel was with him or not.

Roquel tried to run, stumbled and fell. Her face went almost to the floor but she caught herself on the palms of her hands. Her head turned and as it did she saw something completely unexpected. An alien, slight, grey, and primitive with antennae, lay on the ground beneath the stands. He wasn't more than 6 feet from her. He wept openly then curled in pain and agony. She knew that feeling. This creature felt what she had felt; the Raeldra's torment. The alien, one of the planet's natives saw her and when their eyes locked both knew that they were sharing the same excruciating experience.

Torn between being transfixed by the alien beneath the stands and terrified for her own life, Roquel pushed herself up and ran. "IcmoD! IcmoD, wait!"

One of the Akritirian fighters lunged at the Raeldra as it passed by him. The lance raked it's side, drawing an angry line of meat and blood along it's side.

The Raeldra had been struck again. It bellowed loudly and fell. The crowd roared. Roquel fell, once again. She coughed as though her own lung had been penetrated. She could almost feel the lance inside her. When she pulled her hand away, there was blood.

By this time the XO had collapsed against a wall. He could feel himself perspiring. With the sudden pain in his side Icmud could barely keep his eyes open. All he could see was dirt and blood, it was as though he was in the arena.

"Humans" the Orion shook his head.

Location: Tower overlooking the fight arena

It was a subtle, almost imperceptible change. Zoss only began noticing it when his heart rate began increasing, slowly but inexorably, the blood began flooding his extremities and making his trigger finger twitch.

Blinking his eyes and wiping away his rapidly accumulating sweat, Zoss adjusted his suit's temperature controls to try and slow down his increasing metabolism. The movement broke Zoss's concentration on the fight as he noticed that the hand that was reaching down towards the suit controls on his wrist was trembling as well.

Zoss shook his head and tried to fight his way out of a fog that had begun wrapping itself around his mind. He became irritated with the situation, hating being on that tower, hating the fight going on down below, hating this entire colony. These irritations slowly built into a rage, and his body began responding as if he were in a fight.

Alarmed, Zoss turned to speak to Zal only to find that the boy had dropped his weapon and was gripping the railing of the water tower in a grip strong enough to warp the metal and cause his fingers to bleed.

"Sir.... Dad.... I- I don't...." Zal could barely contain his rage and confusion. Zoss only looked on helplessly as the same emotions began overtaking him as well.

Little did the two know that the Dominion had long ago edited out the chemical processes responsible for emotions such as love, fear, compassion, or sadness from the Jem'Hadar genome. Therefore, the majority of the psychic emanations from the arena found no analogue emotion in the two silent observers in the tower above. The only thing Zoss and Zal were capable of experiencing was the Raeldra's rage and adrenaline-fueled exertions to stave off its impending death.

Snarling with bestial ferocity, Zoss picked up his scoped disruptor rifle and drew himself up to his full height, fully intent on peering through the scope and wiping out

every last filthy creature in the arena below. But as his eye focused on the aiming reticle, he found his sights drawn to the thrashing creature in the middle of the arena. The beast looked upwards at Zoss as yet another lance pierced its leathery hide, drawing a fresh fountain of ichor.

The Jem'Hadar elder and the wounded creature locked eyes through the scope. A connection formed between the two that was far stronger than anything Zoss had previously experienced. There was.... A need, a plea, slowly worming its way into Zoss's mind. It tapped into every noble emotion or intention that Zoss had ever been raised with. The strict martial code of honor and rectitude that Zoss deliberately suppressed throughout his line of work as a mercenary came to the fore, urging him to do aid the creature.

"There is no honor in this death." Zal whispered from behind him. It was the boy's voice but there was something more underneath, like a hushed chorus whispering somewhere in the distance. "Grant us peace. Grant us peace...." Zal's tone was like a metronome, hypnotically permeating every fiber of Zoss's being.

The trembling in his arms ceased. The sight lined up with the target. Zoss went through the firing drill he'd been trained in since the day he hatched from his growth tank, and took aim....

A single bright lance of light lashed out from above, almost as if from the sky itself. The beam struck the Raeldra on the forehead right between its eyes with uncanny precision and exited down through the creature's throat. The beam only lasted for a millisecond and left a clean, smoking hole the size of a pen in the Raeldra's cranium. The creature lumbered forward for a moment before keeling over, eyes staring vacantly ahead, heedless as its lower jaw hit the dirt and bit deep into its slack, protruding tongue.

Those nearby reveling in the waves of fear and anguish suddenly felt the emotions disappear, replaced with... relief? Gratitude? The change was only momentary. The empathic feedback quickly flickered out as the last spark of life left the tortured Raeldra's eyes. The abrupt cutoff of the endorphin-inducing high shocked the crowd and many fell to their knees howling in agony at the disruption. It didn't take long for mania and panic to set in.

Location: Raeldra Fighting Arena

When Icmod opened his eyes he first noticed that he was face down on the ground. The pain he had felt moments ago now seemed far away, like a dream. He sat up and looked around. He saw Roquel a few meters away, he made his way to her.

"Roquel, Roquel are you there?"

"You are talking to me, so I guess so." Roquel answered. She was still sitting there in a daze. She wasn't completely clear of the experience, but almost. Seconds later she met his eyes. "The Vegone!" The exclamation sounded abrupt but also urgent. "Icmod, there was one here. It felt everything...more than I did I'm sure of it. The Akritirians are killing the Raeldra by the hundreds and they're killing the Vegone right along with them."

She stood quickly. Her strength came from conviction. "We have to stop them."

"I agree, the amount of distress felt by us and the creature was too much. I don't see how the colonists can handle it." Icmod stood up and then offered Roquel a hand.

Roquel looked at Icmod and then at the others. "I don't think they can feel it. At least, they can't feel it the same way. I think they get off on the brutality of it, actually. It's sick." She spit on the ground to reemphasize her feelings.

"Maybe you should talk to the ship's doctor" Jillido said

"Well we need to talk to a Vegone!" Roquel asserted. "Somehow.... That is the only way to be sure, isn't it?"

"Let's not waste time." The XO nodded and looked at the Albatross crew, at least those who were around. "I'm not going to force anyone to go. This little sojourn is independent of our mission. We are going to find a Vegone and discuss the situation. Come if you wish."

"Not sure what they can offer us?" Jillido thought out loud.

"Explanations." Roquel said, simply. The encounter with both the Raeldra and the Vegone had her so off balance, she just wanted to know what the hell was going on. Helping the Akritirians no longer seemed like the great job that she hoped that it would be. It felt....wrong.

Shenara stepped forward. "You have my assistance. This blood sport is unfair to the creatures involved."

"I admit I've seen better but to each their own I guess. I could go with you." The Orion sighed.

Roquel looked around realizing that the two Jem'hadar weren't in the group. "Where are Zoss and Zal?"

"Probably with Captain and the Doctor I'm sure there fine" Jillido said dismissively

Location: Overlooking Raeldra fighting ring

Zoss hadn't vomited since he was still eating solid food back in the Dominion cloning facility and yet here he was, emptying only moisture and blood off the side of a water tower on some trash world that enjoyed torturing psychic animals...

Hand still trembling, Zoss wiped the mucus and spittle from his chin and took a breath to regain his composure. Off to his side, Zal was passed out from the trauma of the suddenly severed empathic connection, slumped over his rifle cuddling it like a teddy bear.

"Zal..." Zoss called out hoarsely. "ZAL!!!"

"HERE!" Zal woke with a start and fumbled for the pistol grip of the rifle.

"Pack it up... we have to evacuate." Zoss ordered. He then picked up his own rifle while his son worked to dismantle the OP and peered down the scope, trying to locate the Albatross crew.

He spotted Roquel and Noluk together. Several other crewmembers were nearby, and the mob in the fighting ring was getting violent.

Zoss tapped his comm badge. =/\= XO, XO it's Zoss. Come in. =/\=

IcmoD answer the call. He and the other members of the away team had gotten together. "IcmoD here, glad to hear your voice. What's the situation?"

=/\= The crowd is becoming violent. They're ignoring you for now, but I would recommend we evacuate. Captain Noluk, are you listening? We need an evac. NOW.
=/\=

Zoss's voice brooked no opposition. He was using his override authority as a security chief.

On the Alabtross Noluk sat at the bridge. He had been taking some time for himself while keep an eye on the away team's movements. "Noluk here, I can have transporters active momentarily."

"One second Noluk." Icmo interrupted. The group was at this point in the middle of mass chaos. The unexpected death of the Raeldra had angered the spectators. "Some of us want to stay. We think there's more to the situation than meets the eye."

Zoss's head throbbed from the mounting frustration. He peered through his scope and gritted his teeth at the rapidly deteriorating situation in the ring. Several of the colonists had broken down security barriers and were causing rampant mayhem. Brawls started over seemingly nothing and the overall aggression displayed by the colonists was staggering. Zoss paused as he considered the reaction he'd had to the Raeldra and wondered if he and Zal would succumb to the mass hysteria in the ring if they both went down there.

=/\= XO, from my vantage point, I am witnessing colonists literally tearing each other to pieces. We can investigate the situation AFTER everyone is safe aboard the ship!!
=/\= Zoss insisted.

"I understand your concern Zoss, you and anyone interested can get back to the ship." Icmo had no intention of forcing anyone to join the mission to find a native but he couldn't imagine not helping out someone in need.

=/\= Captain, I recommend transporting everyone besides the XO back aboard the ship. Zal and I will make our way to the XO and protect him. =/\= Zoss broke down his sniper rifle and strapped the remaining equipment to his back. =/\= XO, turn on your emergency tracking beacon. We're coming to find you! =/\=

"Captain this is Roquel's request. She and I will stay behind. Beam everyone else up." IcmoD wasn't going to put any others in harm's way. "Zoss, you don't need to follow us we'll be just fine."

"The others are being beamed up now." NoluK's voice came over the comm system. "IcmoD my friend you and Roquel are on your own. Please be careful. NoluK out."

With that, Zoss and Zal both leapt off the tower and broke their fall by deploying a microburst from two small maneuvering thrusters tucked into their boots. The two Jem'Hadar immediately shrouded and ran off towards the sounds of fighting and chaos.

Chapter Four

Location: Vegone Encampment

Tricorders were marvelous things. Either the Akritirians didn't have them or they just didn't care to find the Vegone camp that had launched the raid, because after an only an hour the group from the Albatross had found it.

Though most of the area around the Akritirian settlement was fairly open, several kilometers away there was a copse of trees bordering a river at a low point between two hills. The geography provided a defensible position as well as a good screen from prying eyes that might be in the distance. The odd thing was, that as the Icmo, Roquel, and the others approached, no one challenged them. Perhaps there were sentries in the trees in the lowland or on the hills, but so far they hadn't made themselves known. Several minutes later, they were at the tree line and going in.

Zoss and Zal crept up to the settlement first, shrouded by their natural Jem'Hadar camouflage ability.

"Sir, I spot no guards or sentries. Presence of offspring confirmed. Does not look like a war camp." Zoss reported. "Several armed beings in the vicinity, but they are not on their guard."

"Stay cautious, but try not to look too threatening. We don't know how they'll react to our presence." Icmo was glad to have Zoss and Zal along. He wasn't sure if it would be necessary but it made him feel more secure knowing someone had his and Roquel's back. "What was that?"

There was a rustling in the underbrush to the East and a Vegone stepped out into the open. He walked slowly toward the group in a very casual posture.

The Jem'Hadar pair unshrouded and immediately placed their bodies between the would-be attackers and their charges. There was a whine as their phaser rifles and personal shields flared to life.

The Vegone pointed beyond Zoss and the others. While he had played the part of the innocent greeter, seven of his fellows had moved silently up behind them. They were armed with long-knives and the projectile weapons with the explosive balls that had been used against the Akritirians.

"Zal. Rear." Zoss ordered as he heard another group of natives approach from behind. Zal responded by retreating to the rear of the group and aiming his weapon at the approaching natives. The younger warrior was just as well-armed as his father, and Zoss was confident that based on their previous run-in with the natives, they would triumph... but it would be bloody.

"Stand down." Icmo gestured for Zoss to lower his weapon. The XO looked at the leader of the group. The faces of the tribe seemed to carry a lot of pain and grief. If they felt even an inkling of what Icmo had felt during the fight in the arena, he could understand their suffering. "My name is Icmo, I and my friends here wish to understand more about what is happening here. We want to help, we just need to have a better understanding about what's happening."

Roquel touched Icmo's arm. He was such a good man. Every day she loved him more. She smiled to the Vegone in front of them, ignoring those behind. She felt she knew them, somehow. She felt she sensed a certain level of decency in the blue - purple aliens. "We come as friends." She said, slipping her hand down into his.

The Vegone may have been middle aged, because he walked with a stick. Whether it was needed or not, was hard to tell. He wore a headband, below a frilled headpiece that matched his ears in their tallness above his head. He wore a breastpiece and cloak. He may have been a leader of his people. He blinked at them with large expressive eyes. "Then come."

He turned, presenting his back to the group. He had no fear of them and not because there were other Vegones there to protect him. He didn't fear, primarily because he had nothing left to lose. The nameless, rankless Vegone led them back through the point from which he'd come; back through the underbrush.

The procession of Vegones and Albatross crewmen walked for sometime, mostly in silence. But eventually, they came to a glade. There were dozens of longhouses built of a wooden framework covered with bark walls. They ranged in length from 6 to 10 meters in length and looked to be designed for multiple families. Two to three smoke holes could be seen in their roofs, some puffing lightly, but most not. But despite the size of the camp, the thing that dominated it was a pit on its near side where even now some Vegone were gently laying others to rest, while dirt was being shoveled over them. The leading Vegone turned. "This. This is what's happening."

"Oh, IcmoD." Roquel called softly in dismay.

IcmoD took in his surroundings. He wasn't really sure how to respond. "The attack from earlier..."

"I cannot speak for the colonists..." Zoss turned towards the Vegone leader. His grip on his weapon was tight, but the muzzle was pointed downwards. "But my son and I acted in self-defense. If this is an attempt to coerce us through guilt-"

"My officers are right, we didn't mean to attack your people. At the time we were just doing what we had to in order to stay safe." IcmoD bowed his head. "The orders were mine, I am responsible for any casualties that my people caused."

"What you have done is not the problem that we face." The Vegone's stress on the last word indicated that it wasn't

"We know that your people are being affected by the colonists' recreational activities." The XO didn't have to wait for the leader to bring up the issue, he knew first hand how painful the Raeldra's death had been.

The Vegone nodded, sullenly. "I am Sezha Drayka. Sezha means healer. It is my duty to care for all these." He cast toward the village's populace. Then he indicated the pit with a pointed finger that lingered on its target. "It was also my responsibility to care for them. You did not kill them. The invaders did the killers. They kill the Raeldra and the death of their spirits kills us."

IcmoD didn't realize the extent of the damage. Could the link between the Raeldra and Vegones be that strong. If so the colonists were committing murder and possibly without knowing it. The XO couldn't take it anymore, something had to be done. "If you're willing to trust us, we're willing to help."

"We do not fear you." Drayka assured the group. To back up his statement, he dismissed the warriors that had accompanied them back to the village with just a look.

Roquel's body language relaxed at the statement and the subsequent departure of the warriors. But beyond that, she believed IcmoD would be good to his word and following her earlier experience with the Raeldra's pain, that meant something. "We

should go back to the Akritirians and ask them to stop what they're doing. IMMEDIATELY."

"I don't think the colonists will be willing to negotiate. The Raeldra trade sounds like it's profitable for them." Icmo tried to gauge the manpower he would have available if he needed it.

"We have begged them, several times, to stop slaughtering the Raeldra." The Sezha informed them. "But they are committed to taking as many of them from this world as they can. They don't care HOW and WHEN they kill them, but they will. I'm sure of it."

"If they're not willing to listen maybe we can help you sabotage their operation." Icmo couldn't believe what he was saying. A few years ago he would have never caught himself saying something like that. But now, after all his experiences on Axel and Albatross, he knew there was more to life than just completing one mission after another. He knew he didn't have the authority to make such a decision but Nolut be damned these people needed help.

"What you are saying is illegal and risky even for us." Zoss interjected. "If they find out it was us, we would be banned from doing business in this sector!!"

"He's right." Roquel said, adding her support. "Look around. It would be worth it."

"Insanity!" Zoss threw his arms up and stomped away, his weapon clattering against his breastplate.

Zal merely looked at Icmo and shrugged.

"I agree with the Jem Harda" Jillido said "not our problem then again I'm not a member of your crew so not sure this is more your problem then a my problem"

"Can you show us where they keep the Raeldra?" The XO asked. He knew the tribe was running low on personnel, they only needed one person to show them.

"You have seen their largest facility." Drayka replied. "It is right there at the edge of their settlement. We can't get close to it. It is heavily patrolled at all hours."

"We can get close." Roquel said. "The Akritirians still see us as an ally." There was a lot she didn't say, but most everyone knew what she was implying.

Oroins syndicate were not new to stabbing someone in the back sometimes it was needed to rise up in syndicate it did happen as much as it did with Klingons, Romulans or Cardissana's but it was known to happen. Jillido just nodded

Zoss came back, looking just as furious as before. "I will NOT go along with this! What will Captain Noluk say???"

"If anyone has reservations about what we're about to do I suggest you leave for Albatross." Icmud looked towards his crew mates. "I can't guarantee there won't be repercussions for the actions we're about to take."

"I'll stay." Zal replied.

"ZAL!" Zoss snapped.

"Father, you were in that thing's head before you took the shot. You KNOW what they do here. You KNOW how wrong this is!!" Zal turned and faced his father, trembling in anger.

"This is NONE of our business! There are other ways!" Zoss insisted. "We could inform the Federation, get them to order a stay of operations-"

"How many more would die, in the meantime." Roquel asked.

"You're WRONG! You're wrong and you know it!!" The younger Jem'Hadar, already nearing his father's height, seemed to grow a few inches more as he drew himself up. "When you took that shot, for a moment I was in your head too! In everyone's heads! That first shot wasn't meant for the Raeldra! It was meant for the colonists wasn't it??? YOU were about to execute every single miserable colonist in that arena until the creature got into your head and made you shoot IT instead!"

Roquel hadn't heard this part of the story. ~Interesting.~ She thought.

The XO wasn't about to get between a Jem'Hadar and his son. He merely stepped back a bit to allow the two to work through their disagreement.

"IT ASKED ME TO!!" Zoss roared, the deafening volume of his voice scared several of the natives. "BEGGED ME!! WHAT I DID WAS A MERCY!!"

Zal's voice cracked from the strain of the still-raw experience. "So what, you mercykilled a Raeldra and now you'll just beam back up to our ship, leave this place, file a report, and never think about this again?! Is that what you taught me of honor? How many times have I heard you lecture me about the 'ineffectiveness of voluntary multicultural galactic confederacies'? How many times have we seen these greedy people get away with things like this?? You KNOW that once we leave this place, there will NEVER BE another chance to fix this!"

Stone-faced, Zoss walked up to his son and clapped his hands around the boy's shoulder guards. He gazed into his son's eyes for several moments, still breathing hard, before relaxing his grip and letting out a deep breath.

"Your heart is true on this?" He asked. The true meaning of the words were known only to the two Jem'Hadar.

Zal nodded.

"Fine." Zoss replied grudgingly. "Stay and keep the XO safe. I must report this to the Captain. Whatever else you do is on your honor." With that, the older Jem'Hadar walked off once again while muttering a request to the Albatross. He disappeared into a shimmer of light moments later.

"Well there goes my ride I guess I'm going with you" Jillido said

Now that the arguing had subsided and Zoss was gone. IcmoD turned towards the remaining crew members. "Anyone else?"

Shenara had kept quiet the whole time. She preferred to stay silent and listen. Seeing father and son fight reminded her of the fights she had engaged in with her own father when she had made her decision to enter Starfleet Academy as opposed to the Klingon Empire's equivalent. Addressing both IcmoD and the Drayka "We stand with you, it would be a dishonor to back out and leave you to fend for yourselves."

"Then it's settled." IcmoD turned towards Drayka. "We'll find a way to sabotage the operation. No more of your people have to die."

The Vegone didn't know what to say. These people...these OFFWORLDERS had come to see who and what they were and actually cared about what was happening. The Akritirians had not done this. They hand landed and had determined that they were inconsequential to their own goals. Even when they had been told that "harvesting" the Raeldra like so much wheat was killing the Vegone because of the mental bond that existed between their species, they had persisted. Some had supposed that the Raeldra inspired the Akritirians bloodlust because their different brain chemistry. Who could know. But these people..... "I will lead you myself." The Sezha said with firm determination. In this way, I can be the healer of my people."

Chapter Five

Location: New E Colony

As expected, the holding facility was heavily patrolled. The group had been let back into the colony, the riots from earlier had died down. Before deciding how to take down the facility Icmold suggested doing some rooftop reconnaissance. They found a building situated not far from the facility and were scouting out the fine details. The facility was gated with armed guards walking the perimeter. Several holding pens surrounded the main building. The building was presumably used for general purposes such as feeding and preparing the Raeldra for shipment.

After an initial overview Icmold turned towards his cohort. "Okay we'll need to plant explosives on those holding pens. But destroying those won't be enough. The pens can easily be rebuilt, it's the main building that needs to be eliminated. Zal do you have those explosives prepared?"

"Yep!" Zal happily hoisted a rucksack up. He'd stolen them from the colonists' supplies shortly before they'd arrived. "They were making these for mining or something but rigging them to blow should be pretty easy."

"One of us can get past the patrols and plant them. If we destroy the pens first, the ensuing chaos will give us a window to plant explosives on the main building. The remaining party members will be nearby to provide support to get the infiltrator out." Icmold was aware of the spottiness of the details, but time was short and dawn would be arriving soon. Once that happened it would be impossible to avoid the patrols.

"Sure thing boss!" Zal shrouded and began to walk off.

"I won't let you do that." The XO protested. "Your father would be displeased if anything happened to you. It would be much safer for you to provide cover. Your marksmanship skills are just as valuable."

"Hey, XO, uhh.... Dunno if you saw me do that just now but uh... I'm the best one for the sneaking job." Zal replied, unshrouding next to Icmold.

"Not today Zal, I'd rather not have your father take my head off." IcmoD put his hand out waiting for the young Jem'Hadar to place the bag in it. "Another time, I promise."

"Fine..." Zal said disappointed, handing IcmoD the bag of explosives. "Though your plan's gonna get you killed if you leave me here to snipe."

"How so?" The XO asked as he set the bag down gently.

"I'm good, but my dad's way better and I still got a lot to learn about hitting stuff past 1 kilometer. Dad's gonna teach me that next month." Zal pointed towards the site. "That site's over 2 kilometers away and nothing but flat ground from here to there. If I camp out any closer, they can trace my shots and I've got no cover. You've also got twelve stationary and ten roving guards to deal with. Not sneakable if you can't shroud. You need a distraction."

The young Jem'Hadar brought up good points and IcmoD couldn't deny that. He had to remind himself that Zal wasn't as helpless as he kept assuming. "I suppose you have something in mind."

"Well, I took these from the natives before we left..." Zal picked up another hefty rucksack he'd been hauling around. It rattled with the sound of wooden balls and smelled faintly of sulfur and plant resin. "If I use a duranium tube like a plasma conduit and attach a pneumatic injection device like the kind they use for air flow injections into hovercraft engines at the end, I can launch these guys like mortar rounds. I don't need to be too accurate and it'll cover the distance easy. I'll just land a ton of these on the far side of the base and make it look like a Vegone attack. There's a mechanic shop not far. I can go grab the stuff now and get set up while you guys walk over to the facility."

"I like your thinking." IcmoD nodded at the boy's ingenuity. "We'll start heading towards the facility. We won't risk a confrontation until we get your signal."

"YESSS!!!" Zal threw an excited fist into the air before disappearing in a blur of distorted light. In moments the youth was gone.

As the Jem'Hadar shrouded, the XO turned towards the rest of the group. They had quite the ragtag team and probably weren't prepared for an assault. IcmoD had faith in them though, he had served with many of them and knew that when their minds

were set on a goal, they would do whatever it took to achieve it. "We should get moving. Keep in the shadows if possible but don't do anything that could raise suspicion. When we're close to the compound wait until Zal's distraction before acting."

"You're quite the rebel leader, my love." Roquel teased, as she slid up beside him. She was in shadow as he was and she turned her head to face him, even though his features were slightly obscured, even to her by the darkness. It was of little consequence, she knew them well. "What do we do then?"

"Once the mortars start going off we should try and act quickly." IcmoD picked up the bag of explosives. "Everyone should take a couple charges. We'll need at least one per pen. Once the Raeldra get out the ensuing chaos should give us some advantage in planting the remaining explosives on the main building. Any questions?"

"The Akritirians will go nuts." Roquel replied. Concern, could be heard in her voice, but not seen on this near moonless night. "Do you think it's possible that they'll slaughter the Vegone, wholesale rather than pick up their shoes and go?"

"Many of the tribes have banded together in light of the recent events." IcmoD decided to give the big reveal on the master plan. "We're merely to help spark the Vegone's reclaiming of territory."

Roquel's breath drew in sharply. "When did Sezha Drayka tell you this?! I hadn't heard a word!"

"We talked briefly before setting out. I apologize for the discrete nature but it was at his request." IcmoD hoped that Roquel wouldn't take this as a breach of her trust. "He didn't want to put the other tribes at risk until he was certain we could get into the colony without being questioned."

"I had no idea that there was another clan anywhere nearby, and ready." It made sense. A group of Vegone further off would be less affected by the Raeldra's torment and with the remaining Raeldra stampeding (as it were) away from the Akritirian compound, there was little chance that they would be in immediate harm, and since they weren't in peril this other group could swoop in... "They'll have no choice but to flee rather than to fight."

"That's the plan. Now let's get to it." Icmo didn't want to waste too much time. There would be time enough for all the details once the fighting was done.

#

Pel yawned as he leaned against one of the fence posts. The excitement from the arena's festivities had worn the Akkritirian guard out. The last thing he wanted to do after all that crowd control was to patrol around the processing facility.

As a twig snapped behind him, Pel swung around and readied his rifle. A wave of relief fell over him as he saw his partner Lirin standing there.

"Woah there buddy, watch where you point that thing." The older Akkritirian shook his head. "I don't know why they give you kids those things, ya'll get so jumpy it's a wonder you don't hurt yourselves."

"Whatever old man." Pel reshouldered his rifle. "When those Vegones come around again you'll be thankful that we 'younguns' are armed."

Suddenly the night sky lit up with flashes. The peaceful evening was now returning to chaos. Lirin could feel it in his bones. "I guess they're up to it again, keep your eyes open. Oh and watch before you shoot."

"I assume after I help you with this my debt will be repaid" Jillido stated

Lirin jumped the Orion must've snuck up on them while they were talking. "Who the hell are you?! Doncha hear the battle sounds? You're crazy for being out here in the middle of the night."

"Clearly no wonder you need our help" Jillido said

"And who decided to send you out here to this little piece of heaven?" Lirin asked. The sounds of battle were springing up all around now. The locals were getting quite rowdy from the sound of it.

"Aktritirian government have been very disappointed in your failings to quell the native up raising on this planet felt you needed some outside help" Jillido lied

"Well then you'd better be gettin' out to the front." The old Aktritian suggested.
"Pel here can show you the way if you've not gotten the grand tour."

"Thank you" Jillido said patting Pel on shoulder with his robotic hand zapping him with 40 volts of electricity.

As Pel fell to the ground Lirin let loose. "Now that ain't such a friendly thing to do. Guess it's a time to pull out the old skills."

As if having found the elixir of youth Lirin charged at the Orion. He hadn't engaged in combat in years but it was all coming back to him now.

Jillido began firing at the old Aktritian cow poke with his robotic

As the first couple shots hit the Lirin, the adrenaline overcame the pain and kept him moving full force but it wasn't enough. Just as he reached the Orion, Lirin slumped to the ground unconscious. The revolution had begun.

Location: In a ditch around 2 km south of the Raeldra complex

Zal hopped down into the ditch with a dull thud. It had taken the young man about thirty minutes to pilfer the necessary parts, do some quick soldering work with a phaser, and sprint over to a suitable firing position.

The best thing about indirect fires is that no one needs to see the shot from your phaser rifle. You could be hiding in any old ditch lobbing rounds and unless someone was using sophisticated LADAR or military-grade sensors, there was no way to track pneumatically propelled projectiles. It was perfect for what Zal had in mind.

He lined up the barrel of his makeshift mortar as best he could and cranked up the power on the air blower in the rear of the tube and waited for the pressure to build. With trembling hands, Zal cracked the outer shell of the Vegone explosive and dropped it down the tube. Once the round seated at the bottom with a hollow thud, Zal cranked a knob that released the makeshift valve that led to the pressurized chamber of air in the rear of the tube and closed his eyes.

THUNK the noise barely registered in the still night air. Due to the power behind the air motor and the sheer tensile strength of the duranium tubing, there was

enough air pressure to completely pulverize the dirt around the edges of the ditch, causing tiny avalanches all around the sunken firing position.

The grenade zoomed into the night sky before landing on the far side of the Raeldra complex's perimeter roughly 600 meters too far afield for Zal's liking. There was a brief *flash* followed by a very long and delayed *pop.* Animals all over the complex began screaming and moving about nervously as they sensed the sudden disturbance.

Zal hugged the tube and forced it down more to bury it deep into the loamy soil. He adjusted the angle again and made a makeshift marking with a stick to remember his place. He cracked another explosive, dropped it into the mortar tube, and cranked the knob again.

This time, the explosive landed right on target. A bush near the perimeter fence caught fire. Zal lobbed several dozen more rounds downrange and the night was soon filled with successive *pops* and the colonists were soon sprinting towards the perceived sight of the attack. A long wail pierced the silence as an alarm went off.

Not satisfied, Zal reached into his personal pack and produced several sonic concussion grenades that he'd kept around for just such an occasion. He set the timer, pulled the release pin, and chucked three of them down the tube. He crouched and cranked the knob again.

After about a twenty-second delay, the entire settlement was rocked by a thunderous BOOM as the grenades blew a massive hole in the perimeter fence and set off several fuel canisters that had been stored nearby. Dozens of colonists were knocked flat by the blast, and several others ran around frantically trying to put out the flames on their clothes. Others were rolling around in fetal positions clutching their ruptured eardrums.

Smiling, Zal returned to lobbing his smaller explosives, hoping the rest of the team had gotten his signal.

#

The Raeldra processing facility was a cacophony of noise and mayhem. Blazes raged, Raeldra ran...sometimes over the trampled bodies of the attending Akritirians. Zal

was out there somewhere, and Icmod, and Drayka, the Vegone Sezha were doing there best to keep things 'lively'.

Pelira the Akritirian governor of the colony, had been awoken in the night to the sounds of destruction and the wild beasts in their throes of panic. The sounds of the colonies inhabitants startlement and confusion were soon to follow. Within 4 minutes he was down in the dusty streets. In the distance, he could see that things were already out of control. Many of his Akritirian, brethren struggled to contain fires and their own budding panic. "Daiken! Daiken!"

One of his subordinates ran up to the governor. "Sir..." He looked back towards the facility. "The Vegone have attacked us. I don't know how, but they're inside. It has to be a small party." He looked towards the center of chaos and back. "The guard are searching, but haven't seen even a single Vegone...YET." He stammered.

It was obvious the man's thoughts were in disarray. Pelira, gripped him strongly at the shoulders, and made him face him to make sure he had his full attention. "We need to secure the pens. Calm yourself and organize a bucket brigade to put out these fires." He searched Daiken's eyes for signs that he was understood. Seeing that it was so, he continued. "Have you seen our guests lately?"

"The Albatross crew?" Daken asked, uncertain where this was going. "No. Not for hours. I...I think several of them went back to their ship."

"They're behind this." Pelira said. "I dunno how yet, but they are. Look for them too. If they are here, I want them in the jail. They've gotta be questioned."

#

Roquel could feel the Raeldra's fear...but they knew. Somehow the great beasts knew that they were being delivered from a certain death and that knowledge soothed their minds enough for her to handle the sheer number of them, even in this close proximity. The Sezha was not so lucky. He teetered unto a corner, roughly. The Risian became worried. "Drayka, are you alright?"

The Sezha (healer) waved away her concern. "I'm fine. I'm trying to soothe them. I've told them that we are freeing them from their murderers."

Realization dawned. "Is that why you came?"

"Yes." Drayka sighed, showing true weariness.

"What can we do?" She asked him. But even as she did so, she looked at IcmoD for his suggestions and support. She really was out of her depth. Subterfuge and sabotage were not a thing that she involved herself in.

"We should leave Sezha Drayka to his job. Let's work on sabotaging the rest of the facility." If time wasn't a factor IcmoD would of loved to watch the Sezha do his work. Maybe once things weren't as dire.

The Sezha lost his footing and slipped in some loose hay. His head came down hard against the top of a post, and he immediately lost consciousness.

"Drayka!" Roquel cried out, but in a restrained voice. She started running toward him. But then the full force of the Raeldra's fear was released upon her. But it wasn't just released upon her not upon her, but also upon THEM, because having lost contact with Sezha Drayka the Raeldra's fears soothing sensations, they began to stir more violently. In a fit of madness, of them rushed towards her, striking her hard. The Risian crumpled even more unceremoniously than Drayka had.

"Roquel!" IcmoD's first reaction was to jump into the pit. He began running to her. The Raeldra turned for the XO and began to charge. IcmoD dodged out of the way. The Raeldra barreled past and broke through the barrier holding it. IcmoD scrambled on all fours to where Roquel lay. "Roquel!"

IcmoD listened for a pulse. It was shallow. Roquel's heartbeat was rapid. He had to get her out of harm's way. The XO called out to whoever would answer. "I need some help over here."

Chapter Six

Location: Albatross Transporter Room

The transporter beam took a while to coalesce, but eventually Zal materialized and immediately collapsed to the ground coughing. The boy was covered in scorch marks that indicated just how close he'd come to being fried to a crisp by the angry Akritirians. He still carried his weapon, but many of his ammo and grenade pouches were empty. He looked like he'd just gone through hell.

"Did you enjoy yourself?" A stern voice inquired.

Startled, Zal looked up and saw his father's face looming over him. "Ummm.... did... I..." He began.

"Get up. Let me look at you." Zoss ordered. Zal complied meekly.

After a quick inspection, Zoss patted his son's shoulder in satisfaction. "I watched the firefight. You did well."

"Th-thank you." Zal replied sheepishly.

"But the fact that you were down there at all was a dumb idea." Zoss gestured for Zal to follow him. "And you let Roquel become injured. You should not have been the distraction. You should have protected them."

"I- I know now..." Zal looked down at his feet.

"But it doesn't matter. What's done is done and everyone is still alive." Zoss continued. "Now that I've seen what you can really do, it's time for us to move on to a place that will challenge you even further."

"Where's that?" Zal asked, brushing off some flaking parts of his tunic.

"I'll tell you when we get there." Zoss replied. "Captain Noluk has given us leave to depart as soon as we reach the next port."

"Oh. Ok...." Zal was disappointed. He was starting to get attached to the crew.

"Relax, Zal." Zoss said reassuringly. "Someday we might return. And all will be as we left it."

"Hope so, dad." The boy smiled.

#

Location: Albatross, Medical Bay

Karbo looked over the unconscious women with his data pad. Roquel had nearly died and was brought to Klingon for care. The medical tricorder showed what ever was effecting her was psychological as there was no visible wounds, but he he was able to pick up psychic energy. It was the same that had been affecting blue berry when they landed.

Though Roquel had been stirring while still semi-conscious, she hadn't had any awareness of herself or her surroundings. Slowly, her eyes opened and she squinted at the brightness of the room. She didn't know where she was. The last thing that she remembered was the searing panic of the Raeldra as it burned its way into her head.

"Morning" The Klingon said.

"K...K...Karbo?" Roquel sputtered nearly incoherently. "Am....I on the....ship?" She held up her arm to partially shield the lights, while still trying to get a good look at him. "What happened? Where's lcomod?"

"Yes, yes, you passed out and he is investigating what made you pass out"

"I remember...intense pain." Roquel said flatly while she grappled for the details of the memories. They weren't hers. "The Raeldra."

"According to my readings it is some sort of psychic attack" Karbo said showing her his medical tricorder.

Roquel wasn't a medical expert, but she could see her typical brainwave pattern displayed as a baseline for her good mental health. The flats, spikes and valleys that were recorded on her arrival aboard were very different than the normal sedate one.

The flat lines were the most concerning, because they were fairly long. "Is that....brain death?" She asked fearfully.

"If that was case I would have had to use my ceremonial knife" Karbo told her "I almost did but I managed to find the necessary equipment to block the signals"

"I came so close." Roquel cried despairingly. "Icmod and I ... we almost... it was almost over before it started." She collapsed back onto the table under the weight of the thought that life and love could be so easily lost. "Karbo" She sniffled. "Am I going to recover fully?"

"As soon as we leave this planet you should be fine in a few weeks" Karbo told her.

Lying there, Roquel looked up at the Klingon. "Thank you, Doctor Karbo." She smiled weakly at him, then closed her eyes and allowed herself to fall asleep. She would dream of Icmod and their future together. She knew it before she went under, and better yet, it was true.

*A sadder and a wiser man,
He rose the morrow morn.
-Samuel Taylor Coleridge*

Epilogue

Location: Albatross

Since the away team's return to Albatross neither command officer had attempted to speak to the other. The ship was on it's way back to Sentinel no wealthier than when it had set off. The hour was late when IcmoD entered the ship's rec area. He pour himself a mug of coffee and went across the way to where the tables sat. He hadn't expected to see anyone else around let alone Nolut. The aged Vulcan sat alone at one of the lounge's tables. In front of him was a Kal-toh board and a cup of tea. He barely acknowledged the XO's entrance before returning his focus back to the game.

IcmoD sat at the same table and Nolut. Both men sat in silence for several minutes. Nolut focused on his game, IcmoD just sat and reminisced about when times had been happier between the two.

After not being able to stay silent any longer, IcmoD spoke. "Trouble sleeping?"

Nolut didn't show any sign of hearing his XO. He merely contemplated the board configuration in front of him.

"Yeah me too." IcmoD sighed and took a sip from his mug. "Maybe we should talk. My actions on the surface were reckless. I had no right to do what I did other than because it was the right thing to do."

"Kal-toh is an intriguing game don't you suppose?" Nolut finally spoke up while still focusing on the board. "Each move is of precision and comes only after much patience. Rash choices only lead a player to disorder and chaos."

"I get it friend, I should of thought out my plan more. There just wasn't time. Those people needed help." IcmoD set his mug down for fear of spilling the contents.

"Not only did you betray my trust as an officer, but as a friend." Nolut finally made eye contact with his XO. "Your decision put my reputation and the Albatross'

reputation on the line. Were you anyone else I would of suggested you spend the rest of the trip confined to the cargo hold."

"If that's what it takes to heal the wounds I caused I'd do it. That brings me to a subject I wanted to wait to talk to you about, but I suppose now is as good a time as any. I've come to the decision to hand in my resignation." Icmo watched his friend's face hoping for a reaction. A smile, a frown, a furrowing of the brow, anything to indicate how Nolut felt. Nothing came, apparently the Vulcan's ability to suppress emotions had overcome his years of Trellium addiction. That night at least.

"Your resignation is not necessary Mr. Smith. No matter how heinous your actions I would rather have nobody else than you by my side." Nolut's attention was now fully on his XO.

"It's not as punishment that I'm resigning." Icmo wasn't sure of the best way to phrase it to Nolut. "My days as a drifter are coming to an end my friend. I can't exactly how to describe it, perhaps instinct. With Roquel, this life is becoming too dangerous. I have to say that coming to the DQ I never imagined that I would be a part of a crew let alone two. You and Elias taught me a lot about leadership and life. If it hadn't been for you I don't know if I would have reacted the same way on the planet."

"Where will you go?" Nolut asked.

"We haven't decided yet." Icmo replied. "Home I guess wherever that might be."

"Short a pilot and an XO. Not to mention two good friends." Nolut gazed off. He had become so used to having Icmo and Roquel around that he wasn't sure how to Albatross without them. With them, along with Zoss, and Zal gone the Albatross was beginning to feel very empty.

"I can help you find some new personnel to take our place." Icmo had no intention of leaving Nolut high and dry.

"That would not be necessary." Nolut shook his head. "I would never ask you to do that. You and Roquel will have enough to worry about."

"Then I'll leave Albatross in your hands." Icmo appreciated Nolut's consideration. "If you need any help I'll be around okay?"

"I will contact you if anything comes up." The Vulcan stood up. "I believe it is time for me to retire to my quarters. I hope to see you on the bridge tomorrow morning."

"Yes sir!" Icmo smiled feeling that the bond between the two men had been repaired and strengthened.

#

The time had come for Icmo and Roquel to leave. They were finishing up packing their belongings when the door chime rang. Icmo answered. "Come in."

Noluk opened the doors to the XO's quarters. He walked on in. "Am I interrupting anything?"

"Have a seat." Icmo indicated to the room's single chair. "Come to say goodbye?"

Noluk took his XO up on the offer and sat down. He had been running back and forth all day with taking care of the administrative tasks of running a freighter. "I have and to deliver a gift."

Roquel sat at Icmo's side. She felt awful for him. They had made a decision together that would effect him for a long time. But they didn't really have a choice! Time and again they had found out just how hazardous things could be in space. If they were going to have a life together, it was time to go. "We don't deserve a gift, Captain."

"It's something I found while inventorying the ship's supplies." The captain pulled out a couple pieces of fabric from his pocket and handed them to his two friends. "In case you fail to find home."

Icmo looked at what Noluk handed him. He smiled in delight. It was an insignia patch from the T'mur. "I thought these were all destroyed when the T'mur was. Beyond the ones we were wearing that is."

"I found them in the shuttle. There was a small crate of emergency supplies." Noluk had been trying to decide what to do with the insignias. They were out of date and not relevant to any other ships.

The Risian took one of them from Icmud's hand. Feelings of nostalgia and belonging flooded through her. But as she ran her thumb, over the raised embroidery of Vulcan ship's outline, she remembered just how that ship had met its end. In its own way, it was an affirmation of their decision. Was that what he was going for? It was so...appropriate...for the moment. It seemed to her to be both a celebration of their shared service together, and a symbol of understanding. It brought her peace. "Thank you."

"Yes thank you friend." Icmud stood up. "We should get going. A freighter is headed for Crossroads and with the recent events there are some lucrative opportunities to start a new life on the station."

"Take care." The Vulcan got up to see the young couple out. "Should you ever need Albatross' services you will be welcome to them."

As Icmud looked back at one of his closest friends he had a heavy heart. Holding up his hand in the traditional Vulcan way he gave the Vulcan one last goodbye. "Live long and prosper."

Even after his friends had left, Noluk stood in the doorway of the crew quarters. It was with a heavy heart that he closed the doors to the vacated room at last. As Noluk turned for the bridge, Zeno stood nearby.

"Captain a word please." The robot stood awaiting a response.

"Yes Zeno." Noluk asked not much in the mood to chat.

"I must be departing the Albatross captain." Zeno's toneless voice made it sound to Noluk as though the android had already made the decision and was ready to leave. "I have run system diagnostics and ordered any repairs that you will need during your time at the station. I would stay longer but with the moving of the Gatrubbian fleet, Zenophile Cafe on Crossroads needs to be opened to maintain temporal continuity. I can show you the records that my future self gave me if that will convince you."

"There is no need." The Vulcan shook his head. "Depart when you need. You have more than paid for your passage on this ship. Your service will be remembered."

"Thank you captain." Zeno gave a slight bow as his body allowed it. "Both the Doctor Karbo and Shenara have expressed their intention of staying aboard. I look forward to seeing you and them again sometime."

"We will visit as time permits. Will there be anything else?"

"No sir. Goodbye." Zeno continued walking down the corridor towards the airlock. He had no belongings to carry.

Noluk went the opposite direction towards the bridge. New frontiers were calling and Noluk wanted to be there to answer the call.